

The Humanism of Media Ecology

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I AM, of course, honored to have been asked to give the keynote address at the first convention of the Media Ecology Association. I must assume I have been judged an appropriate person to do this, not merely an available one, and I thank the organizers for that. But what is appropriate is not always the best. Jacques Ellul would have been much better, but he is dead, and even worse, spoke French. McLuhan is dead. So are Eric Havelock and Susanne Langer. I don't mean to compare myself to these great scholars. They are, after all, the Abraham, Moses, David, and Esther of media ecology, which is not to say that they were Jewish, but to say that their work gave form to the fundamental questions of media ecology. I know they are here in spirit, but if any one of them could have stayed long enough to be here this evening, it would have been the best possible start for the association. I should add here, on the question of who would be best to give this address, that there are a half dozen or more young people, some of whom are graduates of the Media Ecology Program at NYU and some of whom are not, who have taken the idea of media ecology farther than I have and who, without much argument, could do a better job than I.

Nonetheless, I am not a bad choice, because along with Christine Nystrom and Terence Moran I helped to organize the first graduate program on the planet that chose the phrase "Media Ecology" to signify a university course of study. And so I should like to begin by saying what we meant by using that term, and I do this without the intention of imposing our meaning on you.

YOU may be surprised to know that our first thinking about the subject was guided by a biological metaphor. You will remember from the time when you first became acquainted with a Petri dish, that a medium was defined as a substance within which a culture grows. If you replace the word "substance" with the word "technology," the definition would stand as a fundamental principle of media ecology: A medium is a technology within which a culture grows; that is to say, it gives form to a culture's politics, social organization, and habitual ways of thinking. Beginning with that idea, we invoked still another biological metaphor, that of ecology. In its origin the word had a considerably different meaning from how we use it today. As found in Aristotle, it meant "household." He spoke of the importance to our intellectual equanimity of keeping our household in order. Its first use in its modern meaning is attributed to Ernst Haeckel, a German zoologist, in the late 19th century. He used the word as we do now, to

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refer to the interactions among the elements of our natural environment, with a special emphasis on how such interactions lead to a balanced and healthful environment. We put the word “media” in the front of the word “ecology” to suggest that we were not simply interested in media, but in the ways in which the interaction between media and human beings give a culture its character and, one might say, help a culture to maintain symbolic balance. If we wish to connect the ancient meaning with the modern, we might say that the word suggests that we need to keep our planetary household in order.

In the early days of our department, we were subjected to a good deal of derision, some gentle and some nasty, about our use of the phrase “media ecology.” I think the objection was that the term was too trendy, but more than that, the term was more comfortable in biology than in social studies and ought to remain there. But from our point of view, we had chosen the right phrase, since we wanted to make people more conscious of the fact that human beings live in two different kinds of environments. One is the natural environment and consists of things like air, trees, rivers, and caterpillars. The other is the media environment, which consists of language, numbers, images, holograms, and all of the other symbols, techniques, and machinery that make us what we are.

From the beginning, we were a group of moralists. It was our idea to have an academic department that would focus its attention on the media environment, with a particular interest in understanding how and if our media ecology was making us better or worse. Not everyone thought that this was a good idea—Marshall McLuhan, for one. Although McLuhan had suggested that we start such a department at NYU, he did not have in mind that we ought to interest ourselves in whether or not new media, especially electronic media, would make us better or worse. He reminded me several times of the lines in Stephen Vincent Benét’s long poem *John Brown’s Body*. At the end of the poem, Benét makes reference to the Industrial Revolution and finishes with these lines:

Say neither, it is blessed nor cursed.
Say only “It is here.”

No room for moralists there. McLuhan claimed that we ought to take the same point of view in thinking about modern media: that they are neither blessed nor cursed, only that they are here. He thought that this moral neutrality would give the best opportunity to learn exactly how new media do their stuff. If one spent too much time on the question of whether or not that stuff was good, one would be distracted from truly understanding media. As a consequence, although I believe McLuhan liked *me*, I feel sure he would not have much liked my books, which he would have thought too moralistic, rabbinical or, if not that, certainly too judgmental.

I think there is considerable merit in McLuhan’s point of view about avoiding questions of good and bad when thinking about media. But that view has never been mine. To be quite honest about it, I don’t see any point in studying media unless one does so within a moral or ethical context. I am not alone in believing this. Some of the most important media scholars—Lewis Mumford and Jacques Ellul, for example—could scarcely write a word about technology without conveying a sense of either its humanistic or anti-humanistic consequences. And it is that issue that I should like to address for the remainder of my talk.

IN thinking about media from a humanistic point of view, one must take into account the obvious fact that people will have different ideas about what is good for them and bad for them. This year, we are celebrating the 600th anniversary of the birth of Johannes Gutenberg. I suppose we can all agree, in the year 2000, that his printing press with movable type was, all things considered, a good thing, that is to say, a humane advance in the history of communication. But people did not agree about that in the early days of its invention, especially because of the role it played in the breakup of the Holy Roman Church. The press put the Word of God on every Christian's kitchen table. That being the case, who needs Popes and priests to interpret it? Which is why Martin Luther said of the printing press that it was "God's highest grace by which the gospel is driven forward." It would have been difficult to find, in the 16th century, any devoted member of the Church to agree with that judgment. We might say that it took 200 years before the quarrel between Catholics and Protestants—a quarrel incited by print—subsided.

Which leads to another point: In assessing the humanistic consequences of a new medium, one must take into account the factor of time. I think some of you know that among the severely negative consequences of television—at least as I see them—is its role in making the institution of childhood obsolete. I would call that a moral decline. Of course, there are some people, especially merchants, who think that the disappearance of childhood is a good idea. But even those, like me, who think it is a catastrophe have to keep in mind that 100 years from now, it may not seem so. In fact, people might believe that the idea of childhood was no great advantage, at any time, either to the young or to the old, and the sooner television wrecked it the better.

And so we must keep in mind, first, that people differ about what is good for them and what isn't, and second, that changes over time will make us see things differently from the way they might have first appeared. In keeping these factors in mind, is one taking the position of a moral relativist? Not necessarily. It is possible, for example, to say that when people have differed over the moral implications of a new medium, one group was wrong. And I think it also possible to say that although time may change the way people judge the effects of a new medium, time can be wrong. I mean, let us say, that the negative effects of a medium might still be a problem and remain one in spite of the passage of time. In other words, time does not always erase the disadvantages of a medium. Neither does it necessarily weaken the advantages.

A good example of this is to be found in the prophecies made by Socrates about the written word. I think most of you know that in the *Phaedrus* he spoke against writing on the grounds that it would weaken our memories, make public those things that are best left private, and change the practice of education. Writing, he said, forces a student to follow an argument rather than to participate in it. I should say that the passage of 2,500 years has not changed those negative consequences. I should add that the positive consequences that Plato saw are also still perfectly evident.

I might offer, as another example, an even more ancient prophecy concerning media. I remind you of the implied prophecy in the Second Commandment of the Decalogue. It is the commandment that forbids Israelites to make graven images or any likenesses of anything in the world. I take it that the author of that prohibition believed that the making of concrete, visual images would weaken the capacity of people to conceive of abstract ideas, specifically a God that has no material existence but exists only in the Word and through the Word. That idea about a medium's effect on human psychology is as certain today as it was three thousand years ago.

What I am leading up to is that while we must keep in mind that not all people agree on what is an advantage or a disadvantage, and that time might alter our judgment of the effects of a medium, one can still take a definite view about whether or not a medium contributes to or undermines humane concepts. Which leads me to say something about what one might mean by a humane concept. Let us start with McLuhan and Harold Innis. As most of you know, both McLuhan, who often denied it, and Harold Innis, who never denied it, had a definite idea about what was good for people in relation to media. McLuhan thought that it was better for people if the media they used promoted a balance in their sensorium. Innis believed that it was better for people if their media promoted a balance in people's conceptions of time and space. The only time I know of that McLuhan used the phrase "media ecology" is in a letter he wrote to Clare Booth Luce, in which he remarked that it may be necessary for a culture to limit its use of some medium in the interests of promoting a balance in the media ecology. For his part, Innis worried that a medium that emphasizes space over time is likely to make a culture obsessed with military conquest. In other words, there is in fact a moral dimension to the way in which both of them assessed media and media change.

WHAT, then, do I think are the humanistic issues one ought to consider in trying to understand media? I should like to offer some in the form of a series of questions, and when I am done you will have, I hope, an idea of what I regard as humane progress.

The first question is this: To what extent does a medium contribute to the uses and development of rational thought?

The question suggests that I believe that rational thinking is one of humanity's greatest gifts, and that, therefore, any medium that encourages it, such as writing or print, is to be praised and highly valued. And any medium that does not, such as television, is to be feared. This is not to say that writing or print do not have disadvantages, and television, advantages—only that in this important sphere of humanity's development we have a clear case of one medium that assists it and of another that undermines it. I am prepared to go quite far on this matter. For example, I would remind you that all the people who helped to create the electric world—from telegraphy to the Internet—were themselves educated almost exclusively by the written and printed word: that is, by pen, paper, and books. How did they get so smart? Well, you know my answer: Their intellectual powers were developed by a medium that fostered abstract thought. If you want any elaboration of this view, I suggest you begin by reading about the 18th century. It was then that most of the humane ideas we have carried forward were conceived: religious freedom, free speech, inductive science, women's rights, childhood, an abomination of slavery, the right of the governed to choose their governors, even the idea of progress, and, you might be surprised to know, the idea of happiness. We owe these ideas to rationalism—a way of thinking fostered by print. David Riesman once said of print, it is the gunpowder of the mind. We need have no fear that we are in danger of having too much of it.

Here is a second question: To what extent does a medium contribute to the development of democratic processes?

There is no question that the printed word was a key factor in the emergence of democracy, not least because it undermined the oral tradition and placed great emphasis on individuality. In *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville worried that the printed word would lead Americans

away from a sense of community and toward what he called egotism. De Tocqueville could not know of radio, television, or the Internet, but if he could, I'm sure he would ask of them, Do they help maintain a balance between a sense of social cohesion and individuality, both of which are necessary to a humane democracy? I do not think he would be impressed by media whose formats encourage isolation. After all, we can listen to music alone, watch television alone, watch videos alone. And now with the aid of computers, we can shop at home, we will be voting at home, and going to college at home—that is to say, alone. Of course, we also read alone, which fact was, as I mentioned, an important element in the development of individualism, but the imbalance fostered by new media creates a problem that will have an important effect on our understanding and practice of democracy.

A couple of years ago, Lawrence Grossman wrote a book called *The Electronic Republic* in which he enthusiastically predicted that in the future, representative democracy would be replaced by what he called participatory democracy. He meant by this that digital technologies would make it possible for plebiscites to be conducted every week; that is to say, citizens would be able to vote on whether or not we should send troops to Bosnia, impeach the President, or change the Social Security system. The Senate and Congress would become largely unnecessary. In other words, we become faceless citizens voting alone on issues we do not have the time or place to discuss. My only comment on this possibility is that Madison, Jefferson, and Washington would have left the country if such a system were employed.

A third question—related to the previous two—is, To what extent do new media give greater access to meaningful information?

In the 19th century, we clearly suffered from the problem of information scarcity. In the 1830s information could travel only as fast as a human being, which was about 35 miles per hour on a fast train. And so, we addressed the question, How can we get more information, to more people, faster, and in diverse forms? We started to solve this problem with the invention of telegraphy and photography in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Not everyone was enthusiastic about the early attempts to solve that problem. Henry David Thoreau remarked in *Walden*,

We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. ... We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.

Nonetheless, the issue of what is significant or useful information was not much discussed, and for 170 years we have been obsessed with machinery that would give access, and give it fast, to a Niagara of information.

Obviously, the Internet does that and we must give all due praise for its efficiency. But it does not help us, neither does television or any other 19th- or 20th-century medium (except perhaps the telephone), to solve the problem of what is significant information. As far as I can tell, the new media have made us into a nation of information junkies; that is to say, our 170-year efforts have turned information into a form of garbage. My own answer to the question concerning access to information is that, at least for now, the speed, volume, and variety of available infor-

mation serve as a distraction and a moral deficit; we are deluded into thinking that the serious social problems of our time would be solved if only we had more information, and still more information. But I hope I need not tell you that if children are starving in the world, and many are, it is not because we have insufficient information. If crime is rampant in the streets, it is not because we have insufficient information. If children are abused and women battered, that, too, has nothing to do with insufficient information. The solutions to those problems lie elsewhere, and Bill Gates and Nicholas Negroponte have not yet noticed that, and it is not likely that they will.

Here is a final question: To what extent do new media enhance or diminish our moral sense, our capacity for goodness?

I know that this question will strike some of you as strange, or perhaps unanswerable. It is, in any case, not the sort of question that is of interest to technologically oriented people, or even the professors of technologically oriented people. And yet, it is a version of the question asked by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in an essay he published in 1749. The essay made him famous, and even better, opened the way to the point of view we now call Romanticism. Rousseau asked if scientific progress contributed to the corruption or purification of morality. I retrieve the question because it was asked at a moment, not unlike ours, when there were great scientific and technological advances, when there was great enthusiasm for inventions of all kinds, when there existed, prominently, the belief that technological innovation was the same thing as humane progress. In his essay, Rousseau ridiculed the so-called advances of civilization, claiming that such advances lead to materialism and atheism, which he thought demeaning to the human spirit. Rousseau placed himself on the side of religion and spirituality, as did so many of the great Romantic poets who followed in his path: Wordsworth, Keats, Blake, Coleridge, Byron, Heine, Baudelaire, and most of all, Percy Shelley, who argued that because science and technology proceed without a moral basis, they do not make the mind receptive to moral decency. He thought, of course, that poetry did. "The great instrument of moral good," he wrote, "is the imagination, and poetry administers to the effect by acting on the cause."

I DON'T say that I see as clearly as Shelley what are the instruments of moral good, or the instruments of moral evil or even moral indifference. But it seems to me that those of us who are interested in media ecology ought to give more time than we do in addressing the role media play in, as Rousseau put it, corrupting or purifying our morality. After all, no one can dispute that in the 20th century more advances were made in technology than in all the previous centuries put together. How, then, can we account for the fact that more people were slaughtered in the 20th century, including as many as ten million children, by wars and mayhem than in all the previous centuries? How can we account for the fact that the three most influential ideologies of the 20th century were Nazism, Fascism, and Communism, each of which reduced the significance of the human spirit so that people fled from them whenever they could? Is it not possible that behind the noon-day brightness of technological ingenuity there lurks something dark and sinister, something that casts a terrible shadow over the better angels of our nature?

Esther Dyson, who is one of the more prominent cheerleaders for technological growth, remarks in her recent book that those who worry too much about the electronic world can rest easy in the assurance that human nature will remain the same. Not surprisingly, she misses the point. Human nature may stay the same. But it is part of human nature to hate and kill, and it is part of

human nature to love and protect. The question is, what part will be released and nurtured? What part will be suppressed and shriveled? And, of course, is there any connection between our obsession with our technology and our capacity for moral growth? This last question is what Rousseau, Shelley, Blake, Carlyle, and Huxley thought and wrote about. Do we?

It seems to me that there is something shallow, brittle, and even profoundly irrelevant about Departments of Communication that ignore these questions, that are concerned to produce technological cheerleaders, and even neutralists who offer little historical or philosophical moral perspectives. What I mean to say, I suppose, is that media ecology is properly a branch of the humanities.

Well, there are, of course, many other questions to ask on the general subject of media and humanistic advance. You will notice I have said nothing about the question of the contribution of media to the growth of artistic expression, and not very much about whether or not media enhance or diminish the quality of human interactions; neither did I say anything about the extent to which new media encourage or discourage an interest in historical experience. These are important questions, and I hope there are those among you who are interested to ask them and to try to answer them.

Let me conclude, then, by saying that as I understand the whole point of media ecology, it exists to further our insights into how we stand as human beings, how we are doing morally in the journey we are taking. There may be some of you who think of yourselves as media ecologists who disagree with what I have just said. If that is the case, you are wrong.

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