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I Didn't Want It to Be True, but the Medium Really Is the Message

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In 2020, I read a book I'd been ignoring for 10 years, Nicholas Carr's "The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains." It was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in 2011 and was much loved among people who seemed to hate the internet.

But in 2011, I loved the internet. I am of the generation old enough to remember a time before cyberspace but young enough to have grown up a digital native. And I adored my new land. The endless expanses of information, the people you met as avatars but cared for as humans, the sense that the mind's reach could be limitless. My life, my career and my identity were digital constructs as much as they were physical ones. I pitied those who came before me, fettered by a physical world I was among the first to escape.

A decade passed, and my certitude faded. Online life got faster, quicker, harsher, louder. "A little bit of everything all of the time," as the comedian Bo Burnham put it. Smartphones brought the internet everywhere, colonizing moments I never imagined I'd fill. Many times I've walked into a public bathroom and everyone is simultaneously using a urinal and staring at a screen.

The collective consequences were worse. The internet had been my escape from the schoolyard, but now it felt as if it had turned the world into a schoolyard. Watching Donald Trump tweet his way to the presidency felt like some sinister apotheosis, as though we'd rubbed the monkey's paw and gotten our horrible wish. We didn't want to be bored, and now we never would be.

So when I came across Carr's book in 2020, I was ready to read it. And what I found in it was a key not just to a theory but also to a whole map of 20th-century media theorists — Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong and Neil Postman, to name a few — who saw what was coming and tried to warn us.

Carr's argument began with an observation, one that felt familiar:

> The very way my brain worked seemed to be changing. It was then that I began worrying about my inability to pay attention to one thing for more than a couple of minutes. At first I'd figured that the problem was a symptom of middle-age mind rot. But my brain, I realized, wasn't just drifting. It was hungry. It was demanding to be fed the way the Net fed it — and the more it was fed, the hungrier it became. Even when I was away from my computer, I yearned to check email, click links, do some Googling. I wanted to be connected.

"Hungry." That was the word that hooked me. That's how my brain felt to me, too. Hungry. Needy. Itchy. Once it wanted information. But then it was distraction. And then, with social media, validation. A drumbeat of "You exist. You are seen."

Carr's investigation led him to the work of McLuhan, who lives on in repeat viewings of "Annie Hall" and in his gnomic adage "The medium is the message." That one's never done much for me. It's another McLuhan quote, from early in his 1964 classic, "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man," that lodged in my mind: "Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind."

We've been told — and taught — that mediums are neutral and content is king. You can't say anything about television. The question is whether you're watching "The Kardashians" or "The Sopranos," "Sesame Street" or "Paw Patrol." To say you read books is to say nothing at all: Are you imbibing potboilers or histories of 18th-century Europe? Twitter is just the new town square; if your feed is a hellscape of infighting and outrage, it's on you to curate your experience more tightly.

There is truth to this, of course. But there is less truth to it than to the opposite. McLuhan's view is that mediums matter more than content; it's the common rules that govern all creation and consumption across a medium that change people and society. Oral culture teaches us to think one way, written culture another. Television turned everything into entertainment, and social media taught us to think with the crowd.

All this happens beneath the level of content. CNN and Fox News and MSNBC are ideologically different. But cable news in all its forms carries a sameness: the look of the anchors, the gloss of the graphics, the aesthetics of urgency and threat, the speed, the immediacy, the conflict, the conflict, the conflict. I've spent a lot of time on cable news, as both a host and a guest, and I can attest to the forces that hold this sameness in place: There is a grammar and logic to the medium, enforced by internal culture and by ratings reports broken down by the quarter-hour. You can do better cable news or worse cable news, but you are always doing cable news.

McLuhan's arguments were continued by Postman. Postman was more of a moralist than McLuhan, likelier to lament society's direction than to coolly chart it. But he was seeing the maturation of trends that McLuhan had only sensed. As Sean Illing, a co-author of "The Paradox of Democracy," told me, "McLuhan says: Don't just look at what's being

expressed; look at the ways it's being expressed. And then Postman says: Don't just look at the way things are being expressed; look at how the way things are expressed determines what's actually expressible." In other words, the medium blocks certain messages.

In his prophetic 1985 book, "Amusing Ourselves to Death," Postman argued that the dystopia we must fear is not the totalitarianism of George Orwell's "1984" but the narcotized somnolence of Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World." Television teaches us to expect that anything and everything should be entertaining. But not everything should be entertainment, and the expectation that it will be is a vast social and even ideological change. He is at pains to distance himself from the critics who lament so-called junk television:

> I raise no objection to television's junk. The best things on television are its junk, and no one and nothing is seriously threatened by it. Besides, we do not measure a culture by its output of undisguised trivialities but by what it claims as significant. Therein is our problem, for television is at its most trivial and, therefore, most dangerous when its aspirations are high, when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversations. The irony here is that this is what intellectuals and critics are constantly urging television to do. The trouble with such people is that they do not take television seriously enough.

That's why Postman worried not about sitcoms but about news shows. Television, he writes, "serves us most ill when it co-opts serious modes of discourse — news, politics, science, education, commerce, religion — and turns them into entertainment packages. We would all be better off if television got worse, not better. 'The A-Team' and 'Cheers' are no threat to our public health. '60 Minutes,' 'Eyewitness News' and 'Sesame Street' are."

All of this reads a bit like crankery. I grew up on "Sesame Street." "60 Minutes" has dozens of Emmys for a reason. And yet Postman was planting a flag here: The border between entertainment and everything else was blurring, and entertainers would be the only ones able to fulfill our expectations for politicians. He spends considerable time thinking, for instance, about the people who were viable politicians in a textual era and who would be locked out of politics because they couldn't command the screen.

That began in Postman's time, with Ronald Reagan's ascent to the presidency, but it has reached full flower in our own, with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jesse Ventura and, of course, Donald Trump. As alarmed as Postman was, nothing in his book was nearly as outlandish as the world in which we live now. Reality TV is an almost too-on-the-nose example of entertainment absorbing all else: an entire genre in which the seduction comes from the pretense of truth, in which the word "reality" signals just another kind of fiction.

It was in that genre that Trump perfected the persona of a ruthlessly effective executive with a particular talent for hiring and firing. Without "The Apprentice," would there have been a Trump presidency? And this is not just an American phenomenon: Volodymyr Zelensky, the president of Ukraine, secured his job by playing an Everyman who becomes president of Ukraine on a sitcom. His political party gave his show its name, "Servant of the People." And his talents proved to be exactly what Ukraine would need when Russia invaded: He has played the part of the reluctant wartime leader perfectly, and his performance rallied what might have been an indifferent West to Ukraine's side.

As the example of Zelensky suggests, the point is not that entertainers are bad leaders. It's that we have come to see through television, to see as if we were televisions, and that has changed both us and the world. And so the line of Postman's that holds me is his challenge to the critics who spent their time urging television to be better rather than asking what television was: "The trouble with such people is that they do not take television seriously enough."

I have come to think the same of today's technologists: Their problem is that they do not take technology seriously enough. They refuse to see how it is changing us or even how it is changing them.

It's been revealing watching Marc Andreessen, a co-founder of the browsers Mosaic and Netscape and of A16Z, a venture capital firm, incessantly tweet memes about how everyone online is obsessed with "the current thing." Andreessen sits on the board of Meta, and his firm is helping finance Elon Musk's proposed acquisition of Twitter. He is central to the media platforms that algorithmically obsess the world with the same small collection of topics and have flattened the frictions of place and time that, in past eras, made the news in Omaha markedly different from the news in Ojai. He and his firm have been relentless in hyping crypto, which turns the "current thing" dynamics of the social web into frothing, speculative asset markets.

Behind his argument is a view of human nature and how it does, or doesn't, interact with technology. In an interview with Tyler Cowen, Andreessen suggests that Twitter is like "a giant X-ray machine":

> You've got this phenomenon, which is just fascinating, where you have all of these public figures, all of these people in positions of authority — in a lot of cases, great authority — the leading legal theorists of our time, leading politicians, all these businesspeople. And they tweet, and all of a sudden, it's like, "Oh, that's who you actually are."

But is it? I don't even think this is true for Andreessen, who strikes me as very different off Twitter from on. There is no stable, unchanging self. People are capable of cruelty and altruism, farsightedness and myopia. We are who we are, in this moment, in this context, mediated in these ways. It is an abdication of responsibility for technologists to pretend that the technologies they make have no say in who we become. Where he sees an X-ray, I see a mold.

Over the past decade, the narrative has turned against Silicon Valley. Puff pieces have become hit jobs, and the visionaries inventing our future have been recast as the Machiavellians undermining our present. My frustration with these narratives, both then and now, is that they focus on people and companies, not technologies. I suspect that is because American culture remains deeply uncomfortable with technological critique. There is something akin to an immune system against it: You get called a Luddite, an alarmist. "In this sense, all Americans are Marxists," Postman wrote, "for we believe nothing if not that history is moving us toward some preordained paradise and that technology is the force behind that movement."

I think that's true, but it coexists with an opposite truth: Americans are capitalists, and we believe nothing if not that if a choice is freely made, that grants it a presumption against critique. That is one reason it's so hard to talk about how we are changed by the mediums we use. That conversation, on some level, demands value judgments. This was on my mind recently, when I heard Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist who's been collecting data on how social media harms teenagers, say, bluntly, "People talk about how to tweak it — oh, let's hide the like counters. Well, Instagram tried — but let me say this very clearly: There is no way, no tweak, no architectural change that will make it OK for teenage girls to post photos of themselves, while they're going through puberty, for strangers or others to rate publicly."

What struck me about Haidt's comment is how rarely I hear anything structured that way. He's arguing three things. First, that the way Instagram works is changing how teenagers think. It is supercharging their need for approval of how they look and what they say and what they're doing, making it both always available and never enough. Second,

that it is the fault of the platform — that it is intrinsic to how Instagram is designed, not just to how it is used. And third, that it's bad. That even if many people use it and enjoy it and make it through the gantlet just fine, it's still bad. It is a mold we should not want our children to pass through.

Or take Twitter. As a medium, Twitter nudges its users toward ideas that can survive without context, that can travel legibly in under 280 characters. It encourages a constant awareness of what everyone else is discussing. It makes the measure of conversational success not just how others react and respond but how much response there is. It, too, is a mold, and it has acted with particular force on some of our most powerful industries — media and politics and technology. These are industries I know well, and I do not think it has changed them or the people in them (including me) for the better.

But what would? I've found myself going back to a wise, indescribable book that Jenny Odell, a visual artist, published in 2019, "How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy." In it she suggests that any theory of media must start with a theory of attention. "One thing I have learned about attention is that certain forms of it are contagious," she writes. She continues:

> When you spend enough time with someone who pays close attention to something (if you were hanging out with me, it would be birds), you inevitably start to pay attention to some of the same things. I've also learned that patterns of attention — what we choose to notice and what we do not — are how we render reality for ourselves, and thus have a direct bearing on what we feel is possible at any given time. These aspects, taken together, suggest to me the revolutionary potential of taking back our attention.

I think Odell frames both the question and the stakes correctly. Attention is contagious. What forms of it, as individuals and as a society, do we want to cultivate? What kinds of mediums would that cultivation require?

This is anything but an argument against technology, were such a thing even coherent. It's an argument for taking technology as seriously as it deserves to be taken, for recognizing, as McLuhan's friend and colleague John M. Culkin put it, "we shape our tools, and thereafter, they shape us."

There is an optimism in that, a reminder of our own agency. And there are questions posed, ones we should spend much more time and energy trying to answer: How do we want to be shaped? Who do we want to become?

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