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Electronic Children: Will the New Generation Be Different?

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Born in Hungary, he came to the United States in 1939 where he received his B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Southern California.

He has directed U.S. and multinational communications research projects under contracts and grants from the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Office of Education, UNESCO, the International Sociological Association, the International Research and Exchanges Board, the Eisenhower (Violence) Commission, and the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior. Currently, under a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health, his research is on the subject of cultural indicators, including a television violence profile and index.

In addition to numerous books, articles, and reports on mass communications research, he is on the editorial board of a half dozen communications periodicals and is currently the editor of the Journal of Communication.

Let me start with the new generation, go on to sketch the new age in terms of communications technology, then describe some of the salient features of the world in which the new generation is growing up, and end by suggesting some implications for democracy.

The new generation that I'm talking about is the generation that is now nearing thirty. This is the first generation that I would like to call, for the purposes of this discussion, "T.T." (total television), as compared to my generation, which is the last generation "B.T." (before television). I think there is a systematic break between those two generations. We live in the same world but in different cultural epochs. We were brought up and we lived the first crucial six to ten years of our lives in different types of homes and in different cultural environments.

The symbolic climate is what makes us human, what permits a member of the species *homo sapiens* to grow up a recognizable human being. At the heart of that climate, at the heart of the symbolic environment, is what I would like to call storytelling. We live in a reality that is defined and selected by the stories we tell about it.

There are basically three kinds of stories. The first and most important are stories about how things work: fairy tales, legends, fiction, and drama. Only those various forms of fiction can tell the truth about the invisible forces and dynamics of life. The only way we can tell the truth about how things work is by inventing the facts (that is why we call it fiction) in a way that illuminates the inner dynamics of things.

The second kind of story is about what things are: bits of fact; information about isolated facts of life, of society, and of

technology. Today we call those stories news and information. Information is meaningless and useless until it's put into a context which has to do with purposes, with motivations, and with how things work.

The third kind of story is one of action; it is about choice, value, and what to do about them. It is a story about styles of life and what each of the different styles of life is associated with. These stories tell us how to act in order to realize the values they reveal and what the price is; in our society they are called advertisements.

All civilizations have had all of these stories; they have called them by different names, and have woven them into the fabric of their own culture in different ways and at different times. And so, to arrive at some characterization of our present age, I'd like to give you my capsule view of civilization in three parts.

Pre-Industrial Era

The first is the era in which all these stories were woven together essentially by face-to-face, typically oral craftsmanship. That was the pre-industrial era, by far the longest in the history of mankind. The era of tribal cultures, of community religions, was one in which the fabric of culture had certain very specific characteristics.

First of all, it was ritualistic; it had to be because so much depended on memory. You couldn't say, "Well, I don't have to remember it; I can always look it up." There was no place to look it up; you had to remember it. It called for, and called forth, inner resources that have never been demanded of people since the pre-industrial era. Everybody had to carry around all information to be useful: those stories about how things work, about what they are, and about what to do about them. Everybody had to be his or her own entertainer, educator, and audience.

The only way to do that was to provide a ritualistic, repetitive structure in which the essential truths of the tribe and the community (about how things work, what things are, and what to do about them) formed a seamless, total whole; a mythological context.

Secondly, pre-industrial culture was highly institutionalized. By that I mean it was not invented by individuals; individuals refined, elaborated, repeated, and selected with more or less personal skill but they didn't invent it. It was highly institutionalized and highly centralized for the tribe and the community as a whole.

Third, it was total in that it involved the total community. There were no great differences of class, station, or tastes; there were no specialized interest groups; there were no high-brow, low-brow, or other kinds of distinctions. The seamless web of stories that provided a way of life and a way of looking at life was highly institutionalized, centralized, and total; it was total in terms of community involvement and it was a totally integrated set of stories, myths, legends, and bits of information that could not be understood without one another . . . that related . . . hung together.

Next, it was all what we would call entertaining. *Entertainment* is a tricky word; it means two things: it means to entertain the basic beliefs of a culture; and to be compelling, enjoyable, and rewarding for its own sake. In a pre-industrial age you couldn't keep children from learning, just as soon as they could, the legends, the stories, the tales, the rituals, the celebrations, and the ceremonies of their tribe and their culture because it was inherently rewarding; it was mental nourishment and, in effect, a coming into full-fledged membership in the tribe or the community for every individual. So it was compelling and entertaining in that sense.

And finally, it was what sociologists call the socializing process of the community. By that we mean that it was the process that introduced the children of the community into the roles of men and women, of young and old, of being interested in and pursuing different styles of life and different activities . . . roles they had to take in life as they grew up.

Print Era

With the coming of the Industrial Revolution all of this changed. The first machine of the new age was the printing press; the first

industrial product was the book. It had to pave the way for the tremendous upheavals to come.

Printing deritualized cultural activity, storytelling and story making. You no longer needed the ritual because you no longer needed to remember everything. You could accumulate printed matter in huge archives and libraries, so you could say, "I don't have to remember that, I can look it up." That was a great enrichment for the collective community but a great impoverishment for the individual who no longer was required to be his or her own storyteller and entertainer.

Printing brought about the Reformation: it brought about the breaking of the hold of a single religion in most human communities. It did that by making it possible for individuals to produce stories via the printing press and to disseminate them in quantities hitherto unimaginable, penetrating boundaries hitherto impenetrable and crossing lines hitherto uncrossable. You could tell people, "Here is the book [for a long time meaning the Bible], you can interpret it for yourself, you don't need the priest's interpretation. You don't need a single interpretation and you don't need the interpretation of the authorities because life is changing and society itself is changing." So, the decentralization, the de-institutionalization of the storytelling process was one of the consequences of the Industrial Revolution.

And indeed society was changing. No longer was everyone dependent on the land and on the lord who owned the land. Society was breaking up, people were uprooted; they migrated into all parts of the world, into ports, into cities, and into factories. There came the division into classes such as worker and employer/owner, and the formation of groups: business and professional, regional, religious, ethnic, and other special interests. With the breakup of the totality of the audience came the breakup of the totality and centralization of story creation and of storytelling.

That breakup is reflected in the rise of a modern (no more than a five-hundred-year-old) phenomenon called the public. A public is a loose aggregation of people that comes about via publication. A public is a group of people, widely separated in time and space,

who may have only one thing in common, namely, the publications they share; through that they experience a consciousness of collective existence and perhaps interest.

The printing press made it possible to disseminate a particular point of view of a particular class or a particular group of people, and by disseminating it to build an interest group, a class-conscious group, a public out of it. The form of self-government that is called republican is ruled by publics; it is predicated on the concept of print. Each group can tell stories from the point of view of its own vested interest, from the point of view of its own outlook on life, and thereby cultivate that public; they then elect representatives who go to some sort of an assembly where the competition and the conflict among the groups can hopefully be reconciled in the interest of the whole.

So, the totality of the audience, the totality of the production of stories, breaks up; specialization of publication and differentiation of consciousness take the place of the unified consciousness. Specialization of storytelling also brings up genres that are very familiar to us today, and different labels for specialized kinds of stories. Next, the entertainment function of pre-industrial culture, in which everything was needed, rewarding, interesting, and compelling, also breaks up. There is now a sharp distinction between specialized information and general entertainment. Specialized information is something that is not for everyone. Education is somewhat specialized and not all kinds of education are for everyone. General entertainment, the stories that are for everyone, is the cement that holds a large and otherwise differentiated community together. Specialized information provides the raw materials and the ammunition for pursuing special interests.

Finally, in the print era, the socializing process itself breaks into many parts. The home becomes an important socializing agency; so do the school and the church.

Telecommunications Era

A new change of scene and we enter the present era which I

would like to call the era of telecommunications. Its chief cultural arm is television.

Television has certain specific features.

First of all, television is a ritual; it has its daily, weekly, and seasonal rhythms. They are highly stylized, and highly repetitive, and rarely deviate.

Secondly, it is highly institutionalized; you need a license to broadcast and you need a great deal of capital. It is no longer what any group of people could do even if it had the money; it is limited, therefore it has to be institutionalized.

Next, it is total. It involves the total community, the total audience, and its total programming is essentially predicated on one formula. The formula is what the trade calls cost per thousand. You reduce the cost, you increase the ratings, and you get the most productive and most profitable kind of programming. Whether it's news, drama, talk show, or what-not, that is the basic formula which imparts to all programming a kind of underlying, common motivation.

And, of course, the audience is total—not only in the sense that television has saturated the United States and most industrial countries to a greater extent than bathtubs or telephones, but also in that people don't watch television by the program but by the clock. Television is not something you pick and choose; it's something that fits into a style of life. Most people watch whatever is on when it's time to watch television.

With print, and even with film, we have to pick and choose; but with television we don't, we use it nonselectively. The responsibility for selection shifts to the producer. Television is total in the sense of involving the total community in a nonselective way and involving all the producers, who provide material essentially according to the same formula.

Next, it is all entertaining. It has to be because it is trying to maximize audiences at every moment of the day and night; therefore it has to be compelling for its own sake.

Finally, it has become the basic, major socializing process of our communities into which the new generation was born. Most children are born into a home in which the television set goes on in

the morning and gets turned off at night. It is the cultural instrument which is there at birth, which keeps constant company throughout life, and which becomes even more important in old age; it is often old people's only, most faithful, most patient, and most entertaining companion. The socializing process, then, is conducted in a framework of that patient and tireless storyteller, messenger, and minister which has a pulpit in every home. The dream of every emperor or pope who ever lived!

In terms of governance, the former nexus of power that was church and state has now become television and state. You cannot govern a modern state without television; it is still an open question whether you can govern it with television.

By the time members of the new generation (the first "total television" generation) reach school age, many of their basic ideas about reality have been acquired from this tireless storyteller.

We've been studying the world that TV presents now for ten years, and we're studying the lessons that are learned in that world. The world itself is a highly stable, well-organized world, despite shifting styles, shifting genres, and shifting titles of programs. We study the time and space dimension, the population of that world, the characteristics assigned to different groups of people, and the fates assigned to different social types. That is basically what I mean by the world.

One of the curious features of the world of television that has far-reaching consequences is that men outnumber women three to one. When you start with that kind of a world, certain consequences will almost inevitably follow. One is that some individuals (men) have more opportunities and a greater diversity of things to do; while others, namely women, are relegated to a relatively few roles. There are, of course, notable exceptions. But when you take, as we have done by now, almost fifteen hundred programs, over five thousand characters, you can see the overall patterns of activity, of types of occupations, and of the differences between men and women, young and old, black and white, among all social types.

The most significant consequence of males outnumbering

females by three to one is that much of the world of television revolves around questions of power. We study violence as a demonstration of power. We have a statistic that attempts to reflect the way in which power on television works. We call it the risk ratio or victimization ratio.

Every violent incident is a little scenario; somebody commits an act of violence and somebody else suffers or becomes the victim of that act. From that simple fact you can calculate a ratio by taking any group and counting the number of times that a member of that group imposes his or her will upon somebody else, and the number of times that a member of the same group is imposed upon, that is, becomes victimized.

The ratio of risk of victimization on network television drama is 1.2. That means that for every violent person there are 1.2 victims. For women the victimization ratio is 1.3 and for young boys it is 1.7: for each woman or young boy shown or cast in a role committing an act of aggression or violence there are 1.3 or 1.7 respectively who get victimized. Old women are the most victimized of all; the ratio is 3.0. That means that for every old woman who is permitted to impose her will on somebody else, 3.0 get hurt or killed. That is the highest risk ratio in the world of television.

Of course, none of this reflects anything like real-life criminal or victimization statistics. But it does reflect something else; it reflects a structure, a hierarchy of power and of fear. The main lesson that we find follows exposure to violence-laden television (an average now of about six to seven incidents per hour) is not so much what is commonly attributed to it, namely, the incitation and the cultivation of aggressive impulses. That is the lesson for a small minority, statistically significant to be sure; but it is not nearly as pervasive, not nearly as general, as the other side of the coin, namely, the lesson of fear of victimization.

Most people exposed to TV violence will derive from it a sense of insecurity, a sense of danger, a syndrome of what we call "mean world": a set of assumptions by which they attribute a lot more danger, a lot more meanness, a lot more menace to the world than

their neighbors who, while exposed to the same facts of real life, watch less television; we shall have more to say about the differences between "light" and "heavy" television viewers.

Now that kind of a consequence, as with all resources, is distributed unequally in the population. Television violence may or may not incite threats to the existing order; running that risk may be a small price to pay for the pacification of the majority. Television generates a sense of insecurity and of dependence in different amounts among different groups in the population. The new generation has a greater dose of this, as do women and minority groups who see themselves portrayed as more likely to be victimized. Let me illustrate that by a few specific figures to show how true it is.

The findings I am reporting are derived from the responses to questions that we ask general national population samples. The responses of the heavy viewers (usually those who view three hours a day or more) are compared to those of the light viewers (those who view two hours a day or less). We control for other factors to make sure that the differences between heavy and light viewers are not due to differences in age, in education, or in income, but are due essentially to television exposure.

A score of interpersonal mistrust is derived from a combination of the answers to three questions: Do you think most people are helpful or not? Do you think most people are fair or not? Do you think most people can be trusted or not?

We find that 41% of the general population exhibit a rather strong sense of mistrust. Only 34% of the light viewers but 51% of the heavy viewers will respond this way. That's a difference of 17% due to exposure to television.

Now let's look at age and see the difference between the under- and over-thirty groups. The under-thirty (from eighteen to twenty-nine) light viewers score 38%, providing a negative response to all three questions. The heavy viewers in the same age group score 59%, a 21% difference which is highly significant both statistically and socially.

You get the same general pattern when re-testing people two years later; you also get the same pattern when asking people other

questions: Do you think you are included in a lot of decisions or are you left out of things going on around you? Do you think what you say counts? Do most people with power try to take advantage of you?

There is a fascinating new finding of our study that comes from asking this question: Do you think your life is exciting or do you think it is pretty routine and dull? From the general population, 56% will respond that their lives are pretty routine and dull. But of the light viewers, only 43% will say that, while of the heavy viewers, 66% claim that life is dull.

Among light-viewing college educated, only 24% will say life is dull; but among college people who view a lot of television, 64% will say so, a huge difference of 40%.

The people who watch a great deal, perhaps because they feel that their lives are fairly routine and dull, keep saying that their lives are routine and dull despite, or because of, their heavy viewing of television. It is at this point that cause-and-effect becomes irrelevant; it's a syndrome that hangs together and that provides the answer to the age-old question that people may have asked you before: "What comes first, the chicken or the egg?" Well, I can give you the answer: the hatchery. If you can control the hatchery, you don't care which comes first, the chicken or the egg.

As for that other often-asked question "Why do people watch so much television?", I think the answer is clear: They have no equally attractive alternatives. Perhaps for the first time in history there is no such thing as isolation. Whether people are parochial, rural, institutionalized, or old, they're all "plugged-in" to the same mainstream, and there is nothing equally attractive in their own environment to draw them away from it.

To conclude, we can say that our studies have shown us that the new generation, the electronic children, are indeed different from older generations. We now know how television affects people; we know much less about how people can affect television. That, then, remains the new task of industrial leadership, of market management, of education, of the communication profession, of research and, in fact, of citizenship.