Analogue Man -
Engagement Without Commitment

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Historically, innovations in communication techniques have involved a manipulation of time and space. To draw an analogy from relativity theory, assuming a number of alternative time tracks are laid out like parallel railroad tracks, technological innovations in communication have made it possible to move from one track to another. Although the nature of ideas, the substance of communication does not change, the means by which, and the speed with which these ideas can be conveyed, stored, retrieved, and disseminated, and the number of people to whom the ideas are accessible has changed dramatically.

The invention of writing enabled man to add new dimensions to time and space, dimensions not accessible to preliterate man, to listen to those long since dead and to speak to those not yet born. As Schramm noted:

Along the path of history, up the long incline, perhaps thousands of years beyond the beginnings of language, lay another landmark: writing. Having learned to separate sounds from their referents, man now learned to separate them from the speaker as well and subsequently made them even more portable...As language arose from the need to abstract upon events and experience, so must writing have come from the need to abstract upon pictures and to make word-signs last longer than the fleeting second during which they could be heard.1

The introduction of the telegraph represented what has been termed a "quantum jump" in the speed of interpersonal transaction, and the telephone had an even more significant impact on the space-time relationship of people:

"There is a difference of some twenty seconds between a friend in Vancouver and a neighbor in Montreal. To many people this time difference is insignificant, and the space difference does not represent a barrier.^2

Latham concludes that the phenomenon of the telephone has led many people to think of the world as "a spatial--unrelated to the factor of distance." Researchers at the Institute of the Future in California believe that computer conferencing creates an "altered communication state" by enabling people to escape the normal bounds of time and space. Vallee, Johansen, and Spangler observe that this altered state is generated by the physical isolation of the participants, suspension of time and space, and reduced obligation to communicate:

When people in widely separated locations can interact at any time of day or night, their "real world" concepts of time and space are drastically altered. Most people have already had their sense of distance altered by the telephone, but computer conferencing...further reduces the consciousness of distance since it typically costs no more to "talk" across thousands of miles than across ten feet.

Even more striking is the unique "suspended time" of a computerized conference. Participants may enter and leave the discussion at will, without risk of losing touch with the meeting. Time zones disappear since discussion can proceed without regard to the fact that one user is about to eat his supper in London, while a California user has just arrived at his office. If the London colleague unexpectedly joins the discussion while our Californian is busily entering his ideas, this "presence" suddenly adds a dimension of intimacy which restores the awareness of space and time. Freedom from the constraints of time and distance can naturally reduce the obligation to communicate. No one is physically present, demanding a response. No ringing telephone demands an answer."
Other new electronic media compress time and space. Satellite television brings increasingly large numbers of people into seemingly intimate contact with exotic places and people. This compression of the time-space relationship has led to much speculation on new orders of world society. The wired nation and the projected global village have been seen as offering possibilities for new levels of social awareness, involvement, and concern.

The thesis of this article is that, far from spontaneously bringing about a world community with higher levels of empathy and understanding, the more immediate likely consequence of the new communication dimensions is to introduce higher levels of alienation and anomie. In support of this thesis, the following areas will be examined: linear vs. analogue content in media, television as an analogue medium the kind of man who is being fashioned by the new communication media, and the "centripetal culture" that is being generated.

Linear vs. analogue content in media

The time element is not inherent in the act of communication or comprehension; it is a characteristic of the mode and not of the message itself. Awareness of an idea does not involve building the idea, letter by letter and word by word, not knowing where one is going until he gets to the end of the sentence. Rather one starts with the idea, and in the codification of it, time is absorbed. In the interpretation or decodification, time is also involved, but again this is a product of the process and not of the state of awareness.

Perception is analogue in that it is instantaneous. However, the individual collects and stores very much larger cargos of impressions than those that he consciously processes. High levels of analogue input bypass the conscious awareness. The ability of a person to replay a scene under hypnosis and to describe detail not recalled in the state of normal consciousness indicates levels of perception far transcending his capacity to organize the material in the conscious state. The rapid staccato pacing of Sesame Street exploits the assumption that analogue impressions can be organized, stored, and retrieved, and learning can take place by other than traditional modes. When these impressions are withdrawn from the subconscious, time is consumed in the analysis and processing of the data, but the time is a function of understanding, not of perception.

Only in states of twilight consciousness, when the guards between the conscious and subconscious are penetrated, does one become aware of the possibility of compressed time. The dream state exemplifies this kind of time compression and indeed time reversal, where a dream of considerable complexity may be triggered to run backwards from the waking stimulus. Similarly, under extreme stress, or where survival is at stake and death seems imminent, the individual may experience instant replays of his life, the dumping of large cargos of impressions, as in a computer search for an analogue to fit the occasion. This is described in terms such as "in that moment, my whole life seemed to pass before my eyes."

Complex motor skills involve a large reflexive content. Driving a car, playing a musical instrument or speed typing illustrate situations where conscious reaction would slow the process considerably and lower the level of efficiency.

In our conscious state, time-bound linearity operates, or what could be called syntactic time. If, however, the structure of an idea is considered to be build up, as it were, letter by letter and word by word, more or less after the fashion of a typesetter setting a page of type, once the page is set, the seeming linearity of the idea has disappeared. The idea is indeed frozen in a mosaic and analogue form, just as truly as is the photograph.

This page of set type can be moved around as a complete encapsulated idea. Inking this typeset block and pressing it onto a piece of paper results in an instantaneous transfer of the complete idea. Putting the block into a printing press and setting the press in motion enables the transfer of the idea thousands of times in the course of an hour. These thousands of prints may be distributed over a wide area, to be read at different times. Although time is absorbed in the reading of the prints, the time is a characteristic of the symbolic mode and not of the structure of the idea.
The idea transfer took place in the fraction of a second involved in the block's making the impression on the paper.

An even more dramatic example of the encapsulation of linearity can be seen in the making of a gramophone record. Think, for example, of a recording of a piece of classical music which might involve the participation of 50 or 150 musicians. The cumulative time involved in preparation up to the commencement of the recording session is great. If one considers the individual performers' practice and rehearsal times, and the time investment by the composer, both in the execution of composing and in the acquisition of composing skills, the recording performance time becomes a very small part of the whole transaction. So in a manner of speaking, the performance itself is a greatly compressed capsule of the sequence of events leading up to the performance.

The next stage of compression involved in this communication process is a complete collapsing of the sequence of the linear performance into an analogue in the substance of the master recording die. In many regards, the die resembles the page of set type. In order to decode the analogue, we stamp the die onto a plastic disc, put the disc on a turntable, and lift the information off linearly through the tone arm. The information has gone onto the disc linearly, and it is taken from the disc linearly, but it is all always on the disc simultaneously.

Both the printing and the phonograph record processes quite dramatically demonstrate the shift from the linear to the analogue to the linear. However, both processes require engagement in the linear dimension in order for communication to take place. In other words, however much information may be contained on the page of type, looking at the page as a whole in a pictorial, or analogue context, does not convey the meaning. In the same way, there is no way of listening to all of the sound on the gramophone record simultaneously, nor if it were possible, would it make any sense to do so. However, analogue is not the nature of writing or the nature of music.

Painting, on the other hand, is linear in its execution in terms of the information's being place on the canvass stroke by stroke; but the end product comprises an analogue form and is consumed as an analogue.

Television as an analogue medium

There has been much debate over whether television is a linear form or an analogue form. It has been maintained that it is linear because the screen is scanned by a rapidly flying dot moving left to right, top to bottom, after the fashion of print on a page. Depending on the time scale used to discriminate, the transaction may or may not be linear. However as far as the observer is concerned, he perceives not a flying dot, but a picture complete. The combination of the afterglow on the fluorescent surface of the television tube and the slow decay or after-image effect on the retina of the eye retain the impression of the scanning process long enough to fill in the complete frame.

A photograph taken with a high speed camera can freeze the process and capture just a few lines of scanning or a quarter of a frame, depending on the speed of the shutter. This possibility is, however, irrelevant in the viewer's perception of what is happening. In terms of perception, television is an analogue medium.

The commercial-based structure of television has tended to emphasize the analogue nature of television. The need for the commercial message designer to get the maximum effect from the short time he has available to him has argued that he break the conventions of the linear literary approach. The commercial message exploits the time compression possibilities of the analogue by transferring large quantities of information in pictorial form with very compressed verbal cues. The processing of the information is then left to the receiver, who will hopefully respond favorably to the commercial message at the time and point of purchase. Through new dimensions of spatial mobility offered by switching camera angles and moving to any viewpoint from extreme closeup to panoramic observation through the use of zoom lenses, time and space become flexible commodities.

In television the linguistic, or the linear, part of the exchange may account for a relatively small part of the message content. Indications are that the function
of language may be a secondary one, with the nonverbal, or analogue, content dominating.

Interestingly, in terms of discussions of Third World societies, the importance of the nonverbal content of television is generally recognized and emphasized. For example, the international debate over satellite television evidences grave concern over the deculturation potential in television. As an analogue medium, television can bypass the naturalizing and easily controlled influences of language and undermine the social, political, and cultural structures of the receiving nation.

From linear to analogue man:
the age of television

Preliterate or tribal man interacted with his immediate environment, and his language grew out of this environment. The numerous languages and dialects in traditional societies evidence this intimate interaction with environment. Tribal man's engagement with his physical and social environment was predominantly a psychic one, and the intellectual engagement through language was very much a secondary factor.

The introduction of literature greatly increased the psychic space in which people operated but necessitated a much higher level of intellectual engagement, as the medium was now linguistic. According to the Whorfian proposition, the need for consensus of meaning brought about higher levels of organization, and in turn, the new organization altered the way man talked about, thought about, and looked at his world.

The linearity in the form of print spilled over into how man perceived the world. The discipline that literature placed on man's way of ordering the world, or his perception of the world, caused man to analyze visual data linearly. The sequential element in the form had other ramifications in that it influenced how man regarded and moved in time. Time became an unfolding ribbon. The linear nature of literacy, in some strange way, gave structure to time. This is confirmed when modern man goes into traditional preliterate society. He is very frustrated by traditional man's seeming disinterest with time, his tendency to show up for an appointment or for work three days late and to be seemingly unconscious of the importance of arriving earlier.

Both persons are behaving appropriately, according to the demands of the environment that generated them. For traditional man, his environment is moving at a different pace. Where one is at the moment is important. Time is now, at a point, with location rather than with dimensionality. Linear man is going somewhere or has been somewhere. The point has developed into a line.

The line of print has been a very hard master in this regard. Experience, in the linear dimension, unfolds. On the other hand, in moving from the linearity of print to the two-dimensional mode of the pictorial, the linearity of time that is involved in the verbal description is, in some measure, collapsed or telescoped.

The nature of an analogue medium is such that it is possible to move directly in and out of a situation, to engage or disengage instantly with what one is observing. The individual is no longer bound by the terms of a time contract, or time lease, that is part of interaction with linear media.

In the case of interaction with electronic analogue media such as television, this is particularly the case. Electronic interaction takes place instantly at the press of a button. The mere capacity that we have to rotate our tuning turret and to make selection among a dozen or more channels, or similarly to instantly withdraw, colors the way in which we look at this form of interaction. We can directly engage or disengage without violation of social commitment inherent in the live situation. Although there may be considerable investment of time, money, and energy at the sending end of the transaction, the receivers who may be numbered in the millions, are in large measure detached from the event, having made little or no commitment to it. Also by virtue of the absence of social interaction conventions, they are minimally contracted to the event. In many regards, the event is perceived without passion or compassion, as an abstract happening.

In a face-to-face interaction, the participants are governed by social conventions and have generally made certain commitments in order that this interaction may take
place. Going to a meeting, for example, involves planning ahead and the consumption of time and money. Once there, the social conventions of interaction, considered in conjunction with the prior investment, makes for an involvement in the transaction. In many regards, it could be said that the involvement is the transaction.\textsuperscript{15}

As far as psychic engagement is concerned, perhaps the most significant factor in the television transaction is its unidirectionality. At least in the short run, the viewer is passively engaged. He has the possibility for feedback, but the feedback has a considerable time lag and is generally of very low volume. Through television, the individual is introduced to a new pattern of social interaction. In the same way that the shift from traditional man to urban man causes identity tension, the new psychic space produced by television creates still more tensions.

The individual who is fashioned by this kind of interaction with electronic media is not directly connected to the events that form a large part of his information environment. Rather than being more involved, the vicarious nature of his relationship with a large, glamorous, exciting, but remote environment, may tend to accentuate the pedestrian nature of his day-to-day life and generate a high degree of anomie.

However true to life the topics of communication may be, they are unlikely to be presented in a manner representative of their frequency of occurrence in the real life situation. In other words, life is generally routine, not to say dull; and interesting, exciting, or unusual experiences by definition represent a relatively small part of the total compass of experience. For the television producer, or the filmmaker, or any artist, to strive for realism is to court disaster.

When the daily information environment involves instantaneous transportation by satellite to the other side of the world or to the surface of the moon, or instant replay in slow motion, or 20-year old reruns of "Lucy", man's interaction with a large part of his information environment in psychological terms, may be as detached as the out-of-body experiences described by psychics.

Bryan Beatty discussed the function that the media serve for modern man in the following way:

\begin{quote}
Unlike the primitive man who knew by direct contact the bounds of his world and the form that it took, modern man's idea of the world's landscape and his place in it is determined by the information which the communications media bring to him. In large part, these act as substitutes for him, giving him a sense of orientation to his world. Because modern man lacks any real contact with his fellow men, the vicarious pleasures offered through the media such as minor wars, divorces, rapes, killings, political statements, all act as replacement acts for the direct sensory response primitive man felt over the direct experience of the hunt, the territorial protection or the kill... However, this mass media man is primarily an observer, a passive recipient of the constant barrage of image, sound, and print projected at him. Every once in a while he may respond, but, generally, he does so within the narrow limits defined by the mass media. He is basically a receptor allowing mass media to fill the voids of participation with pre-edited, highly selective news and entertainment.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The attempt on the part of some individuals to connect themselves in a more direct fashion with the larger environment through acts of outrage such as hostage-taking, hijacking, and street snipings, designed to attract the attention of the news media, demonstrate the processes of alienation taken to an extreme. Although some such acts are political, a large number are highly personal.

At the same time that the individual is only vicariously involved with the larger environment, he knows less than ever about many facts of his immediate surroundings. The typical individual will know more about Charles Manson, for example, or Gary Gilmore, than he knows about the individuals on his town council. He is more likely to vote in a Presidential election than in a state election or mayoral contest. He may well watch the national news in preference to the local news.

The term "centrifugal culture" could be coined to describe this tendency for the electronic communication media to enlarge people's information arena in a way which puts an emphasis on remote happenings. The economic structure of the media is dependent on the largest audience possible. This means that much of the information received
will be from remote locations. The need for broad appeal will also favor the bizarre
or outrageous packaged in easily digested gobbets. In the same way, time restraints
make the coverage of the news superficial, where events are represented in abstract
form. Mr. Average Man from Main Street is living in the hole of an information
doughnut.

Conclusions

Over the past twenty years much concern has been expressed regarding television's
influence on manifestations of violence in society. Hilde Himmelweit's studies in
England served as a precursor to numerous Royal Commissions and Courts of Inquiry,
the Surgeon General's report in the U.S., and the recent Lamarchi inquiry into the
effects of violence on television on Canadian society.

On the one hand, the electronic media are seen to be responsible for producing a
more involved individual with a greater empathy with an investment in people and
places beyond the compass of his immediate environment. For example, in McLuhan's
early writings, he predicted the growth of a global parochialism created by the
world networks of television, a global village populated by people with a much higher
level of involvement than by previous generation. On the other hand, both academics
and the general public have sought to connect attitudinal changes, perceived as
negative ones and especially manifest in the young, to the influences of television.
Any seeming contradiction between these two points of view is generally reconciled by
placing the responsibility for any negative effects of the media on its packaged con-
tent, rather than on its form. It is generally proposed that if its content were of
higher quality, the problems believed to be generated by the media would disappear.

It may be very important to look at violence as a significant part of the environ-
ment that is shaping the individual in modern society. However, the propositions
put forward in this article, if accepted, imply concerns that are more complex. The
form of the media itself, its remoteness, its analogue content, the superficiality with
which it must necessarily treat issues, growing out of the demands of time compression,
its economic base, all influence the development of a particular kind of man. Anomie
and alienation theory suggest that modern industrial man is already suffering the
effects of removal from intimate contact with his environment. Television removes him
still a stage further.

Inherent in the gemeinschaft/gesellschaft distinction is a temptation to overlook
the various kinds of world view appropriate to each position along a continuum of
social development. However, even the idea of a continuum may be restrictive as it
implies unidirectional scaling between two poles. Perhaps a helical form would
better accommodate the possibility of cyclical development implicit in the notion of
the higher level of communication reintroducing the possibility for universal paro-
choialism. The cycle approach may be particularly appropriate to a study of the in-
fluence of communication on society. What has happened in the development of communi-
cation techniques is that successive developments in symbolic systems and transmission
modes, in the first place, tended to move the communication away from the body. Speech
offered the possibility of operating through intermediate agents but lacked precision
control because memory was involved. Writing offered much higher levels of precision,
especially over time and distance, but it lost much of the affective content of direct
interaction. The telephone and radio reintroduced some of the personal content in the
form of audio cues. Television returned more of the body and much of the nonverbal
content of communication. With the prospect of the development of hologram three
dimensional communication, the return of the body is almost complete. However, the
interaction is very different from that of the highly personal transactions of tribal
man. This distinction is frequently underplayed in the zealously of those who put
forward the proposition that the new communication media will bring ever higher levels
of social involvement and concern.

Footnotes

1. Wilbur Schramm, Men, Messages, and Media: A Look at Human Communication (New York: Harper & Row,
Publishers, 1973), pp. 9-10
Benjamin Singer (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing Company, 1972), pp.27-28
3. Ibid., p. 28

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