

Time and the Media

Notes on Public Discourse in the Electronic Age

Ron Scollon

With special reference to:

The Iliad, Homer

The Adventures of Don Quixote, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education, C. A. Bowers

Amusing Ourselves to Death, Neil Postman

Strong Man, Frank Johnson

A Short History of the Title

First the title was to be: *The Image of the Hero from Achilles to Max Headroom*. But there were too many anachronisms. The idea of the hero may be as old as Ancient Greece but to speak of images is modern talk. So then it seemed that maybe the idea of the essay could be better expressed by a title like:

From the Idea of the Hero to the Image of the Hero: Achilles to Max Headroom

That title would have been more accurate but still not a title that would bring a lot of people into the discussion. For that a title like this seemed to work better:

Where did you get THAT idea? Talk, type, or tube in public discourse

That came closer to the main problem which is to try to understand how people form their ideas in a world that is being rapidly changed by the electronic media. The idea of time got into the title just because there is no way of keeping it out when you are writing about differences among speaking, writing, and television.

Finally, the whole essay raises the question: Is public discourse really public at all? It all depends on definitions, of course, but there is good reason that much of the worry about the degradation of public discourse comes from a vague feeling that there really isn't much that is 'public' about what is coming into our homes from the electronic media. It may be the difference between the culture that comes from the people and the culture that is mass produced for the people.

How Much TV Do You Watch?

In a conversation with a woman recently we talked about the problem of television. She said she believes it will be the destruction of the country. We have become a dull and passive people because of our constant watching of television. It has made us into a hyper-stimulated people. It has made us into a weak-willed consumer society in which the quality of our manufactured products can no longer compete in the world market. And we mostly don't care as long as the goods keep coming.

This woman herself doesn't watch television. Oh, except, of course, for the news. You really do need to keep in touch with what's going on in the world. And then Donahue, again, because of his focus on contemporary issues. And on and on she enumerated exceptions to her rule of never watching television. Her exceptions added up to a fixed, regular 25 hours a week of programs which she never misses. To that she added the 'really good' documentaries, specials, historical

series and the rest. Finally she added to this the programs her husband watches in which she has no interest but since they are on she usually sees them too.

I see several things in this. Here is a woman who watches a lot of television. It certainly comes close to what a labor union might consider a full work week. At the same time she believes the medium is destructive of things she values highly, her nation and its society. She likes to feel that she doesn't watch television, or at least not much. This is obviously the report of an addict.

Some Books on the Subject

This is supposed to be a review essay. Maybe I should mention the books before going much further.

*The Iliad*¹, by Homer, probably written down in the eighth century BC from stories which at that time were already old. It is the story of a quarrel between the leader of the battle of Troy, Agamemnon, and his greatest warrior, Achilles. They are at Troy and have been there for the better part of a decade trying to get Helen back for her husband Menelaos, Agamemnon's brother.

The quarrel breaks out when Agamemnon takes away Achilles's captured slave girl, Briseus. Achilles tells Agamemnon that if that's the way he is going to treat his warriors he for one is going to quit fighting. And so he does. Achilles retreats to his boat and quits fighting.

For most of the length of *The Iliad* Achilles is pouting in his boat and everyone is pleading with him to return to battle because without him they are being badly beaten. His response is that that is just what Agamemnon deserves. Let them all die and then they'll see that they should have treated him better.

Achilles remains unmoved by the losses of his own Achaians until his close friend, Patroclus, who can no longer stand the slaughter of his comrades persuades Achilles to lend him his armor and shield. He hopes the Trojans will believe it is Achilles himself returning to battle and be frightened into retreat. Patroclus, however, is killed. And that is what it takes to get Achilles back into the war which quickly turns back in favor of the Achaians against the Trojans.

Achilles is a complex hero surrounded by many other heroes. To modern eyes he may appear petty or childish in his refusal to fight over a point of honor but in contemporary society our sense of honor is questionable to say the least. Whatever our contemporary reading of this poem might be there is no question of its influence over generations and generations of soldiers, statesmen, and clerics. For centuries, certainly in Europe since the Renaissance, and in the classical world all the way back before Homer, virtually no boy was educated without studying *The Iliad*. The honor of Achilles was the model of honor. His love of Patroclus was the model of comradely love.

In the end even the compassion of Achilles for Priam the father of Hector whom Achilles killed in battle was part of the model of the hero for untold generations.

The Iliad is in this set of readings because for most of what we think of as history any public discourse in the West had this model somewhere in the background. The warriors of *The Iliad* themselves were accomplished orators from the honey-tongued Nestor to the insolent, bullying Hector. Since *The Iliad* in the Western tradition public events carried with them the assumption of an active public discourse. We have always expected our heroes to get up and give us fine speeches and arguments, counter-arguments and accusations, and finally placations as part and parcel of their public acts from lawmaking to war. In the whole history of Western literature there may be no better example of this love of public discourse than *The Iliad*.

Don Quixote was a crack-pot hero created by the soldier Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. The first part of *The Adventures of Don Quixote*² was published in 1604 and the second part followed ten

years later in 1614. If it was writing which gave us *The Iliad*, Homer writing down the story out of the ancient oral tradition, it was the printing press which gave us *The Adventures of Don Quixote*.

Don Quixote is the first character in literary history whose mind was permanently warped from reading too many books. He had read everything available on chivalry and that was lots. He had decided to bring that heroic life back into currency in the Spain of the Inquisition. Together with his squire Sancho Panza, Don Quixote sets about righting wrongs, rescuing maidens in distress, and succoring the downtrodden. He's a skinny, wasted skeleton of a man, pushing 50 Years of age on an old horse who can barely trot and for his efforts he gets knocked around and ridiculed. But none of it separates him from the calling he has followed.

Don Quixote is our first anti-hero, 350 years ago. There is nothing to admire in him, a lot to laugh at. And yet as we read we see more and more of ourselves in him. Sure, he is cracked. Certainly those are not castles with distressed maidens but country inns with girls who are quite content with their lot. And yet you begin to share Don Quixote's crazy wish to have things as they could be rather than as they actually are.

And everybody else gets caught up in it too. As you get into the second part Cervantes starts playing around with reality on his own. Many of the characters in the second part have already read the first part of the book. They know Don Quixote not from his behavior but from the book. They too are caught up in the interplay of reality and print. And so they humor him and treat him as the knight errant he claims to be.

Who is crazy now? Don Quixote for getting his knight errantry out of books or the second set of characters for getting their Don Quixote out of a book? And then when Don Quixote steps into a print shop in Barcelona to have a look at the second part of *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, the very book you are reading and he is living out, you see that since the printing press we may never again be able to reestablish the reality of our heroes or perhaps of our own selves.

*Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education*³ by C. A. Bowers is not a work of fiction and he would probably be surprised to find it together with other readings on heroes, images and public discourse. But there is much in Bowers' book about our contemporary view of the nature of the person. Like every other view of ourselves, it is hard at first to see what there is to see.

Bowers tells us that we believe ourselves to be individuals who are or should be free to choose our own destinies on the basis of informed, rational judgment. Much of our concern with public discourse in the electronic age comes out of our fear that as a public we are no longer exercising our rational judgment but are being swayed by high-tech appeals to our emotions, that our political philosophy is more tuned to highly focused media images than to reasoned argument and law.

As individuals we fear that even where we want to exercise our best judgment the facts of the matter are no longer available to us, either because they are obscured by the fog of media presentation or because they are buried under a weight of facts and information which is all but crushing us.

Bowers takes a difficult and unpopular position. He believes that our image of ourselves as autonomous, self-directing, rational individuals is too simple to have ever been very useful and that it has led us into some of our present dilemmas. His solution is not to suggest a way to return to a more rational form of discourse nor does he suggest a form of emancipation from the limits we now feel are constraining us. He feels we must first recognize that our own image of ourselves is misleading.

His interest is mostly in education but his argument applies just as well to public discourse. It may well be that our problem isn't the deterioration of public discourse in the age of television. It may be that public discourse never was what it appeared to be.

*Amusing Ourselves to Death*⁴ by Neil Postman hits television head on. Postman believes that because of television we have come to make entertainment our highest value, in our homes, our schools, and in public life. If something isn't entertaining it simply cannot get our attention.

This means that the news is not governed by importance to our lives but by its ability to entertain us for 30 minutes an evening. It means that our religious experience is now governed more by how it makes us feel than by how it influences our actions. It means that to be elected a public official will do better to attend to his or her media image than to his or her platform and ideas. It means that every public school teacher has to compete with Sesame Street or evening prime-time programming to get a student's attention.

It is difficult to make a quadratic equation as entertaining as a murder. It is hard to discuss the complexity of forest use policy in 30 seconds. It is harder to turn the other cheek than to tap your foot to an up tempo gospel song. Most of the work of feeding, clothing, and sheltering ourselves and our families is very low on any scale of entertainment and Postman believes that television is inexorably driving us away from the reality of our day-to-day lives.

Strong Man by Frank Johnson is one of the classics of Tlingit oral literature included in the collection of classics *Haa Shuka: Our Ancestors*⁵ by Nora and Richard Dauenhauer. Johnson's story is brief, the point seems clear. Strong Man develops his powers away from the scrutiny of other people. They believe him to be a rather unpleasant misfit. He tests his strength away from observation. He waits until his powers are needed by the people and only then displays them in dramatic relief to the noisier, more obvious but weaker apparent leaders.

Frank Johnson's *Strong Man* is a hero from a tradition which values deed over display, action over argument, and response over rhetoric. As such *Strong Man* gives a background against which to view the talk and display and argument of public discourse in the Western tradition of rhetoric.

Now this...

Postman⁶ points out that there is no war so devastating, no crime so despicable, no event so captivating to our attention that it cannot be interrupted with 'Now this...', a commercial break. The commercials construct a frame around the events of the news. It is the frame that is constant, the contents change from day to day.

So maybe you can learn as much from the frame as from the contents. What does it tell us that every evening at about 6:20 we are shown laxative commercials? Who plans that? Who chooses the slot? Are half of us in danger of constipation in general or just at 6.20 each evening. And is that because of the news we've been watching? Or is it because we are watching the news while eating dinner? I don't know the answers to these questions but surely the regularity of our nightly concern with regularity should tell us something about ourselves.

We also learn on each evening's news, not in the news but in the frame, that we have headaches, we sweat when we do things, and sometimes our bodies ache when we exercise. One business man tells us very sincerely, 'Business is tough enough. I don't want to compete with a headache.' Another commercial advises us, 'Never let them see you sweat.' A third offers us a product for when 'you haven't got time for the pain.'

The message of the commercial frame is clear. With the help of a few chemical products you too can live up to the contemporary image of the hero. You can be self-directing, self-realized, successful in what you choose, and you never need to ache, sweat, or be constipated to achieve these things.

The Enlightenment two hundred years ago freed us from the authority of kings and the dogmas of the past. Bowers⁷ shows us how the educational theories first of Dewey and then of Skinner, Rogers, and Freire have sought to free us from the limits of tradition. Now commercial chemistry promises to emancipate us from the last restriction on our unlimited freedom, our own bodies. The nightly commercial frame preaches a message of absolute individual autonomy and self-realization, all for such a low price.

Story, Argument, and Image: A Short History of Human Behavior

For 40,000 years humanity lived by its stories. Paleolithic hunters gathered around the killed game and told stories of the right ways to participate in the life and death of this animal so that the game would remain plentiful. Perhaps the skull would be placed on the earth in a particular direction. Perhaps in skinning and segmenting the animal they would do so on a bed of branches to protect it from being defiled. Afterwards they might tell of its heroic life to give it honor in continuing its life in their eating of its flesh. Perhaps in their own death they would return their own flesh to the animals and birds who would choose to feed upon it.

During the past 4,000 years humanity has come to prefer to live by its laws and their arguments. We hear less and less of the stories. We seem to prefer the code of the book, the law of the letter and let that govern our behavior. The logical argument has become the story of literate humanity.

Now in this century photographs, sound recordings, film, radio, and television have reflected our images back to us and these images have become our story and our magic. We were once participants in the life of the planet. We ate and were eaten. Then we became the embodiments of our own written codes. Now we are just what we appear to be. Story to argument to image; participation to law to impression management; that is our history.

Circle, Line, and Point: A Short History of Time

The closer you live to the earth the more your life is lived in the rhythms of the earth. Farmers, fishermen, backpackers, hunters, and gardeners all know what most of the people who have ever lived have known: the life of the earth patterns itself in cyclic rhythms.

The sense of time of people who live close to the earth is cyclical, it is governed by waking and sleeping, being hungry and eating, seeding, growing, harvesting, and letting lie dormant, by cycles of the sun, moon, and the earth, by cycles of reproduction, menstruation, of childhood, youth, maturity, and age, each person seeing in his or her own life the cycles of grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren.

For some time now we've been building for ourselves a different sense of time. This new sense of time is linear rather than rhythmic. Each moment is felt to be something new, something which has never happened before, and something which will never happen again.

Andrew Schmookler⁸ says this sense of time came with the rise of civilization. It came with our knowledge of the flooding cycles of the Nile. In controlling the periodic devastation of those floods came our first feeling of independence from participation in the rhythmic cycles of the earth.

Some others would say Heraclitus was the first philosopher of linear time when he said that you cannot step into the same river twice.

Benjamin Lee Whorf⁹ believed that our linear idea of time developed out of the grammar of our 'Standard Average European' languages such as English, German, French, and Spanish. In these languages linear time is an obligatory grammatical category. You cannot speak a sentence in the language without saying something about time through the tense system. 'I walk, I walked, I will walk, I have walked;' 'I sing, I sang, I will sing.'

If I want to talk about writing this note I have to say something about time in doing so. I cannot say, 'I write note,' and leave it indefinite. I have to say, 'I wrote a note,' (something done before the present), 'I am writing a note,' (something being done at this moment), 'I will write a note' (something to happen later than this moment) or one of the many other variations. In any of these statements I have to be specific about when this activity takes place, whether that is pertinent to the point I am making or not. The closest I can come to not saying anything about time is to use the infinitive, 'to write' as in, 'To write a note sitting in the sunshine is a fine thing to do.' But there I still had to say something about time in choosing the verb 'is'. Is a fine thing, was a fine thing, will be a fine thing; the language makes you come down onto a linear time line somewhere in the sentence.

Benjamin Whorf believed that the habitual requirement to use grammatical tense, to place all of our sentences on a linear time line, has led us to view everything in our world from a perspective of linear time.

Others have quarreled with Whorf. Their main argument is that his argument doesn't tell us how that grammar of linear time was invented in the first place. They believe that we created the grammar to fit the idea, not the other way around.

Jack Goody¹⁰ thinks that literacy is a better place to look for an explanation of linear time in our thinking. Like Walter Ong¹¹, he believes that writing gives us a sense of history that is very much longer than the sense of history you can have in a purely oral tradition. Goody believes that the concept of linear time is inevitable after so many thousands of years of writing history.

Now, just at the moment that scholars are debating the origins of linear time in our thinking we see a new sense of time developing. That is point time, the flat time, the non-sequential, the non-cyclical time of television. What is important in television is now, not the past, not the future, not the rhythms of life.

We were discussing with a television producer the story of a local resident. Here is a man who had lived through numerous wars in Russia and Europe, perhaps as a spy, perhaps as a doublespy. Now he was seen about town as an ancient, doubled-over derelict gambler. The writers in the group got more and more excited as the details of the man's life were uncovered. The television producer remained unmoved, at least as far as a television program was concerned. The problem? No motion, full color images could be gotten of any of the dramatic events of his story. His only 'good' television images would be of the bent-over old derelict. The contrast between the younger life of the story and the contemporary images was too great to be suitable for video production. A writer could easily project a linear story of the life, a television producer in preferring good visual images preferred a flatter story line.

It may only be temporary because of rapid technical changes in image production, but in film and television in most cases the newer the image, the better the image. That easily generalizes to the idea that contemporary events are better TV than historical events since we can only show the historical through old images, black and white photographs, slides, drawings or recreations. You only have to watch a kid stalk out of a black and white 'classic' film to realize how much our perception of the technical quality of the image is tied to our sense of time.

Has the flatness of electronic time been the source of the quickly growing body of quotes and aphorisms showing up everywhere from our magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Forbes* and *Atlantic* to the boxes of *Celestial Seasonings* teas? The aphorism requires no context, no history, no development, and no exposition. It follows the principle of flat time which is encapsulated in Neil Postman's three commandments for teaching in the television age.

Thou shalt have no prerequisites.

Thou shalt induce no perplexity.

Thou shalt avoid exposition like the ten plagues visited upon Egypt.¹²

The Arrows of Time

Linear, directional time is the time sense of literate humanity. We feel that we are at a moment on a progression from our past on into our future. But for the scientist and the humanist this time sense forms a different arrow. The materials of the daily work of the humanist are the past, they are its history, its literature, its art, its philosophy, its language, its laws, its religions, and its cultures. Oriented as he or she is to the past which carries with it its own special languages, the humanist comes to feel the arrow of time moves downward. The arrow of time for the humanist is degenerative, entropic, a descent from the greatness of the past into the dullness of the present and perhaps the despair of the future.

For the humanist it is a reasonable proposition that the writings of Shakespeare or the art of Michaelangelo will never be equalled, however absurd it may be to try to compare art in value. It is a rare musician who feels his or her art can ever measure up to the standards of Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven.

The scientist is different. The youngest undergraduate student knows things about the nature of the universe which were mysteries to Newton or Kepler. The student can look with some condescension upon Galileo and Gauss. The graduate student can easily expect his or her work will naturally add to the store of human knowledge. For the scientist the arrow of time is optimistic, generative, progressive; it moves forever upward.

The humanist can easily come to resent the past. As an artist the past can be in his or her way as a snare from which he or she wants to be freed. The woman philosopher can come to resent her lineage from Plato to Wittgenstein as giving her a language that is inappropriate to her contemporary life and understandings and yet must be used if she is to continue her line of philosophical discourse. The man who composes music can come to resent the canons of taste, period, and style which threaten to tie his music back to the past through allusion and reference.

It is George Steiner's¹³ idea that science and the humanities carry within themselves these two arrows of time. As he spoke and wrote of the two arrows he was trying to understand our contemporary rejection of the past, of the art and humanities as a kind of resentment that could come of having too much culture, too much history.

He could be right, but to understand these arrows of time there are some things that have to be said first about the sense of time in different media. In an oral tradition time is not linear, it is cyclical. Whatever happens returns to happen again. The cycles of the sun, the tides, the moon, and the seasons are constant reminders of the ebb and flow of time.

In an oral tradition the sense of time is both ancient and adaptive. Time immemorial is preserved in the memories of the eldest of the tribe. The future is in the young people of childbearing age. Between time immemorial and the future are several generations of memory. While all things in the memory of the elders may have a sense of great antiquity they need not be greatly removed from the present in linear time.

This means two things for members of an oral tradition: everyone feels deeply embedded in a past of great antiquity. One's actions are played out against time immemorial. It also means that conditions can change very quickly and still be absorbed into time immemorial. It can be done in three or four generations. The stories and the cycles of the rhythms of the earth are the points of reference, not some abstract standard of constructed linear time. So an oral tradition gives both a sense of deep embeddedness in the past and a highly adaptive absorption of new elements. The new is not a threat because it is so easily absorbed. There is no need for resentment of the past because it has been shaped and formed to the needs of the preceding generation.

A literate tradition provides a constant succession of the artifacts of linear time. The sequence of documents form the knots on the string which tell you that the past has extended much longer than anyone now living can know. A literate tradition can easily bring with it a tremendous sense of a past that is almost inhuman in its extension beyond memory.

A literate tradition may carry with it a sense of the rhythms of time, but the period of these rhythms is greater than any person's experience. The rhythms of experience are those of the sun, the tides, the moon, the seasons, and the reproductive cycles of life. The rhythms of literacy are those of kingdoms and dynasties, of epochs and ages.

But even among literate traditions there are differences. The Confucianist tradition of China was cumulative over nearly three thousand years. It accumulated its past like a great treasure. In that tradition all ancestors were still living, just in another country. Its orientation was to the past and it was without resentment. A young man who succeeded in achieving high governmental rank through his examinations knew the honor of his rank would accrue to the lineage which preceded him but not to those who followed.

In the West the long literate tradition after the partial disruption of the Middle Ages began first with a treasuring of the past in the Renaissance. Then a deep resentment to that past set in. The philosophers of the new sciences, the founders of the Enlightenment, began to see the movement of time not as cumulative but as superceding or displacing. Has any other tradition ever fostered this sense that the life of those present superseded the life of all those who have come before? Has any other tradition ever fostered this sense of resentment toward the past?

The great flowing of this river of resentment toward the past has been science, the Enlightenment, and liberal philosophy. Television is the perfect medium for the resentment of the past. Its sense of time is flat; its orientation is always to now; what comes now always supersedes what came before.

We All Speak Another's Language

My daughter in the eighth grade had a Korean classmate who had recently come to the country. This girl's English was still strongly accented and grammatically unlike the English of the other students. This student and her teacher had worked on a written assignment until it had been considerably changed. My daughter said, 'But it doesn't sound like her. It sounds like our teacher.' I asked my daughter who her own writing sounded like and she said it sounded like herself. But when I asked her how she came to sound like 'herself' she parcelled it out among her teachers' corrections, our speech and her reading.

Between sounding like other Koreans and sounding like her English teacher there is little space for this Korean girl to sound like herself. Between our speech, her teachers', and her reading where is the language of the 'self' my daughter is looking for?

This is part of what T. S. Eliot was speaking of when he wrote,

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion.¹⁴

The struggle is with a language given to us by others and in which we try to say something new.

The question I have is why do we feel we have to say something new? Time is tied into our images of ourselves. In a literate society where time moves on from point to point on a linear time line being alive is moving on along the line, saying something new with our lives. It may be something new in the cumulative sense of adding just a bit to the treasure trove of the past as in the ancient Confucianist tradition of China or it may be something new in the superseding sense of making some small bit of the past obsolete as in the Western scientific tradition. Either way, the sense that time moves onward seems to be part of our long literate tradition. We seem to feel compelled to always try to say something new.

When time is cyclical there is no psychological momentum which requires constant newness. We sense our language is to be used to ratify what is known, to reaffirm the earth and its cycles, to reaffirm our contacts and relations to each other, to confirm the gods in their right to know what is hidden to us.

Some contemporary readers of *The Iliad* find the lives of its heroes depressing. Achilles lives out his quarrel with Agamemnon, his anger, his grief at the death of Patroclus, and his revenge all in the knowledge that he will die on the plain before the walls of Troy. There is no hope of a change of plans, of something new. The speeches of Achilles confirm his role, ratify his position, they do not add novelty to the plot line. Achilles is a hero in an oral tradition. His fate is known to the audience and to him before the story begins.

Don Quixote is a literate hero and the genius of Cervantes is in making a caricature of both arrows of time. The hero, Don Quixote, looks backward to the time of chivalry. It is his language and the source of his life. Chivalry is the author of Don Quixote, he is the humanist who sees himself as coming after the great time. He sees his efforts as restoring in some small measure the greatness the world had formerly known.

But Don Quixote is a comic figure. Cervantes holds him up for laughter. We laugh at him and so do the other characters in the novel. In this Cervantes presages the Enlightenment. The man who looks back is the absurdity, he is mad, he is insane, however kind, gentle and well-intentioned he may be otherwise. But still, it would be hard to say that the life of Don Quixote's contemporaries was much better. It was the Spain of the Inquisition. In the book we see simple, honest men being dragged off as slaves to die in the galleons of the king, Christian Moors are being uprooted and ejected from the land of their birth. The picture of Spain presented by Cervantes is not optimistic or hopeful.

So in mocking Don Quixote is Cervantes mocking the humanists' arrow of time which draws its language and inspiration from the past or is he making an even more bitter mockery of his own times for their rejection of legend? As a great work of literature Don Quixote does not answer these questions, of course. They are our questions. What we can say is that as a portrait of a Renaissance hero whether serious or lighthearted it would be impossible to imagine Don Quixote without the sense of linear time. Cervantes advances a superseding idea of human progress and then steps back to question that as well.

Cervantes sometimes seems more our contemporary than the 350 some years since Don Quixote would suggest.

The Dance of Context

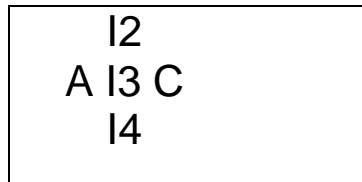
Oral communication requires participation; literacy requires education; and then there's television.

When people speak to each other in each other's presence they participate together in a rhythmic ensemble. Infants blink, jerk, and coo to the rhythms of their mother's speech. Friends nod, smile, cough, and gesture shifting their heads, arms, legs, and torsos together in a dance of rhythmic

ensemble as they talk. The rhythmic patterns of human speech are the tune to which we dance when we are talking together in each other's presence.¹⁵

Every message requires a context. If there is one law governing communication that is it.¹⁶

A black letter printed on a black page is invisible: no message. In the figure



the middle unit may be either 'B' or '13' depending on whether you read it horizontally or vertically. The meaning 'B' or the meaning '13' is in the context, not just in the central figure. Communication requires figure and ground, symbol and context, message and background; it requires contrast and difference. The figure tells you about the ground. The ground tells you about the figure. The symbol and its context tell you about each other. There is no message or context without both message and context.

What then is this rhythm we dance when we speak? It is the dance of context. As we form our message in speech we dance the context with our bodies. As we form our message in words we sing the context in our tone of voice. As we exchange our words we tell each other how to understand them in the rhythms and songs of this dance of context.

And of what does this context sing? It sings of relationship. As we speak our words, our dance of context tells us how we are relating to each other. As a dog bares his canines he wags his tail in the message 'This is play'.¹⁷ As a gorilla enters the territorial bubble of a larger male he slows the rhythm of his walk in the message, 'This is respect'. We sing-song chant to our infants in the message 'We love you. You may depend on us.' Our nurses use the same song in the hospital to tell us in our illness of our dependence upon their skills and expertise, 'Have we moved our bowels today?'

The first, constant, and final question is: How are we relating? This is the contextual question that must always be answered. It does not go away because when any two people are communicating they are continually revising the relationship. The dance of context is the dance of human relationship. It continually tells us how we are getting along.

That's the problem with literacy. For writing and reading to work something has to take over the dance of context. Something has to take on the task of telling the writer and the reader how they are relating to each other.

Already we can see that it is easier for the writer than for the reader. The writer can assume a role and a relationship in his or her text and does not need to wait for feedback from the reader before continuing. In most cases the feedback never comes. In any event the message about the context has to be deferred. The dance of context cannot ever be immediate, ongoing, and negotiated between the writer and the reader as it is in speech. Already the poles of the dance are separated into writer and reader, sender and receiver, one with more power to define the relationship than the other.

For the dance of context to work at all in reading and writing it has to be made more standard, more conventional, more fixed, more predictable. The relationship between reader and writer has to be made regular and must be abstracted from the actual relationship between the two people. In reading and writing the relationship becomes hypothetical. I am writing in a way that assumes

or hypothesizes a relationship between me and you. As with any hypothesis you are free to accept or reject my hypothesis, but I'm the one who gets to make it up in the first place. It is my hypothesis that goes into print and has to be dealt with by every reader, not just you.

One way to understand education and its institutions is to say that education is the solution to the problem of context in literacy. Over the years a host of institutions have arisen with the function of legislating, disciplining, or teaching us how to take the messages found in texts. They teach us as readers how to accept our hypothetical relationships to the authors and they teach us as writers how to hypothesize acceptable relationships for our readers. We have schools, teachers, critics and editorial boards of journals and publishing houses, all creating context for the exchange of written messages. Editorial policy and the style manual have come to replace the dance and the song of context.

Television, however, does not seem to require context. A viewer can get into rhythmic participation with television's images with no more instruction than a newborn infant needs to get in rhythm with his or her mother. Television is like oral communication in that it does not require an education to interpret the rhythmic dance of context. Like oral communication this dance is formed as part and parcel of the message.

Television is unlike oral communication though because the viewer has only passive participation in this dance of context. The viewer can have no effect on the negotiation of the context.

Literacy with its hypothetical relationships and its mediating educational institutions is a powerful force for change in the world. In oral communication an idea which cannot be understood by the audience cannot really be expressed. It remains private and reserved to its originator. It cannot become part of the commons of public discourse.

In literacy, however, an idea can be expressed for which there is no contemporary audience because the audience for things which are written is as large as history and the future. There is an indeterminate period between the formation of the idea and its interpretation. The mediating institutions of education, criticism, and translation may come into existence long after the original message is formed. Franz Kafka, Charles Ives, or Benjamin Whorf could all write things that were largely unintelligible to their contemporaries and yet have become part of our current cultural idiom. This is the bright side of literacy.

The dark side of literacy is that the cultivated literate person can easily come to ignore his or her contemporaries. The writer or reader can fail to be moved by things in his or her immediate presence because of too great an absorption in the almost infinite discourse of the hypothetical world of literacy. Its attractions are many, not least of which is that one can avoid entering into the immediate dance of human relationship.

In any event literacy coupled with its mediating educational institutions is overall a conservative intellectual force because literate public discourse is spread over an indefinitely large time and a host of institutions of criticism, education, and interpretation.

Television is not constrained by any such limits. It is neither constrained by mediating, interpretive institutions; we do not learn in school the canons of appropriate television viewing nor is television constrained by feedback from the viewers of its messages as is oral communication. Television dances its own dance of context.

Furthermore, television in our period has come to be one of the primary institutions which mediate literacy and our oral tradition. Authors now feel they must appear on television to interpret their own works to the public. Publishers frequently require 'media exposure' of their authors. Ordinary people in the grocery store, at the office or on the construction site, or relaxing with their families speak the style, the jargon, and the topics of television.

We have never had before an instance of a form of communication which could unilaterally dictate the terms of its own dance of context nor one which could easily come to dominate the contextual dance of other media. Oral communication requires participation, literacy requires education, television only requires itself.

Public Discourse: Running Around the Commons

'Public' is an old word in our language. We inherited it from the Romans. It meant 'having to do with the people', or 'belonging to the people'. It was contrasted with 'private' which meant those things which were reserved for the use of individuals who owned or controlled them. 'Private' is an aristocratic idea at heart. Not everybody, only a privileged few had private lands. The rest, all the lands which were not private, were the commons. That was what belonged to the public. The commons was used by all but owned by none.

The trick in garnering wealth and power over the years is to somehow capture something out of the commons and somehow get it restricted for private use. Land is the most obvious example of something which when passed over into private ownership garners wealth for the owner. Mineral resources are another fine example. The new industrial technologies of the past 200 years have made one mineral after another valuable and along with them has been tied wealth and power in the right to mine and produce and sell these minerals out of the commons in the earth.

'Discourse' is also an old word in our language. It used to mean running around all over a field. In more recent times, but not very recently, it came to mean verbally running around all over a field or a topic, or talking your way through a subject or topic. A discourse is any talk whether of one person or in a conversation that covers a topic.

'Public discourse' amounts to what the people want to talk about. It is a kind of verbal running around on the commons. It becomes private discourse when someone fences off a piece of it and lays claim to private, privileged use. We also know from experience with land and minerals that when somebody fences off a bit of the commons there is a good chance that he or she will profit from the deal.

In ordinary talk it is pretty hard to fence off a piece of the talk for private use. In oral communication all the participants work up the topics and the context together. You can fence off a piece of the commons of public discourse though if you can somehow set an agenda for the talk and also set limits on who can speak and when. That's called holding a committee meeting and as such it constitutes a raid on the commons of public discourse.

There are other examples in oral communication as well. So-called 'public hearings' are usually really 'private' because of the way they limit the right of everyone to jointly determine the topics under discussion. They are normally held so that there can be no running around on the commons of public discourse. And a lecture usually appropriates a large piece of the commons for the exclusive use and profit of the lecturer. Nevertheless, of all the means of communicating, oral communication is the least likely to let anyone get away with subverting public discourse for private, privileged use.

Even though literacy makes it easier to unilaterally control the context and message of a particular communication it was not until the Renaissance and the printing press that it seemed necessary to actually support the privileged raids on the commons with laws, censorship, and institutional approvals. You might want to say that printed writing created a new and a much larger commons of public discourse than could ever exist in a purely oral society. Certainly with the printing press many more people were drawn into the roles of both readers and writers. That may have been what stimulated the copyright laws, the *Index Expurgatorium* of the Roman Catholic church and the other Renaissance moves to limit and control the commons of printed public discourse.

But whether you believe that printing enlarged the commons of public discourse or not it seems clear enough that in printing the commons gets fenced off by the writer (and editor and publisher) in a way that leaves the reader little choice but to take it or leave it. The reader and writer do not participate together in the running around the commons, they go to a large extent where the writer chooses for them to go,

Public discourse in the age of television may hardly exist. When nightly more than half of the people in the country are unilaterally told what the current news is, it is very hard to maintain that there is much left of the idea of talking about what the people want to talk about. When the highly orchestrated images and topics of the nightly news become the words on everyone's lips at the grocery store, around the water cooler at the office or at the breakfast table on the farm the next morning it becomes impossible to maintain that that is public discourse. The commons has been appropriated by a few for their privileged use. As in other cases it is often the people who are losing the commons who most readily jump to lend a hand in building the fence.

The President's Polyps

There was a time, and not very long ago, when most Americans would have been embarrassed to talk about conditions of the rectum. Those were things you talked about with your doctor or maybe a very close friend or family member. That was it. The private parts were just that, private, nobody else's business. Now we have news as we eat dinner of the President's rectum and its polyps or perhaps it is a drawing of his prostate gland. What was once private now seems all too public.

About one hundred years ago, in 1893, President Grover Cleveland had extensive surgery in which his upper left jaw and part of the palate were removed and replaced with an artificial bone. The process lasted for some 60 days and yet only a very few insiders even knew of the President's illness let alone of the extent of the operation.

As recently as the beginning of the Eisenhower administration news reports could not even quote the President's words without prior clearance from the White House staff. Now in some 30 years we have come from extreme reserve in public discussions of such private matters to nightly accounts of not just the President's comments but his most private parts.

Joshua Meyrowitz¹⁸ believes television is responsible for this massive invasion of the private world by public commentary. It may or may not be television which is the cause, but it seems to me that what this shows is that the words 'private' and 'public' have switched places in a newspeak reversal of meanings.

If private means what belongs to a few and which can be exploited for the development of wealth and power of the few and public means the commons, whatever is of general use by all and not reserved for control and use by any particular interest then certainly the commercial news media are private. They are owned by a small group of people, they appropriate topics and images from the commons for the advantage of commercial advertisers who buy their time and who buy access to their viewing audiences. These very images are carefully copyrighted to protect them against unauthorized use.

So when the commercial media appropriate a topic, any topic, however 'public' the topic may seem, it passes over out of the commons of public discourse into a new vastly elaborated and nearly ubiquitous private discourse, the private discourse of the commercial, electronic media. The talk on television of the President's polyps really is private, but not in the sense of a delicate or sensitive subject matter. It is private in that much older sense of a bit of the commons which has been appropriated for the privileged use of a few.

Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television¹⁹

Jerry Mander published this book in 1978. The arguments are still good, The book should still be read. Television is still with us,

Here are the four arguments in my rephrasing.

ARGUMENT ONE: Television separates us from our experience. All media do this; television is the worst. Writing separates the word from the body²⁰; printing separates the image of the word in type from the traces of the hand which wrote the manuscript; radio and other sound recordings separate the sounds from their sources; film and television separate the images and their sounds from their sources. Television does this so convincingly that many of us find it difficult to know what the experience of our body really is.

ARGUMENT TWO: Television has colonized our experience. The way a colony works is simple. You take over a bit of land. You extract the resources and turn them into something more valuable and sell them back to the people you colonized. It is something like that television is doing. The net result is that control of the resource lies in the hands of a few who control the media.

ARGUMENT THREE. Television is physically and psychologically damaging to the human being. It gives us headaches, makes us feel depressed, and unbalances the normal biological rhythms of the body.

ARGUMENT FOUR: Television is inherently dangerous, not just being badly used. There is no way to fix the problems of the first three arguments.

Mander concludes by saying our only choice is to eliminate television. Similar arguments could be made for the elimination of other highly addictive substances which we frequently deplore and continue to depend on—tobacco, alcohol, caffeine, and sugar may be the highest on the list. Television is like our other addictions. It takes more than logical proofs to make us quit. It takes a redefinition of who we think we are.

Who Do We Think We Are?

Most Americans do not get their sense of identity from the place they live. The majority change domicile every three years.

Most Americans do not get their identity from their position in a family. The majority have relatively little contact beyond immediate family members. Most Americans do not get their sense of identity from the work they do. The majority change work several times in their lives. Most Americans do not get their sense of identity from the stories we tell each other and the songs we sing together. The majority of Americans get their stories and their songs from prime-time television.

Most Americans do not get their sense of identity in the manner of most of the humans who have ever lived or in fact most of the humans who now live on the earth. Place on the earth, family of birth, the work we do to live, and the stories and songs about earth, family, and work have been the four strands of human identity since the Paleolithic.

Most of the people who have ever lived have not had to seek an identity. They have been born into an identity of place, family, work, and story. The meaning of life has been found in ratifying their identity not in seeking it. One learns the self by learning the earth on which one was born. One learns the self by cultivating the human and other life relationships into which one was born, one's house, one's clan, one's totems. One learns the self by learning the work of subsistence on the land of one's birth and by learning the stories and songs of one's people.

We may be the first people to try to live separated from these sources of identity. As largely a nation of immigrants we have given up the land of our birth in exchange for freedom of thought or religion or economic independence. In coming to this land and then moving across it we have continued to exchange our ties to family for higher levels of individual autonomy. As we have moved away from earth and family we have exchanged their work for the work of our new places. Because we move frequently we prefer more abstracted more portable work, the work of ideas, the work of words, the work of the mind to the work of subsistence, the work of the earth. And the stories and songs of earth, family, and subsistence have become quaint and dull to our ears. We can no longer give them voice. We have preferred the heightened measured cadences of the rational argument. We have come to prefer the essay to the song, the newsstory to the poem.

From DeTocqueville²¹ to Bellah²² those who have observed us have seen us break away from the earth, our past, and our communities as we've formed our contemporary understanding of ourselves. As Bowers²³ tells us, we have come now to see ourselves as self-realized, autonomous, and rational individuals, emancipated from the limits of our birth, our traditions, and our cultures. This is the image we have of ourselves. It is the image we have cultivated for perhaps 200 years now as we have struggled free from the prejudices and authority of the past.

Here is the problem: Our image of ourselves no more matches our reality than Max Headroom matches his human source. The difference is that Max Headroom is a cracked, freaky, distorted, unreliable computer-television image of a whole integrated human. With us it is our image that is whole, integrated, rational, and free. We are not. We are no freer of tradition than Paleolithic humans were. We are no more independent of each other than we ever were. We are no less dependent on the earth for our life than we have ever been. The ancient truths remain our truths: Our food comes from the earth; we all speak another's language; our life depends on other life.

'That's the Public We Represent'

On the evening news there is a story about a car wash to raise money to buy gas for unemployed workers. The proceeds are to go to the gas station which will donate five dollars in gas to unemployed workers who are seeking employment. The event was sponsored by an organization for unemployed workers. A representative for the organization said, 'That's the public we represent'.

The word 'public' means 'special interest group'. It does not make reference to the people of the nation or the community and what they hold in common but to a small group of people within the community who have certain similar needs, in this case they need gas to look for work.

The same day in the mail is a letter from our communications utility. It said the Federal Communications Commission was proposing to increase rates for 'enhanced services' which include electronic mail. The increased costs would, of course, be passed on to their customers. The letter urged us to contact the Commission to object to this increase in rates because it 'is not good public policy.'

Again, 'public' does not refer to what is commonly available to the people of the nation or the community. Electronic mail is a luxury commercial service which is enjoyed by a very small interest group of customers. 'Public policy' in this use means 'policy governing private commercial activities'.

Public Discourse in Three Ages

In the long age of oral communication public discourse has been to talk about the commons, to talk about what was shared by all, the earth and its life, our families and relations, and our work. Our public discourse has been our songs and stories which ratify our sense of identity. From Achilles to Strong Man our stories in our oral traditions have reaffirmed our lives as we have lived them.

In the age of literacy a new and much larger discourse grew up around us. Because it took on a life of its own written discourse could speak to ages not yet born. Or we could read the discourses of our great ancestors. And as this discourse enlarged over the centuries we added to it the institutions of education we needed to understand our own place in it. No longer was it possible for a person simply to be born into a body of discourse. One had to be educated into it.

What we did not notice was that as we created this larger discourse we began to shift from public to private discourse. Because the private discourse of education and literacy was so large we mistook it for the ratifying public discourse of the oral age. We neglected to notice as we fenced off the commons of public discourse. We neglected to notice that this discourse was really only open to a few in each place. To participate in it required duties of apprenticeship and rites of membership. It required a purchase of an education. We failed to notice that in the age of literacy we had come to call this large, private discourse 'public' discourse.

In the age of television we have suddenly noticed that our public discourse is badly eroded. We feel the public no longer thinks about issues. We feel our leaders no longer develop a position with any depth but only seek the brightest, clearest image. We feel we are being excluded from decisions and are powerless to do anything but look on.

To understand our experience we need to ask one question: Who feels that public discourse is badly eroded?

Most of the writers who are concerned about the erosion of public discourse compare the present state of things to some earlier, more literate state of grace. It is very easy to see their concern with the quality of public discourse as a loss of their own hegemony in a field which, in fact, was not public at all but their (and our) own domain. By just shifting the terms of the discussion a little from 'literate public discourse' to 'literate private discourse' it is all too easy to see in this concern more of carping than of criticism. It is easy to sense a feeling of loss of economic and social privilege as such as a loss of public rationality.

But that raises a second point: The image of ourselves we have had is an image of rational, autonomous individuals. As the private/public discourse becomes more and more clearly dominated by image and style and as we become more conscious that we are moved by rhetoric and not only by reasoned argument it is harder to maintain the predominating image of ourselves.

And so we need to ask: Who holds this image of ourselves as rational, autonomous individuals? There again the answer seems to be that it is more strongly held by the most literate, most educated among us. Those of us who through our educations and our literacy have felt emancipated from the ties of tradition and place and who have moved upward through economic strata in a mobile society have come to view our positions as the outcomes of our own efforts, as the rewards due us for our rationality, our self-motivation, and our autonomy. It is hard for us to see it as the privileges that come with an arduous course of qualification and purchase in what is still in fact a rather private membership society.

In other words most concerns with the erosion of public discourse may well come out of a somewhat selfish concern for the loss of private privilege held by highly educated literate people. But is that all there is to it? If it is we can turn on the television right now and forget about the rest of this essay.

Who is Joe LaFleur?

In a story on the evening news we see a man being interviewed. The letters on the screen briefly say, 'Joe LaFleur, Cal Energy Company.' Cut to another scene. Cut again. The third cut is another interview and on the screen it says, 'Joe LaFleur, Cal Energy Company.' But you have the vague feeling that something isn't right. Joe seems changed since the last shot.

Fortunately you have the news recorded on video and run it back. The first Mr. LaFleur has black hair in a crew cut, no hat, wears glasses, and speaks in a Midwestern accent. The second shot shows a man with a military fatigue cap, long blond hair extending several inches below the cap, a full mustache, and he speaks with a Western accent.

Someone watching with you says, 'He must have grown his hair out, or cut it.' Another says, 'No, it's a different guy. Isn't it funny that one company has two guys with the same name?'

But there's a third possibility that is slow in dawning, NBC Nightly News has made a mistake and mislabeled at least one of the men.

What has it taken to get from the first feeling that something wasn't quite right with Mr. LaFleur to discovering that it was an obvious mistake of the news program? It has taken recording the broadcast on tape. It has taken running the tape back several times, looking closely at both the images of the men and the letters on the screen, and it has taken some discussion. The whole sequence is 30 seconds at the real time broadcast pace. The first Mr. LaFleur was on the screen for 8 seconds, the second for 5 seconds. The label is on the screen each time for only one or two seconds. It may seem like a lot of work to track down a minor error.

After all, who but Joe LaFleur and his misnamed colleague and their friends and families would really know or care about the misnaming?

But that isn't the discovery here. It is not that mistakes are made and go unnoticed. The discovery is that several viewers, even when the tape was played back, preferred to believe either that a man had changed hair color, style, and accent or that two men had the same name than to believe that there was an error in the television presentation. When a medium can so strongly overpower one's own experience and common sense, what is left of the commons constructed out of our own lives and their experiences?

Escape from Time's Arrows

Past, present, future; if in your mind time moves along this line from past to future, and if you are at all unhappy with the present, then you must end up thinking of yourself as coming before or after the great time in history. Linear time is the source of both the Garden of Eden and Utopia. The arrow of time which looks back sees the past as the Golden Age from which we have fallen. The arrow of time which looks forward sees the future as the Utopia we are working toward.

With either arrow it is hard to find our place in the present. It is hard for us to enjoy our fall from greater days and say, like Montaigne did in the Renaissance,

It is good to be born in very depraved times; for
compared with others, you gain a reputation for virtue at a small cost.²⁴

It may be even harder to work toward some utopian future after such a long history of failure. We wonder if the great utopianists from Thomas Jefferson to Karl Marx could maintain their enthusiasm after the carnage of the world wars and the nearly constant warfare and terrorism since.

Our understanding of the history of public discourse and media can easily fall into the same trap of linear history. Walter Ong²⁵ believes that literacy preempted orality just as George Steiner²⁶ fears that electronic media are now in danger of displacing literacy.

Both Ong and Steiner look back with a sense of loss to the great period of our literacy and mourn its loss. They might argue that the urgent work of the present is one of resurrection of an earlier literacy, shoring up our educational institutions and reinstating a sense of the centrality of the

written word. Ong and Steiner are not alone in this. You can see this spirit of resurrection in nearly every current proposal for educational reform.

Running counter to this reform movement is another riding the other arrow of time into the future. It is the reform movement of the computer enthusiasts. They tell us that it is now a computer society, an information society, and if we don't get with it we'll be left behind as the arrow of time rushes into its problem-solving utopian future.

These two currents running in opposite directions are the alternating current of our present conception of time. When we look back we feel we have failed. When we look forward we feel we haven't arrived yet. This alternating current in our conception of time makes it very hard for us to recognize that the ancient truths are still there at the foundation of our lives: We all speak another's language; our life depends on other life, we get our food from the earth. Our lives are still grounded in the earth, our relationships to other life, and our cultural traditions.

And so there is an escape from the alternating current of time's arrows. We do not have to go back to reconstruct an oral society and dismantle literacy and electronic communications along the way. We do not have to rush forward into the glorious problem-solving electronic future, abandoning the oral traditions and literacy along the way. The escape is simpler than that. All we have to do is look for and recognize the deeper rhythms of the earth, our lives, and our human relationships. We can reorganize our sense of time to get back in touch with the rhythms of the earth because those rhythms are still right there. They have not been superseded or pre-empted by all of our years of literacy and electronics, civilization and change. From our sense of those cycles we can begin to restore the commons of public discourse.

Casting a Critical Eye

Of the ancient sense of the commons of public discourse there is little left. What is called public discourse is a large domain which has been appropriated for private and privileged use by the commercial media, both electronic media and print media.

How do we reappropriate this large domain for genuinely public use?

One way to restore the commons of public discourse is to resist the constant daily invasions of the commons by the private news media which always present themselves as serving 'the public'. Ask questions about what is presented. Ask about any news broadcast or news story you read:

What does this have to do with me? Is there any connection to my home, my community, my family, my needs for food or shelter? In other words, is this issue local in any way or is it entirely abstracted out of that general 'national' and 'international' discourse among private interests. What does your own commonsense and experience tell you about this issue?

Is this a new issue or an old one? Is this something that could be understood in its roots by most of the people who have lived and now live on earth on the basis of ancient values of community and subsistence needs. Or is it something that can only be interpreted by someone living in our contemporary highly technological society? And if it is old, then ask what mythological, historical, or spiritual sources have to say about the issue.

What is the time sense being projected? Is the time sense one of linear urgency? Is the time sense based on the idea of progress or degeneration. Or is the time sense flat, momentary. What sense of history is given? Does this issue tie to any rhythms or cycles based in the earth or human experience?

A Look at the Nightly News

There is a way to pin down this discussion. I looked closely at one evening's news broadcast and asked questions of it. This is what I found.

The NBC Nightly News on August 15, 1987 consisted of nine blocks, five news blocks and four commercial blocks. In the news blocks there were 13 news stories, in the commercial blocks there were 16 commercials. The news took a total of 22.8 minutes (76%) of the 30 minute program. The commercials took a total of 6.5 minutes (22%) of the 30 minute program. The remaining 42 seconds was taken up in various transitions.

The first news block had four stories; the first was about a supply ship being sunk by a mine in the Gulf of Oman (3 minutes, 12 seconds), the second briefly mentioned an explosion in a Saudi Arabian oil production plant (24 seconds), the third stated that the State Department had said Iran had plans to terrorize United States embassies (14 seconds), and the final story was about a near collision of a small plane with the U. S. President's helicopter (2 minutes, 24 seconds).

What did these stories have to do with me?

Nothing in the first news block had anything to do with me, our community, my family or anyone in my extended network of friends. The only references I have for these events come from other news sources on preceding days. This was international news with only slight references to American employees of the Saudi Arabian plant and in the threatened U. S. embassies.

Were these new or old issues?

The Western and Christian fear of Iran and Islam is a xenophobia that goes back at least to the Crusades of the Middle Ages. In *Don Quixote* Cervantes frequently has characters comment that the Moors are inveterate liars and never to be trusted. The atmosphere of Spain at the time of the expulsion of the Moors is very such like the tone of these news stories about the mining of the Gulf of Oman, the explosion in Saudi Arabia and the threat of Iranian terrorism against U. S. embassies.

The fear and mistrust of other groups of people may be as old as mankind. Certainly it appears throughout the stories in all theoral traditions we know of. Part of that fear comes from the possibility of others disrupting our subsistence patterns, our travel to crucial hunting grounds or water, or disrupting supply routes. That ancient fear may help to explain that in the story on the sinking of the supply ship by a mine, no mention is made of the country of origin of the vessel, of its source or destination, nor of its cargo. It was simply presented as a 'supply ship'.

It is hard to see what is new in these stories. They seem less like 'news' and more like current instances of the very old. Looked at from this point of view, it is the new technology of mines and mine sweepers that seems out of place. Yet one of the people interviewed was bothered by the fact that the ship had had only eyesight as a means of defense against the mines.

In the story of the near collision with the President's helicopter the ancient fear of the loss or injury of the leader is recognizable, whatever one's opinion of the leader might be. One aspect which may be new is the degree of familiarity with the image of the President we now have. Until President Kennedy very few Americans or people anywhere had seen much of their leaders. Since television we have seen moving images of the President almost daily. It is possible that this constant view of the President may contribute to a new sense of his fallibility.

Having *Don Quixote* in mind it is hard not to compare one hero with the other. *Don Quixote* in following the code of chivalry refused to fight anyone but another knight. Other lesser foes were reserved for his unwilling squire to fight.

And then you think back to *The Iliad* in which the great warriors roam about the Trojan plain full of fighting men looking for an appropriate opponent. The great fight the great, lessers fight the lessers. This is an ancient code of warfare. Each fights another of appropriate rank.

Now return to the story of an AWOL U. S. Army private endangering the life of the President of the United States, his Commander-in-Chief and you can sense some of the outrage we feel with assassins and terrorists who rise above their place in life to take on great leaders. It suits this ancient code of honor for a Soviet leader to pose a threat to the United States in the person of the President. But it violates this code of honor for a world leader to be threatened by a mere private.

As with the sunk supply ship it is harder to see something new in this story. Most noticeable is the technology of helicopters and planes with automatic recording devices so that we can playback the tapes of the pilot in this near accident. Again, there is a comment that this incident occurred because the pilot had lost his contact lenses. It is interesting that in both lead stories (15 minutes and 36 seconds out of 6 minutes and 24 seconds) the limitations of human eyesight are crucial elements in the story. The message seems to be that humans are coming up against the limits of what they can do unaided by technology.

What sense of time was projected?

I was struck with the way these four stories floated freely in time. There was almost no reference to time. There was one comment about a tanker sunk five days prior to the current story but no real connection made between the two events. The story about the near collision was presented as 'ongoing'. Any sense of linear time was absent. There was no sense of progressive time in suggesting that these stories showed any movement toward any resolution nor was there a sense of degeneration toward any sort of crisis or climax. The events were presented as static and isolated from either past or future.

But these events were also presented as isolated from the earth and cyclical time. There was no sense of connection to seasons or any other rhythms, either natural or man-made.

The 'news' in the first news block was presented as floating free in time having neither historical connections nor connections to the rhythmic cycles of the earth, There was nothing in this block which in any way connected to me, my home, or my community. It was presented as 'new' and yet there was very little in it which would not be familiar in mythological outline to most humans who have ever lived. Between the ancient xenophobias and chivalric code of honor and the flat, anti-historical presentation of facts there was virtually nothing that one could consider to be public discourse.

Coming up...

After 6 minutes and 24 seconds of news which was not new, of a flat, free floating sense of time, and of events, people, and places having no connection with me the first commercial block was a different reality. I was shown eyeglasses which I could buy right here in town. I use eyeglasses. I was shown a box of cereal and fresh peaches and felt like walking over to the store to buy some of those peaches I had just seen there the day before. I saw a pickup truck nearly identical to the one I drive and then a product being sprayed on popcorn just when we had intended to take a break from viewing the tape and make some popcorn ourselves.

The commercials were all directly connected to me, my home, my community, and my family. They were built upon deep physical and psychological needs, all immediately recognizable: good health, security, self-esteem, and personal image. The sense of time was unquestionable. The sense of time was linear, progressive, and superseding. These four products have superseded everything that has gone before; you might as well forget your old eyeglasses, your old pickup, your former foods and tastes.

The contrast with the news block was striking and immediate. The news block was abstract and removed, floating freely in time and unconnected to anything in my experience and reality. The commercials were specific and direct, they were connected to the reality of this house and this town. Their sense of time was urgent and linear.

Even the pace is markedly different between the news blocks and the commercial blocks. In the news the pace is slow and uneven. In commercials the pace is quick and regular. In 22.9 minutes there are 13 news stories but in only 6.5 minutes there are 16 commercials. News stories vary in length from the shortest of 24 seconds to the longest of 3 minutes and 12 seconds.

Commercials do not vary much. They are either 15 seconds or 30 seconds; 6 were 15 seconds, 10 were 30 seconds. Within commercials the images whip by at a speed just barely perceptible. News images move by more slowly.

The news and the commercial blocks present two very different realities. The news is distant, removed and unconnected. The commercials are close, direct, and connected. One lesson in this is that to talk of 'television' with much meaning it will be important to separate frames. There are different realities providing context for each other all working at once.

Fish Oil Concentrate or Salmon?

Television appears to need no context. It does not require interpretation from either schools of criticism or from other media. This is because it presents its own context. It presents two frames, each of which provides context for the other. One frame is the commercial frame, the other is the content frame.

In search of public discourse we can probably dismiss most of what is on television. It does not make any attempt to present itself as public discourse. The evening news is where television most strongly presents itself as carrying on public discourse. This is where Americans now go to find out what's going on. This is where we are most likely to be able to tune into what the people are saying to each other about what's on their minds.

Now we are struck by a strange irony. When we compare the two frames of the nightly news it looks as though it is the commercial frame which is close to home. It is the commercial frame in which I see things closest to myself and my life. The news frame is distant, removed and abstracted. The commercial frame touches me. That's where I see what I recognize and can understand from my own experience.

Or at least it appears so. But it is easy to miss one little point. In the commercial frame of the August 15th news there is an advertisement for fish oil concentrate. The commercial tells me that scientific studies show fish oil concentrate reduces cholesterol levels. Like Don Quixote I am pushing 50 and so the appeal to my health is direct. It is something I understand immediately. And as for fish oil concentrate I can go right down to the store and get it. It is an issue I understand from my own experience and there is a local solution.

What can be easily slipped over is that the largest inland sockeye salmon run in the United States is a few hundred yards out my front door. With a salmon run like that I don't need any commercial product to get my fish oil. That is what my television does not tell me. Whether or not it is incapable of turning me back to my own immediate sources in the earth I will leave to Postman²⁷ and Mander²⁸ to determine, but it is hard to imagine someone buying 15 seconds of prime commercial television time to tell me to go fishing out my front door for my health.

So what appears to be local and to connect up with me and my life is really connecting me up again to the private, commercial interests of the international consumer market. There's not much public in that.

Will the Real Reality Please Stand Up?

Restoring the commons of public discourse is obviously not going to be easy. There is a dynamic working in television between the commercial frame and the content frame which poses the linear, progressive, superseding time of the commercial frame against the free-floating, flat time of the content frame; it poses the direct, psychologically interpretable reality of the commercial frame against the abstract and removed reality of the content frame. With this dynamics operating it may be necessary for whatever public discourse occurs in the medium to be distant, removed, and historically flat. That could be argued.

What seems even more basic to the problem of public discourse in the age of electronic media is that the two realities of television are constantly before us. In normal programming we never go more than a few minutes without humping between the content frame and the commercial frame. With as many as 30 cable stations to choose from frame jumping comes to resemble a kind of jumping from hyperspace reality to hyperspace reality that we used to find only in the science fiction novels of an Asimov or a Clarke.

With this constant frame jumping any claims to reality can be relativized. Public discourse in any form and by nearly any definition becomes a complex game of reality claim and counter-claim. One dodge of the pressure to pin down reality is to present all events as disconnected, unrelated, floating freely in time. In this aspect television may be as much a victim of itself as the cause of the problem. When competing realities are barking out their claims, neutrality can appear to be the wisest position; it is commercially the safest. Some Max Headroom seems the normal figure, cracked and flawed but about as real as anything else around.

When 'public' has come to mean 'private or commercial interest' and when the only tests of reality are 'public' opinion polls and viewer ratings you begin to wonder if it is possible at all to restore the commons of a genuinely public discourse. The answer, of course, will emerge in the discourse of the coming years. Our part it seems is to continually ground ourselves back into the one reality which is not relative, that is the reality of the earth and our essential membership in its life.

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