ILLUMINATING THE BLINDSPOTS:
Essays Honoring Dallas W. Symthe

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"Miracles" of Communication Technology: Powerful Audiences, Diverse Choices, and Other Fairy Tales

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Trendy notions of audience empowerment through technology permeate promotional and even academic discourse. My analysis of trends, however, shows a different picture. New electronic communication patterns provide perhaps the clearest demonstrations of the rush toward cultural monopoly. Far from ushering in a new age of media democracy and popular control, developments in mass media technology may reduce diversity and choice and extinguish all but the facade of democracy in the West, even as the floodgates to them are opening in the East.

Thomas Hughes, a leading historian of electrification, describes the logic of the monopolistic form in that industry in his book subtitled *A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm* (1989). Huge grids dominated by single firms (permitting niches of independence for regulatory window-dressing) are needed to work the *loan factor* that is, the ratio of average demand to peak demand. It requires very large reserve capacity, because electricity is hard to store. Similarly, electronic mass communications driven by advertising is also "hard to store." Maintaining or expanding market share depends on contrast propagation of the sales message. Here a *risk factor*, the ratio of average marketing successes to total production capacity needed to sustain it, requires concentration, consolidation, large investments, and the pooling of resources through networking.

These imperatives create the impetus for what Hughes calls *technological enthusiasm*, that is, a cultural climate of swift and seemingly inevitable change propelled by inexorable forces of science, technology, and the "free market." Its speed and momentum tend to overwhelm public safeguards erected previously. Its sweep tends to disorient citizens who might form a constituency for democratic resistance and media reform.

The theoretical groundwork for confronting these trends has been laid by Dallas W. Smythe (see, e.g., 1977) in his work on the commodity form in advertising-driven mass-produced communications. The primary commodities created and sold in such production are not editorial or program content but audiences. Advertisers pay for media production according to the size and *quality* (i.e., propensity to consume) and of audiences (called *markets*) mass media assemble and sell to them. Editorial and program content is the "free lunch," "loss leader," or "bait" that, in the argot of the trade, *delivers* the audience, preferably in the mood to buy.

Ads and almost everything sandwiched between them are designed to the specifications of a marketing plan built around the basic formula of *cost per thousand*, that is, the measure of the value of the commodity: how much does it cost to attract audiences in units of one thousand. That yardstick of value rewards cutting costs and boosting mass appeal; it punishes other qualities. The entire operation is funded by a levy hidden in the price of goods we buy, assessed on everyone who uses any advertised product (without representation, one must say), whether or not we need or use the media that it finances.

It is high time to distinguish our roles as commodities, markets, and consumers from that of citizens in self-governing society. In order to do that, we shall apply Smythe's theoretical contribution to the claims of technological empowerment and to look at the realities of availability and choice in mass communications.

CLAIMS

On the last day of 1989, in an editorial typical of the new media hype, the *New York Times* looked back at a decade of development in communications and pronounced it the Age of Speed. "Whatever else happened in this decade, the 1980's have been a time of acceleration, especially in America," *The Times* declared. Telephones have become portable. Microwave ovens speed labor in the kitchen. Computers drive business, industry, transport, government, and many professions to work ever faster. The video cassette recorder (VCR) appeared from nowhere to become a fixture in two-thirds of American homes. And more was still to come:

> Before cable, Manhattan residents could watch only seven channels.... Today's Manhattanite can graze among 37 channels, and others are on the way.[1]
>
> Because of cable, culture now travels faster. MTV provides throbbing music day and night. There are channels for movies, channels for children, channels for talk, channels for sports. And, of course channels for news—news that seemed to sweep through living rooms at gale force.

All this, declared *The Times,* gave viewers "control over what was watched."

Similarly, *TV Guide* (December 9, 1989) looked back upon what it called a "Decade of Change, Decade of Choice" and declared that "two new technologies—VCR's and cable—have forever changed the way we use our TV sets. And, indeed, the way we live."

If so, was it really in the direction of audience control and choice?

There is no doubt that the convergence of powerful new communications technologies speeds business, institutional, and professional life. But does the average home user who pays the extra price really gain and exercise greater control? Do new technologies promote freedom? Could it be (as I think the evidence seems to indicate) that the greatest acceleration in communications, in which *The Times* and *TV Guide* were both major participants, was the "age of speed" in global media concentration and hybridization? These are the questions we address in this chapter. First, we shall look at the actual diversity of media sources and materials available to the vast majority of people. Secondly, we shall review some evidence about the choices they make of them.

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[1] In fact, 1993 is the target date for 70 channels in Manhattan, operated by two large cable systems—both owned by the megaconglomerate Time Warner, Inc. The deputy mayor of New York when the first cable franchise was issued, Richard Aurelio, became the head of Time Warner Cable New York and negotiated the second franchise, running until 2003. "People who take cable," Mr. Aurelio told the *New York Times* (July 2, 1990, p. B2), "have a love affair with television."

AVAILABILITY

Most people make their choices from what is made most readily available to them. The long-term trend in the availability of media materials—~~both information~~ and entertainment—has been a rise in volume, a reduction in original sources, and a decline in the diversity of content.

The facts of media concentration and homogenization have been known for a long time. Yet they have been obscured or ignored by proponents of the new "powerful audience" theory. Media and academic voices both cheer and "revival" proliferation. They see "power" in whatever residual choices and interpretation audience members ae able to make among media choices available to them. This apologia undermines analysis of the political economy of media and distracts attention from what is going on behind the scenes.

What is going on behind the scenes, unreported by mainstream media, is indeed a transformation of unprecedented speed and scope. The constant novelty of appeals and styles suggest content change and diversity. The relative stability of corporate names and logos implies constancy of structure. Together they help make the sea-change in the manufacturing and control of the cultural environment not only unreported but virtually invisible.

The dismantling of public protections in banking facilitated the largest known financial ripoff in the country's history, the Savings and Loan (S&L) scandals. The same process called "deregulation" permits much less known, but for a democracy even more far-reaching, changes in the structure of cultural choices and the process of choosing.

Concentration

Many studies document the trend toward media concentration. Two wire services, one near bankruptcy, supply most world and national news. Chains dominate the daily and weekly press, with the top 10 controlling more than one-third of circulation. Only 4% of cities have competing newspapers. Magazines and books provide the most varied fare, but electronically based conglomerates own the most and biggest publishing houses.

Broadcasting is of course the most concentrated. The top 100 advertisers pay for two-thirds of all network television. Three networks, increasingly allied to giant transnational corporations—our private "Ministry of Culture"—control the bulk of production and set the trends for the rest of the cultural mainstream. Some 50 weekly series are cancelled every year, many without being given a chance to build a public. Many programs and films are made but never shown. A handful of huge conglomerates, probably not more than 40, manage most media operations. With the recent "merger mania," their numbers are shrinking and their reach is expanding every year. Other interests, minority views, and the potential of any challenge to dominant perspectives, lose ground with every merger.

In one of the few studies of content diversity, Dominick and Pearce (1976) analyzed trends in network prime-time programs over a 20-year period. Their "diversity index," showing the number of program choices available to viewers, declined from over 60 in 1953 to under 20 in 1974. Their "homogeneity index," tracing the similarity among network schedules, showed that the tendency to clone doubled "the symbolic structure has become more redundant and audiences have been presented with fewer and fewer alternatives" (p. 80).

The media proliferation of the 1980s strained some traditional client relationships (such as network advertising) and sharpened competition for existing markets. But it did not increase the supply of original sources of ideas or productions. On the contrary, the apparent market fragmentation was accompanied by an unprecedented new wave of mergers, acquisitions, cutbacks, and bottom-line pressures. The drive for ratings forced the same dramatic appeals on news as on fiction, and led to "reality shows" fronted by journalists and, ironically, involving dramatizations. Bizarre plot configurations popular on soap operas were recreated by "real people" on "trash TV." "The greatest threat to journalistic independence and integrity is not the Jesse Helmses," a network news executive was reported saying, "and it's not the libel suit—it's red ink."

Trying to finance their growth and still return a profit, giant conglomerates cut costs, reduced staffs, curtailed risky experimentation, and limited or totally abandoned specialized, minority, and public affairs programming (for a report, see Donahue, 1989). They seemed to be secure in the knowledge that large and otherwise diverse groups of media consumers exercise new media choices along existing lines. These are tastes and preferences cultivated mostly by television.

Television

The overwhelming fact of cultural life is that television has become the common everyday symbolic environment into which children are born and in which they live and learn from cradle to grave. The set is on an average of 7 hours a day in the average American home. Viewing is a relatively nonselective daily ritual. It fits styles of life, income, education, and work. Most viewers watch by the clock and not by the program. The content preferences and "predisposition" so important to selectively used media do not apply to the overarching patterns of the world of television.

The more viewers watch (and the more electronic media they own, the more they seem to watch), the fewer basic content choices they have. This fact is obvious if we compare what is available through electronic media with what is available through print. But it is also true for electronic media choices themselves.

Our long-standing "Cultural Indicators" research on network television content and the consequences of exposure (Gerbner, 1986, 1990; Signorielli & Morgan, 1990) demonstrates that many of the most typical overarching content patterns of life on television—action structure, casting, social typing, and fate—are common to most types of programming and news. They are remarkably stable and repetitive from year to year, and they are inescapable. Exposure to them depends more on how much than on what the viewer watches. Independent stations and syndicated program originators cater mostly to the same markets and audience expectations and follow the same basic production and programming patterns.

We have found that the cultural tidal wave that is television cultivates viewer conceptions of reality, and shifts political orientations, and—vocal claims to the contrary—generates conformity and intolerance of differences. Provisions that had attempted to preserve fairness, plurality, and public participation in broadcast policy crumble under the impact of a shift of controls to ever larger industrial combinations. This process is called *deregulation* and is justified by an appeal to the free marketplace. The trade paper *Variety* announced in its September 11, 1985, issue (p. 45): "Diversity in the entertainment business, for decades the cornerstone of government policy and congressional oversight, seemingly has melted overnight into something akin to benign neglect." The last feeble remnant of broadcast fairness, the so-called Fairness Doctrine, is attacked by broadcasters as an infringement on their right to program as they (and their sponsors) please. The agency that is supposed to enforce the Doctrine decides to dismantle it because it "chills and coerces speech"—by requiring broadcasters to air controversy fairly. A survey of studies by Aufderheide (1990) shows that, while news and public affairs were cut for economic reasons, the Doctrine itself did not chill debate nearly as much as its absence does. Nevertheless, when Congress tried to restore the Doctrine, President Bush vetoed the bill, giving the same reasons.

When the state of Florida enacted a tax on advertising, industry's champions of the free marketplace of ideas threatened to blank out that state for national advertising, further confounding the distinction between free speech and profitable speech. Florida quickly reversed itself, and the experience slowed the desire of other states to tap a rich vein of potential revenue.

The Federal Communications Commission grants licenses free of charge in exchange for a promise to use the airways as a public trustee, broadcasting in "the public interest, convenience, and necessity." Never clearly defined or enforced, the concept of public trusteeship was virtually abandoned during the "deregulation era," largely because the FCC accepted the claim that new technologies make the license-holders' monopoly over scarce frequencies obsolete and diversity of content an inevitable consequence of market competition. Despite experience to the contrary, it has become increasingly difficult for community groups to challenge a broadcaster's failure to live up to any standard of public service and program diversity, or even of reporting. In turning down such a challenge to six commercial television stations serving Philadelphia, the FCC affirmed its elimination of quantifiable service or diversity requirements and only admonished a station for not even providing a publicly available file of its performance ("Memorandum Opinion and Order" released June 29, 1990).

Other technologies

More than 60% of all American homes are wired for cable, but most cable companies do not engage in new production. Those that do compete for the most popular network-type fare. (And also charge for it, and increasingly also carry advertising.) The more specialized channels appeal to upscale light viewers for whom they duplicate and compete with similar content on other (mostly print) media.[2]

Movie theaters, once an endangered species, now adjust to and reap record profits from the convergence of new technologies. Industry analysts report that "The box-office surge has been helped along by

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[2] For example, *Broadcasting* Magazine reported on June 18, 1990 (p. 53), that 40% of the viewers of four cable networks earn more than $40,000 a year, compared to one-third of broadcast network viewers. Over one-fourth of the Arts and Entertainment and Headline News networks earn more than $60,000, compared to about 13% of broadcast network viewers. Although the total number of cable viewers is still much less than that of the broadcast networks, and most cable viewers watch more television than non-viewers, the upscale character of a larger proportion of cable than broadcast viewers is used by cable operators to convince advertisers that putting together a commercial package aimed at four or five of the upscale cable networks is a good way to reach specialized audiences. That policy is most likely to drain advertising support from magazines (as well as from broadcasters) already hard-hit by mergers and competitive media.

broadcast TV, cable TV and home video.... Producers are using sales of foreign, cable TV and home video rights to virtually guarantee a film's profit before it even reaches theaters." Movie marketers are singing praises of the new technologies as efficient ways to promote movies that appeal to the largest audiences (Walley, 1990, p. 80).

Video production has of course been fully integrated into the new electronic system. Prerecorded video-cassette buying, renting, and copying (illegal but widely practiced, costing the industry an estimated $500 million a year) concentrate on the most profitable titles. For example, more than half of VCR owners said they will buy, rent, or copy "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" (*Variety,* June 27, 1990, p. 47). Videos also specialize in "adult" fare and other features that are more likely to imitate and even exceed some of the most exploitive aspects of standard productions than to offer alternatives or challenges to it.

It is, then, a political myth and intellectual conceit to assume that diverse audiences are clamoring for varied ideas, new knowledge, and fresh experiences. Often ignored by promoters of new technologies is the fact that cultural enrichment and diversity come from investment in education, art, science, and talent in general, and from resources devoted to the abolition of barriers to creative work such as minority status or assembly-line dramatic and news formulas. In the decade of media explosion, the proportion of resources devoted to such social investment declined.

While media outlets proliferate and consolidate, the numbers of writers, directors, journalists, and other creators of information and entertainment shrink. Media sociologist Muriel Cantor (1990) reported that, in the late 1960s, there were 25 program production companies; some 20 years later there were 13. During the same period, the eight major studios' share of all prime-time programming increased from 40% to 75% (*Variety,* June 27, 1990, p. 60).

With the loosening of the long-standing FCC rule against the networks producing the syndicating most of their own shows instead of contracting with the production companies (a rule nicknamed *finsyn,* for financial interest and syndication, designed to preserve a modicum of diversity), another wave of mergers and vertical integration is inevitable. "WALL ST. SEES FINSYN CHANGES TRIGGERING MEDIA MERGER SPREE" was the *Variety* headline of June 27, 1990 (p. 3). Michael Hill of the *Baltimore Evening Sun* foresees "A few media giants who would tower over all aspects of the entertainment and information business" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer,* July 4, 1990, p. 7D). Their expanding control over production would also enable these media giants and electronic conglomerates to enlarge their stranglehold over the global market and its extension into the hitherto limited territories of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Choices

Under these circumstances, the entry of new communication technologies into the home means, on the minority upscale information rich and the rest of the population, who may now be called the "entertainment rich." For them more channels means more time spent on the most popular types of electronic entertainment delivered by a greater variety of means. The new orchestration of mainstream media has fewer players handling more instruments playing fewer tunes for audiences who want more of what they already know and like.

Audience research from many countries confirms the fact that media diversification and novelty, as such, do not create new audience interests. On the contrary, they provide more means and styles (and markets) through which existing interests can be more single-mindedly exploited and pursued (see, for example, Becker & Schoenbach, 1989, p. 354).

Just as video rentals gravitate toward the "blockbuster" product, two-thirds of those who record programs on their VCRs tape popular network fare to view more often and at more convenient times. The A.C. Nielson Company reports that, instead of diversifying viewing patterns, most VCR users provide their own reruns. *Grazers* change channels frequently but relatively aimlessly. They are more creatures of chance than of choice. There is no evidence that their choices differ from those who watch by habit.

Viewer inertia and repeat viewing are the rule, eclectic and diverse choices the exception. These facts need not be interpreted as denigrating audiences as passive and powerless. Respect for audience choices comes from a recognition of the cultural context in which they are made. Given a particular cultural situation, audiences use their powers as they, not wishful thinkers, like to use them. In his summary of audience behavior Comstock (1980, p. 11) concluded that, "Viewers do watch programs they are familiar with and like, when they can."

Most cable homes watch more television and have more channels to pursue their preferences. Although VCR and remote control use led to a decline of viewer inertia (staying with the same channels through program changes), most cable and VCR users seek more of the same content types through a greater variety of outlets. Cable penetration even increased channel loyalty among those who stay with standard channels (Walker, 1988). A network-supported study reported in *Variety* (June 27, 1990, p. 52) also found that viewers are twice as likely to change channels when watching cable channels as when watching broadcast networks. By staying with regular station and network schedules, many of these loyal viewers may actually see a greater variety of programs than the volatile viewers, or *zappers,* who can pursue more limited preferences through the availability of more channels.

Evidence that this is indeed happening comes from several large-scale media market surveys. Neuman (1989) examined these data looking for diversity of viewer perceptions and choices. He was disappointed. Audience perceptions of program themes and motivations for viewing are strikingly similar across gender, income, educational, and age groups. Furthermore, the correlations of actual viewing patterns with perceptions are also similar in the different demographic categories. The highest positive correlation is with "relaxation" and the lowest (negative) correlation with programs perceived as "informative," or "sophisticated."

Our "cultivation analysis" of television viewing (Gerbner et al., 1986; Signorielli & Morgan, 1990) also shows the erosion of traditional differences in different generations born into television homes. The more viewers watch television, the more they share common conceptions of reality regardless of other group differences. Cable, VCR, news viewing, or other program preferences and selections do not significantly alter the basic "mainstreaming" pattern. Diversified media holdings and investments also imprint the book publishing business with their homogenizing tendencies.

All that does not mean the death of diversity. Credit should be given to the creative people who manage from time to time to produce thoughtful, challenging, magnificent works. Significant and restive pockets of resistance, alienation, and polarization also exist side by side with pervasive homogenization and mainstreaming. But it is clear that the global spread of mass marketing in all media, new or old, will not address, let alone satisfy, the human and public need for genuine diversity and choice.

The proliferating electronic discharge of ever more massive content configurations into the mainstream of the cultural environment, and of their ever deeper penetration into the dynamics of opinion formation and choice, confronts communities all over the world with a major new social policy problem. The mass production of ever more homogenized "masses" challenges any concept of popular self-government. A "revolt of the masses" as commodities, the building of an international constituency for democratic media reform, is needed to confront that challenge. A citizen constituency participating in and supporting the development of new and freer cultural policy making is the imperative of the information age. A new environmental movement, dedicated to the cultural environment that will shape and guide those who survive the degradation of the physical environment, is needed to tackle that task.

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