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INTER sections

Who is telling all the stories?

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Most of what we know, or think we know, we have never personally experienced. We live in a world erected by the stories we hear and see and tell.

Unlocking incredible riches through imagery and words, conjuring up the unseen through art, creating towering works of imagination and fact through science, poetry, song, tales, reports and laws — that is the true magic of human life.

Through that magic we live in a world much wider than the threats and gratifications of the immediate physical environment, which is the world of other species. Stories socialize us into roles of gender, age, class, vocation and lifestyle, and offer models of conformity or targets for rebellion. They weave the seamless web of the cultural environment that cultivates most of what we think, what we do, and how we conduct our affairs.

The stories that animate our cultural environment have three distinct but related functions. They are (1) revealing how things work; (2) describing what things are; and (3) telling us what to do about them.

Stories of the first kind, revealing how things work illuminate the all-important but invisible relationships and hidden dynamics of life. They make perceivable the invisible and the hidden. Fairy tales, novels, plays, comics, cartoons, and other forms of creative imagination and imagery are the basic building blocks of human understanding. They show complex causality by presenting imaginary action in total situations, coming to some conclusion that has a moral purpose and a social function. You don't have to believe the "facts" of Little Red Riding Hood to grasp the notion that big bad "wolves" victimize old women and trick little girls — a lesson in gender roles, fear, and power.

Stories of the first kind build, from infancy on, the fantasy we call reality. I do not suggest that the revelations are false, which they may or may not be, but that they are synthetic, selective, often mythical, and always socially constructed.

Stories of the second kind depict what things are. These are descriptions, depictions, expositions, reports abstracted from total situations and filling in with "facts" the gaps in the fantasies conjured up by stories of the first kind. They are the presumably factual accounts, the chronicles of the past and the news of today.

Stories of what things are usually confirm some conception of how things work. Their high "facticity" (i.e. correspondence to actual events presumed to exist independently of the story) gives them special status in political theory and often in law. They give emphasis and credibility to selected parts of each society's fantasies of reality, and can alert it to certain interests, threats and opportunities and challenges.

Stories of the third kind tell us what to do. These are stories of value and choice. They present things, behaviors or styles of life as desirable (or undesirable), propose ways to obtain (or avoid)

them, and the price to be paid for attainment (or failure). They are the instructions, cautionary tales, commands, slogans, sermons, laws and exhortations of the day. Today most of them are called commercials and other advertising messages and images we see and hear every day.

Stories of the third kind clinch the lessons of the first two and turn them into action. They typically present a valued objective or suggest a need or desire, and offer a product, service, candidate, institution or action purported to help attain or gratify it. The lessons of fictitious Little Red Riding Hoods and their realistic sequels prominent in everyday news and entertainment not only teach lessons of vulnerability, mistrust and dependence but also help sell burglar alarms, more jails and executions promised to enhance security (which they rarely do), and otherways to adjust to a structure of power.

Ideally, the three kinds of stories check and balance each other. But in a commercially driven culture, stories of the third kind pay for most of the first two. That creates a coherent cultural environment whose overall function is to provide a hospitable and effective context for stories that sell. With the coming of the electronic age, that cultural environment is increasingly monopolized, homogenized, and globalized. We must then look at the historic course of our journey to see what this new age means for our children.

For the longest time in human history, stories were told only face to face. A community was defined by the rituals, mythologies and imageries held in common. All useful knowledge is encapsulated in aphorisms and legends, proverbs and tales, incantations and ceremonies. Writing is rare and holy, forbidden for slaves. Laboriously inscribed manuscripts confer sacred power to their interpreters, the priests and ministers. As a sixteenth century scribe put it:

> Those who observe the codices, those who recite them,
> those who noisily turn the pages of illustrated manuscripts.
> Those who have possession of the black and red ink and that which is pictured;
> they lead us, they guide us, they tell us the way.

State and church ruled the Middle Ages in a symbiotic relationship of mutual dependence and tension. State, composed of feudal nobles, was the economic and political order; church its cultural arm.

The industrial revolution changed all that. One of the first machines stamping out standardized artefacts was the printing press. Its product, the book, was a prerequisite for all the other upheavals to come.

The book could be given to all who could read, requiring education and creating a new literate class of people. Readers could now interpret the book (at first the Bible) for themselves, breaking the monopoly of priestly interpreters and ushering in the Reformation.

When the printing press was hooked up to the steam engine the industrialization of story-telling shifted into high gear. Rapid publication and mass transport created a new form of consciousness: modern mass publics. Publics are loose aggregations of people who share some common consciousness of how things work, what things are, and what ought to be done — but never meet face-to-face. That was never before possible.

Stories can now be sent — often smuggled — across hitherto impenetrable or closely guarded boundaries of time, space and status. The book lifts people from their traditional moorings as the industrial revolution uproots them from their local communities and cultures. They can now get off the land and go to work in far-away ports, factories and continents, and have with them a packet of common consciousness — the book or journal, and later the motion picture (silent at first) — wherever they go.

Publics, created by such publication, are necessary for the formation of individual and group identities in the new urban environment, as the different classes and regional, religious and ethnic

groups try to live together with some degree of cooperation and harmony.

Publics are the basic units of self-government, electing or selecting representatives to an assembly trying to reconcile diverse interests. The maintenance and integrity of multiple publics makes self-government feasible for large, complex, and diverse national communities. People engage in long and costly struggles — now at a critical stage — to be free to create and share stories that fit the reality of competing and often conflicting values and interests. Most of our assumptions about human development and political plurality and choice are rooted in the print era.

One of the most vital provisions of the print era was the creation of the only large-scale folk-institution of industrial society, public education. Public education is the community institution where face-to-face learning and interpreting could, ideally, liberate the individual from both tribal and medieval dependencies and all cultural monopolies. The second great transformation, the electronic revolution, ushers in the telecommunications era. Its mainstream, television, is superimposed upon and reorganizes print-based culture. Unlike the industrial revolution, the new upheaval does not uproot people from their homes but transports them in their homes. It re-tribalizes modern society and changes the role of education in the new culture.

For the first time in human history, children are born into homes where mass-mediated storytellers reach them on the average more than seven hours a day. Most waking hours, and often dreams, are filled with their stories. Giant industries discharge their messages into the mainstream of common consciousness. The historic nexus of church and state is replaced by television and state.

These changes may appear to be a broadening and enrichment of local horizons, but they also mean a homogenization of outlooks and limitation of alternatives. For media professionals, the changes mean fewer opportunities and greater compulsions to present life in saleable packages. Creative artists, scientists, humanists can still explore and enlighten and occasionally even challenge, but, increasingly, their stories must fit marketing strategies and priorities.

Despite being surrounded with sales messages, or perhaps because of it, a Consumer Federation of America survey concluded in 1990 that "Americans are not smart shoppers and their ignorance costs them billions, threatens their health and safety and undermines the economy..."

Broadcasting is the most concentrated, homogenized, and globalized medium. The top 100 advertisers pay for two-thirds of all network television. Four networks, allied to giant transnational corporations — our private "Ministry of Culture" — control the bulk of production and distribution, and shape the cultural mainstream. Other interests, minority views, and the potential of any challenge to dominant perspectives, lose ground with every merger.

The Cultural Environment Movement was launched in response to that challenge. Its Founding Convention was held in St. Louis, Missouri, March 15-17, 1996, in cooperation with Webster University. It was the most diverse representation of leaders and activists in the field of culture and communication that has ever met.

The concepts that motivated us developed after 30 years of media research. It became clear that research is not enough. The new globalized and centralized cultural environment demanded a new active approach. Working separately on individual issues, rallying to meet each individual crisis, was not sufficient. Treating symptoms instead of starting to prevent the wholesale manufacturing of the conditions that led to those symptoms was self-defeating. Dealing with systemic connections requires coordination and organization. Individual effort, local action, and national and international constituencies acting in concert can, together, help to begin that long, slow and difficult task. It involves:

Building a new coalition involving media councils in the U.S. and abroad; teachers, students and parents; groups concerned with children, youth and aging; women's groups; religious and minority organizations; educational, health, environmental, legal, and other professional associations; consumer groups and agencies; associations of creative workers in the media and in the arts and sciences; independent computer network organizers and other organizations and individuals commit-

ted to broadening the freedom and diversity of communication.

Opposing domination and working to abolish existing concentration of ownership and censorship (both of and by media), public or private. It involves extending rights, facilities, and influence to interests and perspectives other than the most powerful and profitable. It means including in cultural decision-making the less affluent more vulnerable groups who, in fact, are the majority of the population. These include the marginalized, neglected, abused, exploited, physically or mentally disabled, young and old, women, minorities, poor people, recent immigrants — all those most in need of a decent role and a voice in a freer cultural environment.

Seeking out and cooperating with cultural liberation forces of other countries working for the integrity and independence of their own decision making and against cultural domination and invasion. Learning from countries that have already opened their media to the democratic process. Helping local movements, including in the most dependent and vulnerable countries of Latin America, Asia, and Africa (and also in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republics), to invest in their own cultural development; opposing aggressive foreign ownership and coercive trade policies that make such development more difficult.

Supporting journalists, artists, writers, actors, directors, and other creative workers struggling for more freedom from having to present life as a commodity designed for a market of consumers. Working with guilds, caucuses, labor and other groups for diversity in employment and in media content. Supporting media and cultural organizations addressing significant but neglected needs, sensibilities, and interests.

Promoting media literacy, media awareness, critical viewing and reading, and other media education efforts as a fresh approach to the liberal arts and an essential educational objective on every level. Collecting, publicizing and disseminating information, research and evaluation about relevant programs, services, curricula, and teaching materials. Helping to organize educational and parents' groups demanding pre-service and in-service teacher training in media analysis, already required in the schools of Australia, Canada, and Great Britain.

Placing cultural policy issues on the social-political agenda. Supporting and if necessary organizing local and national media councils, study groups, citizen groups, minority and professional groups and other forums of public discussion, policy development, representation, and action. Not waiting for a blueprint but creating and experimenting with ways of community and citizen participation in local, national and international media policy-making. Sharing experiences, lessons, and recommendations and moving toward a realistic democratic agenda.

The Cultural Environment Movement (CEM) is a non-profit coalition of independent organizations and individual supporters in every state of the U.S. and 57 other countries on six continents, united in working for freedom, fairness, gender equity, general diversity, and democratic decision-making in media ownership, employment and representation.

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