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Television Triumphant!
How the Digital Utopia
Destroys Culture

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The constant presence of audio-video media, expanding in this century beyond our willingness and capability to organize its artifacts, impels a critical and historical understanding of its cultural impact. This understanding, to date, is lacking. Much of the pertinent discussion instead centers on the social effects of the omniscient, invasive manner by which this presence often manifests itself. Or an understanding of the cultural effects is ignored in favor of a faddish embrace of certain media and formats by those whom we could define as Digital Utopianists, whose perspective nonetheless accepts Dystopian outcomes insofar as they assume little to nothing can be done to control the way in which technology shapes our lives. That word, technology, now often only refers to the latest interactive, internet-based formats. The unspoken heightening of these formats' significance confirms their perceived inevitable progress and irresistible power. Culture becomes passive: a realm of practices acted upon—affected by, instead of enacting—changes in routine habits and social mores. Artists and their communities of patrons, critics, and appreciants become as victimized as the Digital Utopianists are submissive. If this fate turns out to be a true reflection of the priorities of a civilization in which, with small computers providing audio-video content affixed to our body, we increasingly act as consumers instead of producers, refusing to create outside the television world, we must understand what made it so. Not technology and science, or mathematics and algorithms. Not progress or history. Only us. Our immoderate desire for a new god to relieve us of the self's own godliness. Put simply, the lazy demand for immediate gratification.

1. When Recorded Music Became Common and Cheap

To start, what of the apparent decline of recorded music from its previous extraordinary significance? Estimates of revenues earned by the music industry, taking into account both new sources of wealth and the older sources that have dried up, vary considerably, but average out at a number that is only half of what was earned in 1999. Has the cultural status of recorded music fallen as precipitously? We must ask if changes in what sells (Compact Discs versus subscriptions to audio-streaming services) correspond to changes in listeners' perceptions of recorded music's place in their lives. In other words, is the decline in revenue mostly due to a great amount of funds captured by internet middlemen (that is, the newly-dominant distributors) or is it also significantly, perhaps equally, due to less interest among listeners? An emphasis on buying and selling – instead of listening – in narratives of the music industry's decline leaves participants eager to cast blame. Either multimedia conglomerates produced sound recordings inefficiently and selfishly; or a panoply of internet-related companies and peer-to-peer networks shamelessly pirated audio content – then, recorded music's value having fallen, some of those companies and several new arrivals bought a commanding position in the marketplace on the cheap.¹ Of course, reliable statistics are harder for the general public to access as communications become increasingly

¹ This divide does not seem to correspond to leftist-rightist political lines, though it does hint at unsettled arguments within consumerist capitalism on the issue of intellectual property (more on that below). Besides, the illegal internet transfer of digital data suffers a similar fate as other activities subject to governmental attempts at prohibition: punitive measures against users/ clients are pointless, but when the criminal act in question declines in the fact of competing products and shifting consumer choices, proponents of such measures claim victory.

dominated by internet media. If they were available, elaborate social-science endeavors would only begin to answer necessary questions, perhaps most crucially: To what extent would listeners have purchased music that they accessed online if it had not been free or very cheap?

Several outward signs of popular music's development since the turn of the century do not bode well for its cultural significance, hardly suggesting a positive answer to this question. The popularity of singing-competition television programs allows viewers the sense of partaking in a major facet of music as we currently know it; yet the winners of these competitions often end up with careers that make a mockery of their hopes. Meanwhile, musicians, commercially-successful and critically-acclaimed alike, resign themselves to their work being used as background noise. Muzak in public buildings, bad Classical music in movies, stock music in advertisements and promotional films... all are increasingly replaced by music originally made to stand on its own, sold by creators desperate for any compensation.

The sales of individual tracks were supposed to compensate for the decline of album sales, and perhaps usher in a new era of popular music, in the words of some writers bringing us back to the pre-1967, singles-centric, ethnically-diverse era that preceded Rock's stifling dominance. Alas, they did not. Instead, the rise of streaming music services put the album—countless albums upon albums—back into play, if not into the forefront like it once was. Streaming services would hardly want artists only to offer a few sample tracks. The album produces more “content” and thus more advertising revenue, even as sales of single-track downloads continue to be higher than albums, a “lose-

lose” for artists. The enormous success of a few younger divas (Adele, Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, Kanye West) could be said to reflect the growing disparity in income among economic classes generally, as multitudes of artists across the land consider the prospect of making a living from music to be obviously unrealistic. For them, the Bandcamp platform suffices; its basic model assumes that the artist wants to allow listeners to hear all tracks posted for free *before* paying.² Many of those who still “shift units” had already established themselves before download sales overtook those of CD’s (e.g. Beyoncé, Eminem, Coldplay – natch, any Rock band still capable of selling in the millions).

This discussion, though compelling in its own right, may overshadow the fundamental change taking place. While many of us would insist otherwise, and we may hope for a change in this regard, in this new century, we do not listen to music as deeply and closely and with the same purposefulness as we did previously. Who are “we”? The present-day consumers of sound recordings in the societies wherein, for the second half of the Twentieth Century, such documents sold in numbers large enough to support an industry: manufacturing gramophone records and optical disks, magnetic tape and microphones; employing musicians, sound engineers, composers, publishers, distributors, retailers, promoters, and impresarios (indeed, large enough for both artists and rapacious middlemen, whether the latter reside in Hollywood or Silicon Valley). We are the listeners who obsessed over (and at times still, at least, out of guilt-ridden nostalgia, collect) cherished albums

² The artist on Bandcamp has to pay for the privilege of not allowing listeners to hear every track for free.

and artists; engaged in home-recording experiments on Tascam four-tracks; strain to recall fleeting memories of gigs that we attended and parties with friends playing and listening; all of which, we know changed how we felt about music, art, life, everything. Until they didn't.

The counterargument? That the return of recorded music to a minor place in cultural life, relative to live music, is perfectly normal. Most music in human history has been listened to live, in person, the listeners witnessing the musicians, even if from quite a distance. The act of listening to recorded music without visual accompaniment, indeed often in the dark or dimmed lighting (as with the cinema), might end up being associated with the Twentieth Century alone. Though increased revenues from live performances largely stem from increased ticket prices, even those of us who still purchase a great deal of recorded music can take solace in the notion that the few artists who can demand such prices are at least getting revenge on pirate-consumers. Sounds nice, but any claim that we're experiencing a revival of non-media—non-mediated—experiences of art is dubious. Live music is no more prominent or common, even in cities filled with the supposed "creative" classes. And the form in which it takes, ostensible professional performance at commercial establishments, many of which primarily make money by selling alcoholic beverages, may encourage amateur endeavors, but hardly innovative, experimental music.

Documented music, both notations and recordings, allowed for genius to manifest itself in greater ways, and for the listener to recognize that genius. In turn, we could understand how the live music we witnessed, of lower quality or more provincial in nature, imitated or failed to match canonical works. This

practice developed over centuries in European and other Classical musics, and yet merely over decades with popular musics like Jazz and Rock, albeit in a manner less formalized, at times in Rock only expressed orally given the general lack of respect afforded to Rock critics. Going back to music as it was practiced and appreciated before sound recording is not only impossible, it would be boring. Or, indeed, it has been. Popular music, in order to prosper, needs sound recordings and their documentation to be widely heard and embraced. Serious listening in Classical and Folk musics, perhaps in Jazz as well, may be able to subsist upon scores, songbooks, and similar texts enabling new live performances or amateur explorations. That said, who besides a purist advocate of music experienced in-person and *in situ* would want that?

The world of song composing that was created by Rock, in contrast, would not merely be impoverished by the loss of sound recording as its principal means of creativity, it would be unrecognizable. Granted, artists in Rock/ Rhythm and Blues and similar popular musics birthed by urbanization, electrification, and the singer-songwriter (*e.g.* Reggae, Country and Western, *Tropicália*) at times have made concerts the main forum for their work; their workaday experiences often consist of rehearsals for said concerts, with some giving little thought to the particularities of sound recording. Nonetheless, they leave behind a legacy of records, or no legacy at all.³ Records permanently changed the art of song. The older folk tradition of songs passed down through the generations, adapted time and again by new

³We could name this the Fate of the Crucial Three, that is, the unrecorded Liverpoolian group featuring Ian McCulloch, Julian Cope, and Pete Wylie.

performers, continues as a pursuit of only a few. Since, roughly speaking, Bob Dylan, the song has come to be associated with the individual singer who originally sang and recorded it, often composed it too. Moreover, many contemporary popular-music performers, as Hip Hop and various electronic dance genres have moved to the forefront, commonly use pre-recorded music in live performance, if anything countering the notion of enhanced musicianship and the centrality of live performance. After all, we do not see at the larger venues and festivals an emphasis on, say, freestyle competitions that foster new talent in Hip Hop; or the unique, real-time combination of pre-recorded elements characteristics of the finest Techno and House D.J.'s. We see music as the soundtrack to social events saturated with audio-video media, music that has difficulty claiming an independent, meaningful place in listeners' lives.

2. Television, Television, Television Instead of: Music, Books, Film

Two factors seem decisive in recorded music's decline. First, the growth of the number and kind of competing audio-video media and formats has crowded sound recordings into a small niche of the marketplace. If we had kept buying music on disk at the same numbers as we did in the Twentieth Century, by this point we would demand Blu-Ray albums that could store the complete works of many artists. A terabyte-sized hard drive holds more music than most will listen to in their life, but only enough movies or T.V. series to last a few years. Sound recordings as distinct things—*not* as ambiance—*not* as the sound portion of audio-video content—have not been supplanted. Rather, they have been made part of a larger television experience: the screen, always on, always ready with something new. Jaron Lanier, a computer programmer and musician, foresees in popular music's fall from grace a pattern that could spread to other media, and entire industries, as they become networked and made constantly accessible by digital, internet technology. While Lanier focuses on the political and economic conditions that allow a few large "tech" corporations, what he calls Siren Servers, to reap most of the financial benefits of internet media, when we consider the issue of the cultural effects of these media, we emphasize the question of video vs. non-video: sight weakened by excessive misuse, the other senses weakened by atrophy.

In other words, the big hint here is that internet technology, as compared to digital audio-video media and formats, may not be as significant as it is often held to be. Granted, the proliferation of audio-video options

has happened remarkably quickly since the late 1990's; its position as a decisive moment in post-industrialization human history, if that is its rightful place, will only become obvious with the benefit of extensive hindsight. But perhaps we failed to embark upon a broader understanding of the effects of these myriad video options on culture and, ultimately, human consciousness because of our misplaced interest on a certain technology: "the internet," as it tends to be reified, and its presumed unstoppable expansion. Internet vs. cinema, internet vs. "physical" media, internet vs. book, internet vs. newspaper, internet vs. "brick and mortar" — internet vs. the world! Contrary to Marshall McLuhan's famous notion that the media is the message, that "our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot," we should not assume that we are *not* idiots regarding digital and internet technology (18). We should cease McLuhanesque studies of new media that encourage blind (and, certainly, numb) obedience to their effects and instead ask if we want or enjoy those effects. That is, non-McLuhanesque studies of how varied internet and digital media are used, and how that use differs from that of other media and formats. McLuhan's seminal *Understanding Media*, in contrast, pairs fanciful optimistic visions of the effect of electronic media with a severe view of "Western man" based upon the author's constricted interpretation of the effects of print and literacy.

While popular discussion of the computer age would suggest that we have entered into McLuhan's Global Village, it at least has not failed to note that the centralizing force of the proliferation of audio-video consumer options remains a medium from McLuhan's

time: television, albeit radically transformed. We have learned in these past two decades that televised entertainment has an uncanny ability to dominate whatever medium it uses: broadcast, optical disks, satellite, internet. Its captivating power, especially due to its always-already presentness, and supposed connections to the broader society, certainly still matches McLuhan's notions of "cool" vs. "hot" media, the antiquated, mechanical latter fostering disparate experiences and individual points of view. If we have entered a global stage of history like that envisioned by McLuhan, then the nagging questions that he dismissed – how are the media used? do we approve of those uses? – could explain why the Global Village looks more like the abandoned pre-fab housing developments that began to dot the American landscape around the same time as portable, always-on/ always-disruptive, internet-connected screens.

When television first entered your home, it did not have much to offer: a few channels with crap shows for when there was nothing else to do. Granted, its appeal was immediate, advertisers fought over this new limited space accessible to so many millions. Yet it could hardly cause a sea change in our culture with such limited options, a fundamental reality that still held true in most nations until recently. But then you got to watch movies on videocassette. You, not national networks or local channels, picked the film. The cassettes were alright; at some point, they started to come "letter-boxed," so you knew what you were seeing was what you would have seen if you had gone to the cinema. Other movies had never been shown at the cinema, or weren't even film per se. Like your regular T.V. programming, they were shot on video tape, lower

quality but easier to use and cheaper. Digital technology entered the scene around this time, making the creation of video even-more easier and cheaper; leading, by way of optical-disk technology and its audio-only baby, the Compact Disc (C.D.), to its adult destination, the Digital Video Disc (D.V.D.) and Blu-Ray Disc, the quality better than tape (usually). Around the same time as these digital disks arrived, you also got hundreds of new channels, delivered via satellite. And new, fancier video games, on computers or their own consoles, more intricate and demanding, more like television series or movies in their protracted narratives. You could not play them at arcades even if you wanted to.

For the first half-decade or so of the Twenty-First Century, these expanding options for at-home audio-video consumption did not present a radical challenge to culture as we knew it. At least not yet. But among these increased options was the Web – what is this really? Why is the word capitalized? It's on your computer, it's digital, but those categories are broader. It's a relatively-uniform way of presenting digital information on a computer screen. You read text there. You can download audio files, and even listen to music directly, like a radio. You view images, and later audio-video. More and more video, short segments at first, then T.V. shows and movies. It's streaming, not downloaded, and thus temporary and ethereal, also varying more in quality and long-term accessibility. As the Web turns from still images to moving images, it becomes the connective tissue driving the user to keep watching, to jump from show to game to movie to clip to site to feed to... the endless stream. Whatever the Web is, it's always with you, it always wants you.

Soon enough, the Web's on your mobile phone, no longer simply *telephonic*. It's televisual. A tiny computer. A tiny television? No! Of course not. Like the Web, they say it's interactive. You play a role in creating the content. It's you, your life, your connections, given back to you in convenient, entertaining form. As Lanier has written, we do not get back the money paid to the media or utility companies that connect you to the Web. And we do not get back the resources used to run all the computers housing the data that we assure ourselves resides safely in "the cloud." *Of course not*. It's not that kind of interactive. That is, it's not a kind of interactive that interferes with the "lifestyles" and business practices of profligate consumerism.

The problem with audio-only formats being employed within the portable Web-T.V. combination of "smart" phones (let's call it the T.V. Stream for short) is that moving images can easily intrude to distract us. Musicians and their listeners, friends... we would like to listen, to buy disks and downloads, but find ourselves drawn away by competing options, audio-video instead of audio. At the peak of "sharity" blogs, their authors using shady file-sharing sites like Megaupload to make the work of music artists freely available, one could download thousands of albums, in many cases rare works not at the time commercially available. How many of them did we listen to more than a few times? How many did we grow to cherish, cling to like a talisman, study like a sacred text? Hardly any, in this author's experience. Even when we do buy a download, we often given it only a cursory listen, via the computer screen, rarely taking the time like we once did to get to know the recording. The renascent music trade—as compared to an industry, that is, the exchange of money for live

performance (and less money for subscriptions to streaming services)—does not grant popular music a prominent place in a society dominated culturally by constant audio-video documentation and entertainment. In this new culture, sound recordings occupy a low place, used by up-and-coming musicians to document their progress in crude form, providing a sample for the sake of securing live gigs; or for selling—often, giving away for free—copies to fans and friends who blithely overlook that the recording in question does not supersede or complement the artist's performances like a great recording should. The new setting for much of our home listening: the computer screen, makes the existence of those few records that do supersede or complement a musician's live work all the more bedeviling, like books on a shelf waiting to be read.

Given this diminished position in our consumer habits, we come to our second factor in recorded music's decline: sound alone, as compared to audio-video, requires fewer data. In the economy of online digital media, low data equals low class; that is, the efficiency of digital technology has demoted music to the same position occupied by news video clips, articles no more than a few paragraphs long, flashing advertisements, animated games played to pass time, and other fleeting forms of quick mind-capture that comprise such a large amount of the material we encounter online but are dismissed as minor annoyances not supposed to distract from the major revolution of internet-based media. Music based around songs, and even to an extent Jazz and electronic dance-music genres, inevitably entice their listeners with small bits of a composition (hooks) that pop up in the mind. We want to hear that one song, quickly, in the moment; and online interfaces allow for

that experience more so than disks and cassettes taken out of their packaging, then placed within the confines of a stereo system. Music's ability to satiate an immediate need is one of its advantages relative to filmed entertainment, reading, or cooking. It is also a crucial aspect of recorded music's commercial downfall. As consumers, we have come to expect the quick hits of information and amusement that we get online to be free or at least easy to access.

The drive of the consumer to maximize the value of his dollars compels him not only to pay less attention to how and why he chooses which music to allow into his personal space—because "it's all online."⁴ It also drives him, automatically and unwittingly, to increase time spent on audio-video, because it makes use of the full spectrum of internet-television media. The time and effort involved in downloading video content or copying D.V.D.'s, compared to downloading audio or copying C.D.'s, and the mere fact that streaming audio does not require a strong connection while streaming video, without the latest advances in connectivity, likely results in inconsistent quality or delays, makes the user less opposed to those in the film/ television industry trying to clamp down on illegal copying of their work. Though musicians and record labels obviously erred greatly in targeting individual downloaders in certain lawsuits, even fair and sincere efforts to encourage Web users to pay for music solicited at best apathy, at worst misdirected scorn. A musician who could barely pay his bills was grouped in with multimedia conglomerates

⁴ Though it's obviously not, as there's clearly an inverse relationship between those talking about the "long tail" and those interested in the cultural interests supposedly included in that tail.

engaging in C.D. price fixing. The musician David Lowery, who has taken the lead in these efforts, notably in a lawsuit against Spotify, is dismissed as a curmudgeon trying to eke out a last bit of money from old hits, instead of one of countless musicians who wish that their friends, let alone anonymous consumers, would care about how they listen to music and not access poorly-made copies often made without the artist's consent.

The Utopianists would object to this interpretation of what has happened to recorded music, offering two points of contention: first, McLuhan's point that we need not get hung up on the media or formats in which content arrives. They may say that studies have shown that the Web led to an increase in the amount of reading that the average U.S. consumer does daily relative to what he did in the immediately-prior cable-T.V. era, or that as long as hard-drive space continues to get cheaper and take up less space, higher-quality audio and audio-video files can become more of the norm and, when combined with a growing number of devices geared toward certain tasks (*e.g.* better interfaces for reading and more hi-fi systems developed specifically to work with televisions and computers) overall no long-term cultural degradation will take place. Besides, they may say, photographic and phonographic fidelity have never gotten in the way of genuine, inflamed passion for the arts — think: seven-inch singles, A.M. radio. From this perspective, low-quality M.P.3's of a C.D. and some incomplete information about the music are superior because of their accessibility, their ability to catch the listener at an inspired moment.

Fair enough. Until the listener moves quickly to the next inspired moment, and the next, next, next. The

consumer who decides what he wants based upon certain interests and idiosyncratic tastes, and then uses the available media and formats that effectively satiate those wants, is largely a mythical creation. To understand how impulsive and random choices can have a positive impact by leading us to cultural experiences that we would not have otherwise is difficult enough. We find it harder still to realize how consistently impulsive and random our habits are, that a modicum of discipline may be necessary to push us toward tasks that we want to do but do not find ourselves doing in the course of any given day. Discipline, though, seems inappropriate when applied to recreation and, more broadly, seems out of place historically. Beyond the workplace (or a health regimen) the consumerist elite of the post-Second World War epoch have little patience for discipline. Besides, audio-only options being low-data not only accounts for their failure to compete with audio-video when we must make a choice between them, but even when we have already chosen audio. The attraction of new audio-video amusement interferes, shortening our attention span, distracting us away from sound-alone with the lure of yet-more pertinent quick bites of savory information.

In short, if a great deal of our work and pleasure takes the form of digital files, then audio is not going to hold a significant place in our lives. Unless... we take the time to divorce ourselves, if not daily at least weekly, from the stream of digital data constantly submerging us, choose particular artists and musical works to listen to, and devote prolonged, consistent attention to them. Let us not kid ourselves about how rare this has become, especially for those who do not play a musical instrument or otherwise engage in any sort of music-making activities. The slight increase in vinyl sales has

lately given hope to the music industry. This hope is misplaced, often no more than wishful thinking. Vinyl's new popularity in the 2010s, like the newly-important role of live music in maintaining the livelihoods of musicians, hardly suggests a return to the analog or the authentic, or any sort of desire to escape the Digital Dystopia. Many new L.P. releases include access to downloadable computer files. These are what the buyers end up listening to more often than not. The acolytes of the "vinyl resurgence" rarely acknowledge this uncomfortable truth. Many of those who have switched to vinyl from digital formats, or have always preferred the format and celebrate the newfound interest in it, conflate C.D.'s with digital files, no matter how many times they acknowledge that M.P.-3's are subpar compared to C.D. quality and that even with high-definition files one would need a Digital-to-Audio Converter (D.A.C.) to transfer them to a good stereo system (when one could go to any random thrift store and buy a C.D. player for a nominal price). They seem to be attempting to enact a delusional rewriting of the history of the music trade: wherein cassettes and C.D.'s were both unfortunate divergent paths, the era of their dominance an anomaly, consumers having now returned to a tried and true format reasserting its rightful place. This may be true for a sliver of the buying public that preferred vinyl throughout the cassette and C.D. eras (1987-1990 and 1991-2006, respectively) but found it difficult to continue buying it because of its rarity. But we have to ask: How many of us, young and old, buying the new, highly-priced "vinyls" are doing so because we feel guilty about listening to music mostly via streaming services? Do we convince ourselves that we are supporting artists even when we often buy reissues of

artists who are dead and listen to new music for free (or "freemium") at ugly web sites run by awful companies whose staff know nothing about, and care little for, the music that they peddle? Many of the few devoted buyers of recorded music remaining not only ignore the vast amount of material only available on C.D. but do not make serious demands upon the streaming-music services: such as, include personnel and technical information, link to artists' and labels' Web sites and encourage purchases there, provide information about when and where the artists are performing live, and so on. The vinyl resurgence, like singing-competitions shows, is closer to a self-parody, an elaborate prank perpetuated by what remains of the music industry (both the three remaining "majors" and the bigger indies) increasingly in league with "tech" companies, all believing that listeners who want distinct, physical copies of an album and who want to support musicianship as a profession are foolish simpletons failing to adapt to a new economy.

Second, the Digital Utopianists would assert that digital and computer technologies have created—beware the Dystopian turn—a glut of video as well as a glut of audio, that more people are listening to more music, and reading more books and watching more movies, relative to any other point in history; earnest conversations about information overload would ensue. In the consensus history of computers and “the internet,” our cherished mobile devices became common only with the i-Pod, the tiny computer that only offered audio files. Alas, it did give our contemporary T.V. addicts, the Dystopian Utopianists' victims, a proper epithet: Pod People. Granted, as internet technology continues to advance, the amount of audio-video could overwhelm,

its ultimate effect on filmmaking as awful as it has been for recorded music. Nonetheless, the degraded position of audio would persist. When we exalt at such a massive amount of music being available via tiny computers, we inadvertently demean sound, confirm its diminished place in the era of constant audio-video that was still nascent when the i-Pod first struck its tinny, discordant notes. Again, music was prescient, a bellwether, the canary in the coal mine, only because we were still waiting for audio-video options to be similarly accessible and affordable. Those options have arrived. They may not be good options, but T.V. is T.V.: it drowns out the competition regardless.

Sound, not making use of the visual component, the full spectrum, of the stream, seems cheap, ironically, because it demands more of that which is dear: close, prolonged attention to detail; genuine, devoted interest; a clear, pointed decision in favor of one cultural pursuit over another. Do the Pod People get hooked on music, rushing home after discovering a new song on a streaming service or that a friend shared with them in order to listen to it on a proper playback system? Or do they go home, toss aside their little M.P.3 player (now a "smart" phone) with its bizarre little earphones, and start watching T.V.? Does sound alone work only when there aren't enough screens around? Say, when you're out for a walk and – heaven forbid! – are faced with the prospect of no televisual entertainment to keep you occupied unless you take out your mobile device, watch while you walk, and thus counter the original purpose of the activity. These "smart" devices, in so many social arenas, seem to have this numbing (McLuhanesque) effect. Overall, listening and only listening (with no screens present to accompany you on the daring journey to the

world of sound) comes to seem low-class or at least hopelessly regressive or Luddite. Music works primarily as background ambiance. The accessibility of digital information in the computerized, online environment allows audio-video to overwhelm audio-only and text-dominant alternatives. Audio-video is, as the "tech" giants have begun to show by their latest business maneuvers or have stated plainly themselves, the end game. Among the interchangeable human units of the Pod world, Jeff Jobs cared as much about music as Steve Bezos did about books.

That brings us to literature, the other canary. It has suffered nearly as much as recorded music, because, in publishing, as in sound recording, digital technology has made common what had been a scarce commodity. Previous limitations in resources encouraged a mass market in books and periodicals, as the difficulty of making them and the need to finalize the content of a published item, if not permanently then at least for a significant amount of time (until a second edition or the next issue) kept them somewhat valuable if any sort of care went into the production of either their content or materials. In the Twenty-First Century, though, like sound recordings, books and periodicals, when presented via a televisual screen, find themselves demoted to the position of minor adjuncts to the star attraction, the new god of contemporary culture: the multiplicity of audio-video formats subsumed to the computer screen. The new old god, I should say: television. Indeed, books sold (Amazon) and bootlegged (Google) online were the vanguard, defiled before Pod People came on the scene.

While the concept of an "e-book" does not seem to have allowed for the T.V. Stream to invade the space

within a book's borders, physical or virtual, we must still consider a great deal of bad news regarding periodicals of all formats and functions: newspapers, magazines, academic journals. Before the internet, the increasing ease with which information could be displayed on the magazine page, graphically, with as little text as possible, had made most magazines sub-literate. In this new millennium, any magazine covering practical matters or niche hobbies (fashion, guns, sports, outdoors recreation, cars, and so on) and many magazines dealing with politics and culture are a mix of image and text, and in some cases can be considered as intermedia, not literary, works. Newspapers follow suit. As this pattern follows its due course, digital versions of periodicals will always have a greater number of images, plus audio-video, distracting the reader and, more importantly, giving the writing evocative, suggestive powers that it would lack on its own. Bad writing accompanied by a stunning image or two seems less bad. Plain language comes to seem bold. The misleading, provocative headlines that have become typical at e-zines represent an intrusion of T.V. dynamics into the print world.

Periodicals entrap themselves in a cycle of producing more exclusive content for the Web and "apps," to generate revenue and name recognition. Consider the effect of these brief digital-only posts on the archive that these publications will leave behind. A future researcher looking for information about a certain topic is skimming the titles of relevant articles published by a respected magazine. Because, in this new century, the magazine began publishing many short pieces exclusively on its Web site, and like most Web-specific content they are not subject to the rigorous editing process that the print publication is, an index would only

suggest that the magazine's standards had declined. Granted, some magazines might in any sort of back catalog demote the Web-specific content or exclude it entirely. But why do that when such complete digitized copies of an entire magazine's run, already available from the likes of the *Nation* and *Harper's*, add to the number of clicks on that publication's site, and thus the amount of advertising revenue? Ironically, the magazine's storied past contributes to its tawdry present, as the increase in online ad money decreases the publication's reliance on the subscriptions that maintain its integrity.

Individual writers may not suffer as much as their trade as a whole, especially if the writer in question established himself before blogs and the T.V. Stream. While musicians find that their manual labor (live performance) is the only thing they have to offer worthy of value, and even so concert goers constantly photograph and film them, indirectly indicating the lack of value of audio-only content, writers have the advantage that their contributions, though using scant amounts of data compared to audio-video, nonetheless command greater attention than music, which has the distinct fate that it can always be demoted to ambience. In other words, while sound takes up more space, digitally speaking, in other ways it is actually less voluminous. Let's imagine a thorough plundering of the works of two advocates of the relaxation of copyright restrictions: Siva Vaidhyanathan and Lawrence Lessig. We go to the library of a major university, borrow every book by these authors that the library owns. Then download every article available via the databases to which that library has subscribed. We put the entire content of these works into simple text documents to

allow for maximal editing and searching by users, alongside all of the free writings that these authors have posted online. We even order transcripts of the television programs that these authors have appeared on, perhaps make transcripts of their lectures and other public appearances. Dump it all in those text documents. We see, most of all, that it would take a lot of time and effort to create this cache. Also, non-fiction writers who cover topical issues have an advantage over artists in that their users nearly always want their latest product. Whereas, with musicians, we often want what they made when they were young, at their peak, producing new, innovative work quicker than older, established artists do. Our conclusion? As we saw when comparing recorded music to the cinema, the fact that it's easy to rip off recorded music seems to be the principal reason why music artists are ripped off, the justifications coming later.

In the end, though, writers will suffer. Text, like sound alone, requires little data compared to audio-video.⁵ Even the Web as it was originally presented and other early uses of personal computers, such as chat programs and mailing lists, have been subsumed into formats and programs created to emphasize moving images, what is increasingly known as "social media." At the other end of the data spectrum, audio-video content of greater duration, demanding prolonged attention, has suffered as streaming audio-video has become easier to create and access. Feature films (increasingly seeming like an outmoded concept) are increasingly watched at home, removed from the cinematic setting that

⁵ Will print eventually be called still text, as compared to the moving text of the computer interface/ television screen?

contributes greatly to their effect; also, lectures or any other sort of verbal instruction are poorly adapted to the screen, the user straining to pay attention or neglecting the work necessary to remember or internalize the lessons. Past commentators on television, most of all, as we will see in this essay, Neal Postman in his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* [1985], warned us of this zero-sum game that television plays. Regardless of the interactivity of much of internet media, regardless of the difficulty of adapting the task of broadcasting to the Web (the latter was not built for such purpose) we are all watching more television, often via internet connections, whether we want to or not.

3. What Happened to the Computer?

Computer and internet technologies need not be so fatal to our culture. They should aid or expand communication, not displace it. By linking computers, internet technology allows humans to communicate with each other across wide expanses (albeit originally that applied largely among English speakers of some means). "The internet" began outside television. It was additional, complementary, or supplementary to workplace tasks and, to a lesser extent, recreation. It aided business, government, and academia, or anyone, in the organization of information—cataloging, indexing, collating, editing. In the early years of the Web, computers began to excel at providing reference information like a book would: the "1-point-0" world now deemed dead and buried. Reference tasks suited the Web well. Indexes, catalogs, directories, *etc.*, are well suited to the computerized, digital realm. Why have any information that will be updated on a regular basis come in the form of books, when the print medium works better for information of value for a longer period of time, if not all of human history?

Digital technology, though, encompasses all media, and as we have seen the Web became important to recreational pursuits as well. Unfortunately, like radio and television before it, or for that matter any format capable of being always on, always accessible (streaming, broadcasting, satelliting, hyperlinking) the Web is not ideal or even beneficial for the arts. The very dreams that Digital Utopianists have for the future of cultural pursuits using internet technology suggests the medium's insufficiency for cultural tasks. A medium that satisfies the most practical and immediate of information

needs in these Utopian fantasies becomes the interface between the user and any cultural product that he could possibly desire.

Two scenarios could make this fantasy into a reality. First, the creators of cultural products could drop any objection to any user having immediate, free access to their products. In the long run, this would leave us only with the trash already available in copious quantities on the Web. Second, the user's cultural knowledge and appetites could become so weak and malleable due to his constant use of televisual media that he is left with only misunderstood or unrecognized desires, manipulated by the creators of "content"—that once-innocent word—those individuals having long since abandoned any distinction between advertising/propaganda and all other cultural products, either unwittingly or justified by an occasional meditation upon the irony/ tragedy of their work. A form of entertainment or cultural appreciation that is always with you, refuses to leave you alone, clearly does not enhance your life, it takes over your life. We can still go to a book store or record shop and easily find something that will change our lives, if we take the time to digest its contents—quite a compelling difference, there, between "content" and "contents"—and apply what we learned. What we find on the Web can also change our lives, but it is a medium that tends rather to consume them. It keeps pushing new content, as if a bookseller followed you home, stalking you, trying to determine what else you may be interested in, or a record-store clerk was a peeping tom unembarrassed by his crime, tapping on your window then plastering it with advertisements.

As traffic on the Web increased, the amount of information there grew beyond our ability to interpret as

a singular body. This change is seen, for example, in the eclipse of the Yahoo Directory in favor of keyword searching on Google and its imitators. The movement of data becomes a major money maker. The companies that control the means of accessing and transferring data began to influence the Web, push its "content" creators toward constant movement, constant new options, in order to generate greater advertising revenue. The Web experience became like that of channel surfing: never stop flipping, never find something to watch for an extended period. Nor do we want to. As we flip through television channels, we do not stop when we come to an advertisement, to see if we want to watch what is on that channel. We hardly prefer one over the other—keep flipping. In this way, internet media do not offer a different kind of communication. They offer more cheap culture: T.V. and the T.V. Stream.

The Web as an audio-video entertainment format devalues video by offering so much of it, in the process undermining the Web's superior aspects relative to old-fashioned television and its useful functions in workplace and academic pursuits. In its initial form, the Web's interactive capability allowed users to stop the flow of information when we pleased, decide what we considered important, and moreover to know that we received more information from the "content" provider than the latter received about us in return (that is, less surveillance). Now users are not only overwhelmed by the large amount of available information that we want, but are further hindered by the large amount of unwanted information, often repeatedly stalled and started again by interfering pop-up advertisements and other barriers to access, at least insofar as the "freemium" model continues. Moreover, the interfaces of "smart

phones" discourage us from deciding to use a program or check a particular in-box, instead alerts us based on an automated system monitoring the arrival of certain bits of information, compelling us to always have them on (and placed on or near our bodies) and to interrupt other activities, fragmenting them for the sake of a different fragmented experience.

Do we take the time to appreciate content when it does in fact warrant close study? Sites and articles of interest are bookmarked, then forgotten; the bookmarks are subject to organizing schema designed to compel future interest, then forgotten again. We imitate the work of search "engines," moving quickly from one link to the next. We talk of artificial intelligence, of computers getting smarter, but in fact we humans are getting dumber. Artificial intelligence is authentic stupidity, and large institutions, both private and governmental, are inherently inhumane, because, as metaphorical assembly lines, they represent a conglomeration of routine acts by a large number of humans. They rarely take as their input the thoughts and research of humans at their most sophisticated. They are not supposed to. They are also not supposed to make big decisions for us. Jaron Lanier, in his book, *Who Owns the Future?:* "We can't tell how much of the success of an AI algorithm is due to people changing themselves to make it seem successful. People have repeatedly proven adaptable enough to lower standards in order to make software seem smart" (155). Because Digital Utopianists will always turn to Dystopianism for convenience's sake, many working in the "tech" industry acknowledge these problems. For example, Google, Facebook, Amazon, and so on document your previous choices and use that growing body of information about you to limit the results of your

own searches. In other words, they claim to serve you better by assuming that you do not want to expand your interests and knowledge. Those keyword searches at Google no longer seem so wide-reaching and liberating relative to the past drudgery of searching for information via reference librarians, phone books, directories, catalogs, *etc.*

Though the "smart" phone looks less like a television than computer monitors do, increasingly the Web's endless stream becomes television's endless stream. That is, the computer and Web giants, and the television and telephone companies that now seem to blend together, control it. Besides, the "tech" companies act more like media companies, and both model themselves on Wal-Mart, the great pioneer of the feedback loop of constant dispersal of low-quality product at little to no price satiating immediate needs created by the constant consumption of low-quality product. Recall those awkward political opinions and fantastical visions of the future occasionally uttered by your computer-savvy friends? Say, about the Singularity, Objectivism, or some grave misunderstanding of any given political ideology used to justify whatever. Now they at times dictate your economy and your culture. They are beginning to disrupt and destroy not only patterns of production and distribution, but also the very ability to think about such matters in an abstract, sophisticated way. The Web, after all, is not just T.V. and movies; its masters strive to make their products synonymous with commerce itself and even to replace much of your social life. Thus the problem is even greater, going beyond the scope of our topic here.

The deluge of video, televised or streaming, online or via satellite, even at the cinema, where film is now rarely projected and an excess of audio-video advertising is shown before the film, degrades its value. As with any product too easily available, flooding the market, the novelty of constant moving images has diminished. Monetarily, but also personally. Why make your own video when it will just get lost in the morass? Who continues to produce in such a market? The loud, the brash, the loutish. The interactivity of the Web impels you into a shouting match, competing for attention with the worst of the lazy and stupid. With the U.S. elite an ever-smaller minority, and as the middle classes shrink, an artist is increasingly a sucker: one of the few creating new content instead of regurgitating old material. While countless commentators have noted that "reality" television, including the larger number of talk shows and other non-scripted programming, allows for cheaper labor costs, we should consider a broader view. There have always been presenters, especially for what were once generally called variety shows. Now we are all presenters, D.J.'s and V.J.'s, posting and "sharing" online. If one wants to know how truly absurd the Digital Utopianists are, recall that "sharity" bloggers who uploaded other artists' music, at times in bulk, without those artists' permission, were thanked by their downloaders; the artists were not. That is, you can upload a crap reproduction of another's art and — that's it, you've made a cultural contribution. The pauper-like status of artists in a cultural milieu that promotes montage, or more likely the endless linking to summaries of articles (fact checking? proofreading? no!), has been discussed in greater detail by Lanier *et alia*. We must expand our purview if we want to counter the

absurd view of the television version of the Web as a revolutionary democratizing "social media." Turning to Neal Postman's work, we come to understand that the medium, *pace* McLuhan, is conducive to certain kinds of messages, and it also shapes our modes of thought that decipher those messages, and frames our cultural experiences after we decipher them. Having discussed how these media are used (what McLuhan didn't want us to do) we ask, what is the T.V. Stream's message, its deeper meaning?

4. Excessive Accessible Data Ruining Neal Postman's Typographic Mind by Way of Daniel Boorstin's Pseudo-Events

The Huxleyan Present

How did we arrive at the cultural degradation caused by the T.V. Stream, that is, caused by the speedy transmission of data for the financial benefits of a few and the mindless entertainment of the many? Neal Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* [1985] has been hailed as a contemporary classic, for good reason, as it offers a thorough explanation of how television, or, in today's terms, streaming video, destroys our ability to take art, or anything, seriously. In doing so, it answers this question of ours. In Postman's view, of the two great Dystopian visions of the Twentieth Century, Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, the latter was truly prophetic.⁶ For, the problem that the soma-addicted adults of Huxley's future had "was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking." Or, in the drab non-fiction world, "the problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertainment" (87). In retrospect, we see that Orwell used speculative fiction to explain the horrors of his present. In contrast to the concept of totalitarianism—according to the historian Stanley Payne, it has rarely been achieved by regimes, communist or fascist—the Huxleyan Dystopia has

⁶For a contemporary comparison of these two novels' prophecies, watch the televised debate between Will Self (more on his writings below) and Adam Gopnik that took place November 28, 2017, in London, organized by Intelligence Squared.

turned out to be shockingly easy to accomplish. "Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours" (163).

Postman's visions of the future did not merely trade in these well-worn paths. "A central thesis of computer technology—that the principal difficulty we have in solving problems stems from insufficient data—will go unexamined. Until years from now, when it will be noticed that the massive collection and speed-of-light retrieval of data have been of great value to large-scale organizations but have solved very little of importance to most people and have created at least as many problems for them as they may have solved." That sounds like... not that it was written in 1985, but will be written in... 2025? Let's hope. Of course, since he was writing roughly a half-decade before the launch of the Web, some of Postman's prescience is essentially correct if slightly off-track. He seems to think that an image-centered world already exists. "Our use of other media [...] is largely orchestrated by television. Through it we learn what telephone system to use, what movies to see, what books, records, and magazines to buy, what radio programs to listen to." While this description may have been accurate in the 1980's with regard to television, it would be indisputably true if applied today to the Web and mobile "apps," as long as one takes into account that nearly all but the most reclusive of humans rely significantly on interpersonal communication and of course are limited by practical considerations.

Putting aside these broader social matters to return to the effects of the T.V. Stream on culture, specifically our perception and appreciation of sound and music, and text and literature, Postman indirectly answers some of our questions in his analysis of what he

calls the Typographic Age that preceded radio and television. More or less, sound shares important characteristics with print simply because it is non-image/ non-video. Phonography and photography arrived almost simultaneously and together irrevocably changed human civilization, yet technical limitations allowed for sound recordings to exist as a separate cultural realm until recently. As noted above, the previous century might well have witnessed a golden age of listening, as phonographic technology was positioned in its historical development for roughly four decades (1955-95) at that precise point when it encouraged us to listen to recorded, instead of live, music, but not as either an audio-video recording (because what was available on T.V. and the early years of the Web was scant) or with a distinct video accompaniment. Some of the positive attributes of Postman's "typographic mind" thus survived. Very likely, he would agree. Noting that cinema, recorded music, and radio all are forms of entertainment that have altered the nature of public discourse, nonetheless he notes, "television is different because it encompasses all forms of discourse. No one goes to a movie to find out about government policy or the latest scientific advances. No one buys a recording to find out the baseball scores or the weather or the latest murder. No one turns on the radio anymore for soap operas or a presidential address (if a television is at hand). But everyone goes to television for all these things and more. [...] Television is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself" (92). As suggested above, thirty years later, television has merged with our computer; the resulting T.V. Stream plays this central role in many lives.

In turn, the notion that the presence of advertising, or of ridiculous and useless information alongside the pertinent and serious, discourages viewers from taking anything seriously applies to music as well. Essentially, Postman voiced what many critics of "music videos" were saying about the effect of the Music Television (M.T.V.) channel in its early years. Music that was dreadfully non-serious, such as Glam (or "Hair") Metal and the worst of "Synth Pop," employed visual effects, clothing, hair styles, and simple story lines to draw viewers in, getting fans based not on their music, not even on their fashion or theatrical live performances like plenty of bands in the Rock era did, but on what were essentially short television programs that blended into advertisements and other crap programming, defiling the music's original aural sanctity. There is also the opposite effect, of course, wherein viewers repulsed by an artist's physical appearance or tawdry "videos" find years later, when they have a chance to listen to the music closely, that the artist did have something to offer.

Printing Routinizes the Production of Text

How exactly did the typographic age lead to television triumphant and the diminution of non-video media? Postman explains the crucial differences between the dissemination of information via print relative to television step by step. To begin:

"The written word, and an oratory based upon it, *has a content*: a semantic, paraphrasable, propositional content. This may sound odd, but since [...] much of our discourse today has only a marginal propositional content, I must

stress the point here. Whenever language is the principal medium of communication—especially language controlled by the rigors of print—an idea, a fact, a claim is the inevitable result. The idea may be banal, the fact irrelevant, the claim false, but there is no escape from meaning when language is the instrument guiding one's thought. Though one may accomplish it from time to time, it is very hard to say nothing when employing a written English sentence. What else is exposition good for? Words have very little to recommend them except as carriers of meaning. The shapes of written words are not especially interesting to look at. Even the sounds of sentences of spoken words are rarely engaging except when composed by those with extraordinary poetic gifts. If a sentence refuses to issue forth a fact, a request, a question, an assertion, an explanation, it is nonsense, a mere grammatical shell. As a consequence a language-centered discourse such as was characteristic of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America tends to be content-laden and serious, all the more so when it takes its form from print."

Those who develop typeface, or work in advertising and propaganda, may beg to differ regarding the visual appeal of words, letters, and symbols, and I am almost certain that sound poets like Kurt Schwitters or Henri Chopin made great art while lacking "extraordinary poetic gifts." Nonetheless, the basic idea Postman spells out here effectively leads to a devastating

critique of television. As he asserts later, "Meaning demands to be understood," reading "encourages rationality." Of course, the analytic thought demanded by print existed before the Gutenberg Revolution, and Postman clarifies, "I am referring here not to the potentialities of the individual mind but to the predispositions of a cultural mind-set. In a culture dominated by print, public discourse tends to be characterized by a coherent, orderly arrangement of facts and ideas" (50-51). Of course audio and audio-video possess content and have meaning; being non-literal they are ambiguous and open to productive interpretation in a way that written language is not. However, without the "semantic, paraphrasable, propositional content" of language, any discerned meaning cannot be expressed directly. And if the audio-video never stops, it attempts to render us speechless, dumb. All meaning becomes like the subliminal or suggestive content of advertising and propaganda; and, though we know that such meaning can be dissected then rejected, we do not do so; in some cases — those same clever elites who cynically support or slavishly resign themselves to a "post-literate" culture — telling ourselves that such literary deconstruction is obvious and has been done before, even as many increasingly lack the ability to express such deconstructed meaning literally.

In recalling pre-Gutenberg times, we again get the premonition that mass society is heading towards a post-Gutenberg era of mass illiteracy or mere functional literacy. The "potentialities of the individual mind" could continue to expand, given the inevitable accumulation of knowledge in the sciences or the challenges presented by ecological and medical problems. But the democratizing trajectory of the print era has been disrupted. Writing at

the popular level has been in decline for decades, seen in what remains of daily newspapers and their replacement by a relatively-unstable set of journalistic options online. The notion of rational debate, the elucidation of differences of opinion and ideology—rather, an understanding of the mental discipline required to form opinions or adhere to ideologies—is on the verge of extinction. We all have an excess of worn-out rhetorical flourishes and personalized vendetta-like demands that we insistently impose upon conversations. How many contemporary Americans understand that democracy is both a delicate practice and a historically-contingent ideology requiring a certain rigor to maintain? Instead, it is perceived more like a human right that we are all entitled to, that we simply must demand in the face of reactionary and corporate barriers to the "arc of history."

Telegraphy Foreshadows Televised Text

The degradation of language began even as it was still at the peak of its influence, with the invention of the telegraph, which Postman claims "made a three-pronged attack on typography's definition of discourse, introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence." Precisely because telegraphic messages are printed documents, we can see that the mere fact of the T.V. Stream being audio-video is not itself the reason for its disastrous influence on culture. It is the speed and ease with which it comes to us, relative to printed text or audio-only; these are overwhelmed, causing an impoverishment of our mental "diet" as our mastery of written language and our perception of sound wane. Speedy transmission across the globe is of primary significance relative to the medium itself. "Telegraphy gave a form of legitimacy to the idea of context-free

information; that is, to the idea that the value of information need not be tied to any function it might serve in social and political decision-making and action, but may attach merely to its novelty, interest, and curiosity. The telegraph made information into a commodity, a 'thing' that could be bought and sold irrespective of its uses or meaning" (65). This sounds eerily familiar.

Despite the lack of relevant information to send, the telegraph sent something. Here, Postman points to that oft-quoted prophetic line from Henry David Thoreau's *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." Newspapers that had reported local information of direct relation to its readers' lives began to print information about distant events, especially of a sensational or scandalous nature; events that the readers had no control over, nor cared to—they just perhaps found reading about them to be amusing. Finally, the telegraph made information incoherent. "The principal strength of the telegraph was its capacity to move information, not collect it, explain it, or analyze it. In this respect, telegraphy was the exact opposite of typography. Books, for example, are an excellent container for the accumulation, quiet scrutiny and organized analysis of information and ideas. [...] A book is an attempt to make thought permanent, and to contribute to the great conversation conducted by authors of the past. Therefore, civilized people everywhere consider the burning of a book a vile form of anti-intellectualism. *But the telegraph demands that we burn its contents.* The value of telegraphy is undermined by

applying the tests of permanence, continuity or coherence" (69-70; original emphasis).

Minor reservations to Postman's argument immediately surface. Those who assume that the Western world before the 1960's was a wasteland of bigotry and misogyny would argue that those readers of local newspapers reporting nothing but local news undoubtedly were close-minded and misinformed about the wider world. They may have had the opportunity to participate in rational discussions about their locale, region, or nation, but generally did not. The counter to this: what would they gain from getting pointless information about the wider world? No instant cosmopolitanism results. Only an expanded sphere in which us average humans can assert our dumb opinions. Granted, Postman and those who concur with his argument do need to acknowledge that, even before television, a plenitude of bad books overwhelmed in number and effect the good, or "great," books, and that those bad books contributed to the mass of incoherent and irrelevant information accumulated by telegraphy and, later, radio and television. That said, Postman's point, that such books seem to demand an assessment of their informational and propositional value, while telegraphic messages do not, holds true. With bad books, at least we will come to understand that they offer nothing of lasting value, but with information in newspapers obtained via telegraphy, we never even begin to consider such questions. Telegraphic messages of course were never going to supplant books, live music, theatre, storytelling, outdoor activities; were only useful for the transfer of practical, transitory information. The problem comes with media, similarly limited in their use,

which do begin to supplant recreational and cultural pursuits.

Phonography and Photography Irrevocably Change Humanity

They began to do so with photography, developed nearly at the same time as the telegraph. Postman points to Louis Daguerre's claim that his invention "would invest everyone with the power to duplicate nature as often and whenever one liked." With further innovations, this ability to make exact copies began to come true, culminating in digital technology's mastery of this task. Postman spends more time, though, illuminating the differences between language and photography. "Language defines, even creates, broad abstractions like love, freedom, nature, and humanity. Photography shows "particularities," examples of such abstractions at a moment in time. It does not, however, assert opinions about the objects represented. Beyond the question of a photograph being purposely altered, the questions of truth and falsity do not matter. To some extent, of course a photograph is true; it's a direct representation of reality. But then that truth can be used to make false claims." Returning to the issue of coherence, Postman adds, "Language makes sense only when it is presented as a sequence of propositions. Meaning is distorted when a word or sentence is, as we say, taken out of context; when a reader or listener is deprived of what was said before, and after. But there is no such thing as a photograph taken out of context." Referring to Susan Sontag's foundational writing on the art of photography, Postman speaks of the photograph's "dismembering of reality, [its] wrenching of moments out of their contexts, and [its] juxtaposing of events and

things that have no logical or historical connection with each other."

These characteristics make for extraordinary art, but do not make the medium ideal for journalism or any serious inquiry regarding veritable subjects. Unfortunately, the excessively educated of our present day, lacking creative outlets not only because we are under-employed but also because we waste leisure time and creative energies engrossed in the T.V. Stream, use the online presentation of photography and audio-video as a desperate way to define ourselves. This embrace of the malleability of a photograph or video's meaning, not for cultural pursuits but to place oneself socially, leads to one's acquiescence to the exploitative way that images are used in journalism, advertising, and propaganda. Referring to Boorstin's "graphic revolution," Postman argues that, "the photograph was the perfect complement to the flood of telegraphic news-from-nowhere that threatened to submerge readers in a sea of facts from unknown places about strangers with unknown faces. For the photograph gave a concrete reality to the strange-sounding datelines, and attached faces to the unknown names. Thus it provided the illusion, at least, that 'the news' had a connection to something within one's sensory experience" (71-75). Similarly, our identities as defined in the T.V. Stream have begun to merge with advertising and propaganda directed at us, tailored to us by prying corporations and governments, making the latter more acceptable, more natural or normal.

Pseudo-Context as Television's Subject

A caveat to Postman's line of thought at this point: a solution which, before the rise of television, would have

undermined the deleterious effects of useless information transmitted quickly and easily. Drawing upon Boorstin's pseudo-events, such as a press conference, existing only to be reported, Postman defines the "pseudo-context" (crossword puzzles, trivia contests) "invented to give fragmented and irrelevant information a seeming use. But the use the pseudo-context provides is not action, or problem-solving, or change. It is the only use left for information with no genuine connection to our lives. And that, of course, is to amuse" (76). Indeed, in this new century, trivia nights at bars in some cities have become frequent and, for some, a principal cultural outlet. However, the pseudo-context, when transferred to culture, can do more than amuse us. Again, televisual content is not in and of itself a problem; great filmmakers prove this, especially in that they increasingly do not work with film itself, but with the same digital means used by the T.V. Stream (though they struggle to get anyone to care). Televised audio-video is a rotting sore on both our body politic and our civilization because it provides a glut of useless information about society and politics at their most debased, *quickly and easily*. In contrast, a pseudo-context providing background information for the appreciation of music, the visual arts, theatre, and literature can usually be of service to even casual consumers. In some respects, going to the cinema, buying an L P, attending a book signing, are all forms of amusement, taking place in a pseudo-context probably with no direct bearing on our lives, except in the rare cases where they excite us to such an extent that they impel us to begin to create something ourselves. And an excess of information about cultural products undoubtedly distracts us from actually appreciating them. Nonetheless this information can enrich our lives.

If we do not allow for the sincere and thorough appreciation of the arts made possible by photographic and phonographic documentation, we end up being Philistines.

Having made this objection, though, we return to Postman's argument, realize that Philistinism has its uses in our current situation. Even many of our young elites, addicted to the T.V. Stream, resort to a new, improved, hip Philistinism in order to restrict television's pernicious influence on their lives. We see it in the renewed emphasis on cuisine and sustainable agriculture, and a broader desire for handmade goods. So-called localism—more accurately, regionalism—counters the globalizing, dehumanizing effects of the T.V. Stream and the globalization of consumer capitalism. Perhaps the only good thing coming out of the wave of gentrification of urban neighborhoods in the U.S. and U.K. in recent decades has been that, if one can afford it, better food is available. Does this mean we can take solace in being happy gluttons as our culture burns?

Before the reader casts dispersion upon this sarcasm, he should wait until Postman goes into detail about how televised content cannot be taken seriously, even if the creator or viewer wants to do so, and in turn how it cannot contribute to rational discussion of social and political matters. The aesthetics of television, at times pleasing or even of artistic significance, lure us into believing otherwise.

"In watching American television, one is reminded of George Bernard Shaw's remark on his first seeing the glittering neon signs of Broadway and 42nd Street at night. It must be beautiful, he said, if you cannot read. American

television is, indeed, a beautiful spectacle, a visual delight, pouring forth thousands of images on any given day. The average length of a shot on network television is only 3.5 seconds, so that the eye never rests, always has something new to see. Moreover, television offers viewers a variety of subject matter, requires minimal skills to comprehend it, and is largely aimed at emotional gratification. Even commercials, which some regard as an annoyance, are exquisitely crafted, always pleasing to the eye and accompanied by exciting music."

Television, as a medium "devoted entirely to supplying its audience with entertainment," as such is not an inherent evil for supplying some amusement amid life's challenges and complexities, giving us a brief moment of demotic sublimity, unthinking repose, as we eat our grass-fed cows. The problem is that television "has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience, [...] that all subject matter is presented as entertaining," and that "entertainment is the supraideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure" (86-87).

Television then turns "information about entertainers and celebrities into 'serious' cultural content, so that the circle begins to close: Both the form and content of news becomes entertainment." In the present day, we see this trend growing enormously: news being about our perception of the news and celebrity attempts to control the "news cycle." In Silicon Valley, the Digital

Utopianists have their variation: while many important matters warrant only smirks and awkward silences from them, they will suddenly turn serious when talking about the future of their favorite medium, often heaping snide attacks upon "legacy" media (that low-class low-data "deprecated" disappearing errata). Their supraideology may be different: not entertaining humans, but rather capturing their minds entirely. Albeit, the pleasant aspects of that capture will be reserved for the rich (i-glasses and robot friends), the unpleasant for the poor (say, those an algorithm claims are likely to commit crimes being relentlessly tracked via nanotechnological devices implanted against their will). Nonetheless, that ideology, like television's, comes back around to that "emotional gratification" that Postman noted and is marked by obsessive devotion to certain media and formats providing that gratification. Many may scoff at the notion that television's only goal is to entertain. Viewers do gravitate to news stories of the grotesque and disastrous. But if emotional gratification is one of entertainment's goals, those "serious" and "hard" news stories indeed amuse us. They comfort us if we feel relatively safe, or confirm suspicions and hard-headed beliefs, or provide a good story to tell.

Daniel Boorstin's Pseudo-Events

While Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* is perhaps the only book more popular and influential than Postman's in the field of media studies (however one defines it) Daniel Boorstin's *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* [1961], written more than two decades prior, supplements *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, defining the force that ended the Typographic Age as the Graphic Revolution. That is, he helps us see photography and

sound recording as end games, destroyers, of the Gutenberg Revolution, making typography merely one part of a larger array of graphic arts, as it literally is on the Web: image-text. Boorstin, an amateur scholar whose primary credentials were his concise prose style and concern for public literacy, was also a man of conservative temperament (not always corresponding to conservative politics). Accordingly, he emphasizes extravagant expectations regarding knowledge, media, experiences—life itself—that in his opinion lead to our lives being overwhelmed by what he terms, pseudo-events: tourism instead of travel, celebrities instead of heroes, images instead of ideals, and the creation of news for the sake of that news being news, such as reporting on the routines and whereabouts of a film star or politician simply because he is who he is, even when the information in question does not pertain to public events or projects. Boorstin's pseudo-events, like television, make anything they touch unserious. His analysis concurs with what Postman argues about the telegraph providing incoherent and irrelevant information to newspaper readers who in turn were impotent regarding what that information pertained to. Boorstin's book came during an era when the gradual increase in governments' and corporations' efforts to control the news via press conferences/ releases, advertising, and other promotional efforts had become too obvious, and yet was still too novel, not to pass comment on. And of course, as he was writing, the 1960 presidential debates famously helped the photogenic Senator John F Kennedy appear strong-willed and intelligent, even as those only listening to, or reading transcripts of, the debates tended to think that Vice President Richard Nixon had bested his sparring partner.

Not only do we want too much, too often and too easily, Boorstin says, but in turn we delude ourselves into believing that we have attained what we wanted. "We tyrannize and frustrate ourselves by expecting more than the world can give us or than we can make of the world. We demand that everyone who talks to us, or writes for us, or takes pictures for us, or makes merchandise for us, should live in our world of extravagant expectations" (5). Such an unhealthy pursuit of illusions by all accounts has metastasized with digital technology. Consider how eager early adopters of digital means of distribution of goods love to cajole and hector those who are reluctant to employ new means when the old ones work perfectly well, confidently asserting (despite much historical evidence to the contrary) that they know where the economy is going, that the future's path is certain. Extravagant expectations indeed.

At an early point in *The Image*, Boorstin follows Postman by nearly stumbling into Philistinism. The first chapter after his introduction, discussing journalism's endless disclosure of novelty, retroactively and liberally applies a critique of the making of news in order to publish news to seemingly any kind of journalism or information seeking. Who draws the line between the pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of novelty? This emphasis on the telegraph and its useless information leading journalists to "manufacture" news (that is, create pseudo-events) ignores the fact that there is always enough useful information to fill up newspapers (or continually bombard online viewers with). Much of this useful information, though, is only potentially useful to most people, and thus also potentially useless even if valuable. Most important, it generally will not be entertaining. We can imagine a huge increase in the

number of television channels, radio stations, and Web sites offering valuable information (say, the Congressional Record, the English Annual Registers, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, comic-book price guides, bibliographies, encyclopedias, what-have-you) but few would care. We're looking for fun, and human connections. The primary cause of the negative effects of the T.V. Stream remains: it being always on and available, impelling us to look for human connections and social outlets in the form of dumb televisual entertainment.

Past this initial false step, Boorstin effectively focuses on the pseudo-events crafted by business, government, and journalists, all in cahoots with each other. The present-day reader cannot but conclude that, in a time and place inundated with televisual images, an excess of such events hinders knowledge. It does, first, via the fragmentation of our experience and appreciation of art, which Boorstin discusses in the chapter, 'From Shapes to Shadows: Dissolving Forms'. While his emphasis here on adaptations and abridgments of literary works seems quaint, and needlessly disputatious, overall his interpretation is as timely as ever. As argued earlier in this essay, the clever denizens of the Digital Utopia-Dystopia at times fashion themselves as the meta-curators/ commentators/ editors of the T.V. stream, forgetting what it is like to become engrossed and obsessed with certain works, artists, or genres, and neglecting to ask themselves if they consider themselves to be excellent aggregators of digital ephemera only because they never bothered to understand deeply and thoroughly any of the material that ephemera is attached to. Boorstin saw this happening before the Web or cable-T.V.: "Expecting

more novelty than there is, more greatness than there is, and more strangeness than there is, we imagine ourselves masters of a plastic universe. But a world we can shape to our will—or to our extravagant expectations—is a shapeless world" (118). We must add that the digital-media money makers lack such unrealistic expectations. They easily shape the content of what we consume online, using slapdash automated processes romanticized with the veneer of computer science, because they know the content is garbage. Our landfills, after all, can be filled with a multitude of priceless artifacts, merely in the wrong place, comparable to a Thomas Hardy novel on a Web page or a Nina Simone recording on a "smart" phone.

Boorstin's discussion of literary adaptations and abridgments at least brings us to two crucial points already made here: the expanded use of color images in print, to the point where, online, what was once printed has become entirely color images (compare the bright white of Web pages' backgrounds to the color of most paper); second, the eclipse of our ability to imagine what we read by the depiction of live action in natural settings on the cinematic (then televisual) screen. Boorstin writes, "The sweep of landscape and the panoramas of violent action seen in the pages of novels could not be convincingly transferred to the stage. [...] With the rise of motion pictures, however, these limits were destroyed. The new technique made it possible to change scenery in the flash of an eye, to bring vast landscapes and wild action into the theater" (128). From this, we see what could be an advantageous result for all involved: "The increasing technical possibilities of movies did have the effect of leaving the novel with an entire new role. [...] Some of the ablest literary artists [...] more and more

explored the inner world—the world of eroticism, obscenity, blasphemy, symbolism, stream of consciousness, and introspection—which could not be acceptably displayed on the movie screen" (129). Again we have the possibility of more, more, more. But we do not have more time, that fundamental commodity that cannot be bought: the wealthy discover that paying servants to do tasks for them creates the new task of managing the performance of those tasks, and then managing those who manage, and managing the money that maintains all of this task-assigning.

Of course, filmmakers will always seek out new material from the literary world, except for a small number who adhere to the auteur approach of the director and original screenwriter as one. They even attempt to adapt some of the Modernist literature that Boorstin suggests cannot be transformed into moving images, such as the surprising attempt at William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Enhanced digital means at filmmakers' disposal in this new century has both made the boiler-plate blockbuster action fare more impressive in what its technicians attempt, if not in the frequent tawdriness of the results dominated by computer-generated images, and enabled those with less funding but more imagination to try adaptations that previously would have been impossible or pointless: these range from the awful (Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly*) to the mediocre (John Hillcoat's *The Road*) to the fine (Michel Gondry's *L'Écume des Jours*—but is it more than visual splendor?).

Art in the T.V. Stream as Pseudo-Events

The concept of pseudo-events returns advertising to its proper place as a nuisance at best, at its worst in the new

online media a fatal trap that turns all of what we consume into mental drivel. Users of modern media have long since resigned themselves to the absurdity and disingenuousness of advertising. We breezily dismiss such concerns, much like we stoically, perhaps with some reservations, accept data about our consumer choices constantly being collected and tabulated. We simply do not have the time and wherewithal to demand changes in these matters, at least not as individuals who have difficulty remembering to vote let alone participate in time-consuming, psyche-bearing community organizing. That said, we still have the ability and right to make choices about how we listen to music, watch filmed entertainment, and read, choices that could minimize our exposure to advertising. Boorstin's review of advertising's tricks can steel the resolve of those who do want to make such choices. He reminds us how advertising, especially in audio-video form, appropriates new ideas in design, radical film techniques, and at times academic theories, all for the sake of selling products that we either already know we want or don't want but might become likely to buy because of the mote of satisfaction that comes with every purchase or any possibility that it could become worthwhile.

Writing a half-century ago, from a vantage point that the Dystopianists may condescendingly call "innocent," Boorstin details how the content of advertising fits the old stereotypes of "snake oil" salesmanship even as the media and forms that advertisers use have changed. First, making illogical or meaningless statements that are neither true nor false. For example, a basic characteristic of a product is made to seem like a special trait. Second, paying for celebrity endorsements creates a self-fulfilling prophecy

regarding the supposed benefits of a product. In turn, consumers become part of a product's promotional campaign, as their willingness to advocate for a product, or merely wait in line for it, becomes a selling point. Boorstin explains: "Just as each of us likes a movie star or television celebrity more when we think we have had a hand in making him a celebrity, the same is true with commercial products. We know that by buying a product we increase its popularity; we thus make it more valuable." Boorstin ignores that a consumer may have an ideological reason for buying a product, including yours truly when I refuse even to consider buying a subscription to streaming-music services. And, again, we have the Philistinism problem: consumers justly want to make an artist who creates valuable timeless work more commercially successful. That said, the tendency of Digital Utopianists to shill for major "tech" companies truly disturbs. Third, using technical jargon that the consumer expects *not* to understand. As Boorstin rhetorically asks, "Who would want to live in an economy so stagnant, in a technology so backward, that the consumer could actually understand how products were made and what their real virtues were?" Here we have an inescapable facet of the industrialized world, as most of us do not understand how plumbing works, let alone our computers. As Boorstin shows with regard to automobiles and cosmetics, and as we can see in advertisements for new T.V.'s and computers today, consumers are impressed by words (at times, mere acronyms) that they do not understand. Finally, we have come to enjoy advertisements in and of themselves, "flattered that anyone would go to such trouble for us."

In Boorstin's estimation, advertisers' methods cause truth to be supplanted by believability or

credibility. This is the parallel development to the assertion that we must respect unfounded, irrational opinions simply because the bearer of those opinions truly believes in them, as if an individual's opinions were born with him and thus cannot be used to judge the worthiness of that person's contributions to any given discussion, because to do so would reek of racism, sexism, or another prejudice against a person based on aspects of their birth beyond his control. Similarly, Boorstin finds that those duped by advertising "are always playing a game with themselves. Momentarily they enjoy the pleasurable illusion that an extravagant expectation has been satisfied. Then [the Dystopian turn] they enjoy the revelation that they have seen through the illusion" (213-28). That is, we do not actually accept mere believability or credibility. We assume that we will find the truth eventually. A game of some amusement, perhaps every once in a while. What happens, though, when significant portions of our lives are littered with, perhaps dominated by, advertisements?

Pseudo-Context = Disinformation

Clever media and film scholars commonly, world-wearily make quips about advertisements being the true purpose and content of television, that the programs exist to draw advertisers rather than the ads existing to support the programs. As with the notion that users of internet media exist only to supply data about their own consumer choices, this is another Dystopian turn in order to deflect criticism. Let us instead stay focused on the content of what people spend hours upon hours watching. Online, ads definitely are being watched, and often. Audio-video, as well as audio-only and text-centric, "content," especially when made exclusively for

the Web and mobile devices, instead of making the ads seem impressive by comparison (the model used for television in the days of the cathode-ray tube, and still seen with high-viewership events like the Super Bowl) now increasingly merges with the ads. The ads always seem intrusive, as they are not part of the original form of either the Web or mobile “apps.” They do not have their specific, cordoned-off place, as in live television. “Content” then starts to lose its meaning. Articles are always getting shorter, becoming listicles (in other words, images with captions). Music becomes increasingly designed not to interfere with other tasks, at times matching the always-upbeat nonsense heard in ads. Everything becomes ads.

The long-term result of the growing amount of television programming, plus the unknown depths of original content produced for the Web, both difficult to discern from advertising, has been an overall decline of intellectual content and a movement away from any programming that actually shows conversation or corresponds to social activity. Despite the surfeit of television news aired in our new millennium, still very little in the way of rational debate takes place. We do not hear conversation that proceeds logically, with each participant making sure he understands what the others meant by their contributions and vice versa. Instead the presenters talk at each other and at the audience. They make the same points *ad nauseam*, either with a devilish grin if the person feels that he has trumped his opponent, or with a crafted mug of disgust if he is succumbing to base fears and distaste for thought itself or at least encouraging his viewers to do so. The example that Postman uses, a discussion led by Ted Koppel including Henry Kissinger, Robert McNamara, Elie Wiesel, Carl

Sagan, William Buckley, Jr., and Brent Scowcroft, about the prospect of nuclear war, prompted by the made-for-television movie *The Day After*, would be impossible to imagine in the current cultural environment. Yet, even that discussion, according to Postman, did not see its participants talking to each other, responding to others' contributions.

Discussion on television is not "discussion as we normally use the word" – perhaps, three decades later, as we no longer use the word. Referring to the *Day After* program, "There were no arguments or counterarguments, no scrutiny of assumptions, no explanations, no elaborations, no definitions. [...] When a television show is in progress, it is very nearly impermissible to say, 'Let me think about that' or 'I don't know' or 'What do you mean when you say...' or 'From what sources does your information come?' This type of discourse not only slows down the tempo of the show but creates the impression of uncertainty or lack of finish. [...] Thinking does not play well on television. [...] There is not much to *see* in it. It is, in a phrase, not a performing art" (90; original emphasis). In Postman's time, we worried about the difficulties involved in trying to have real debate and conversation take place on live television. Now we worry about the ability to have debates or conversations at all, as we talk past each other, assume the other's bad intentions, or do not assume that the other has given prolonged, serious thought to any subject. "The single most important fact about television is that people *watch* it. [...] And what they watch, and like to watch, are moving pictures – millions of them, of short duration and dynamic variety. It is in the nature of the medium that it must suppress the content of ideas in order to accommodate the requirements of visual

interest" (92; original emphasis). What happens, then, when that medium follows us around, when the suppression of thought occurs persistently throughout the day? That is, when one always watches, never acts. At the close of the second decade of the Twenty-First Century, we already have copious evidence of the effects of humans watching screens instead of looking out into their surroundings; the deadening effect on public gatherings (gyms, concerts, bars, farmers' markets, festivals) at times is palpable. Is it any wonder that a zombie television series is one of the few cultural artifacts of this era to cut across sociopolitical and ethnic boundaries?

The succession of images, the need to move on to the next story or show, to keep the stream going, is the central pivot of Postman's idea that television is inherently unserious, and as such impairs our understanding of social and political reality, and my own argument that it now undermines any cultural pursuit. A report about a significant event is followed by an advertisement or a report about an actor or singing star. Postman asks how a reader would respond if the author of a book inserted advertisements in a middle of a paragraph. While, as noted above, the rise of electronic books has not yet led to such intrusions, many present-day readers might accept them. The expectation that the producers of a cultural product will "maintain a consistency of tone and a continuity of content" will perhaps disappear from recorded documents of cultural production, insofar as they are consumed in a televisual environment.

Continuing to connect the implications of the T.V. Stream for social discourse to its potential effects on

culture, Postman's claim that television does not inform, but rather provides disinformation, seems useful.

"I am using this word almost in the precise sense in which it is used by spies in the C.I.A. or K.G.B. Disinformation does not mean false information. It means misleading information—misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information—information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that television news deliberately aims to deprive Americans of a coherent, contextual understanding of their world. I mean to say that when news is packaged as entertainment, that is the inevitable result. And in saying that the television news show entertains but does not inform, I am saying something far more serious than that we are being deprived of authentic information. I am saying we are losing our sense of what it means to be well informed. Ignorance is always correctable. But what shall we do if we take ignorance to be knowledge?" (107-8).

In other words, while a deluge of information has always been the source of disinformation or misleading information, the confines of print formats turned that information into *leading* information. As uncomfortable as we claim to be with authority and discipline, we must accept on faith the conclusions reached by scholars and journalists whom we have good reason to trust. They provide us with the knowledge needed to be good citizens, assuming that we embark on our own pursuits

wherein we verify their findings. Ideology comes into play here, and political platforms that voters demand accordance with on the part of their representatives. In contrast, our current standard features voters complaining about the actions of their leaders, claiming to be independent, then going to the polls and voting for the same candidates from the same parties every time.

Consider a random number of articles from a disorganized selection of encyclopedia volumes; the reader would not know exactly how reliable the information is. This problem is multiplied many times over if one were confronted with a mass of articles from books, newspapers, and academic journals, as well as advertisements, pamphlets, *et cetera*, without any indication of their provenance. This is also to say that all information, or content, ultimately becomes disinformation. It loses its context, its place within a network of signifiers that suggest to its users that it is trustworthy. Now, on the Web, consider only Wikipedia. Not only is there the common topic of its unreliability caused by the possibility of there being multiple, unknown authors of each article, but there is the lesser-known issue of all of its rejected content remaining online on each article's History page. Even when the Wikipedians have restricted editing of a certain article to a few of their own, the rejected edits from before that restriction remain, including those done only in jest or as sabotage. For the advocates of Wikipedia, the constant weighing of the truth, the need to question all content, seems exciting and liberating; it is, for them, a sign of intelligence, their willingness to accept the challenge of adjudicating statements made to them, not only from "the media" but also in daily human interactions. They may not say this outright. No, they want the articles to

be the truth. But their approach suggests how vacuous their ostensible reasoning is. Wikipedia excuses all authors from any negative effect of not being honest or thorough in their research, other than having text removed from its lowly position as part of a Wikipedia entry. It puts its content immediately into the context of disinformation, not waiting for the gradual changes that render past information meaningless to contemporary users, instead embracing it, encouraging it, speeding up the process. You could act as they say you should, accepting their articles as the closest approximation of the truth currently available, or you could act as they seem to suggest you should, find the inevitable errors in the document, become a Wikipedian yourself—and create errors yourself, either due to the laziness that made you use Wikipedia in the first place or sheer malice.

The Actual Context, the Actual Event

The transformation of information into disinformation wrought by Wikipedia corresponds to the broader tendency of companies like Facebook and Google to break information provided to them back down into data. Because their principal means of making money is collecting data about their users and then selling it, they have little interest in helping users transform contributions to "social media" into something resembling knowledge or wisdom. Let's draw out as an example the murky world of online customer reviews, as documented at a myriad of sites like Trip Advisor, Yelp, Amazon; and the related phenomena of question-and-answer sites like Stack Overflow and Quora, these sites overlapping significantly with message boards. Whether posing a question or reading others' questions, one can

glean a great deal of information from these sites. Perhaps one could combine the information in such a way as to create a cohesive whole. Alas, knowledge can hardly be expressed in the confined spaces offered by the T.V. Stream. Meanwhile, Google and what-not are turning the information back into data, but not data useful for their contributors.

Virtually no-one suggests that we can rid the world of companies that maintain data about individuals and sell it; provided that the individuals' privacy is respected, such businesses can be seen as inevitable, if unfortunate, developments of digitization and advanced capitalism. However, anyone who pretends that computer giants like Facebook offer an effective means of communication with friends, family, and one's larger community, taking the awkward, roundabout form of an interactive televised entertainment, is kidding themselves. Experian does not run a news wire, and Aetna does not have a record label or film-production company. Yet for some reason many people seem to have no problem with an array of internet-related companies using information that we provided them as a way of deciding what news stories to read, and others, for some god-awful reason, are excited that Amazon now broadcasts T.V. series or that Apple wants to be a record label.

The "tech" companies' propagandists and, at times, critics, when they turn their attention to creative processes of writing and making music or video, adhere to fantasies. We are supposed to revel in the ability to share opinions and information about ourselves online, whereas before we would have no outlet with which to express ourselves freely *sans* institutional and commercial barriers. We conjure and celebrate the young

writer able to dismiss the arbiters of taste as represented by newspapers and the book trade, or a young filmmaker bypassing Hollywood studios with his hand-held digital devices. However, this temptation to state what always comes first and easiest, to bypass channels that are more formal, also discourages us from attempting anything greater than a post or a clip, that is, a snippet of what could have been a rough draft of a cohesive work. Those formal channels of communication that the Digital Utopianists scorn, such as periodicals, academic conferences, newspapers, governmental functions, and political meetings, indeed insist upon certain conditions that participants must meet in order to participate. No easy divide exists between the professional and the recreational world; you do not get to toss aside standards of competency and seriousness when outside the schoolroom or work place. We all dearly need editors, peers, and collaborators besides the faceless horde of "social media" button pushers.

The set-up created by computer/ internet companies for releasing and distributing music borders on the absurd. Musicians, for example, do not use the Web and streaming services to bypass record labels and other arbiters of accepted style in favor of direct contact with listeners; the Web and streaming services have replaced all of those middlemen. The likes of Spotify and Soundcloud do not work entirely in the background, as a pressing plant would (or, in the book world, binderies and printers). Their brand gets stamped on your music. They receive their cut, whether in the form of advertisements also attached to your music, user subscriptions, or shares of your download sales, much like labels, distributors, and retail outlets took theirs.

Why do the administrators and programmers of computer/ internet companies want such direct involvement in cultural activities? Are they envious of artists? Regret that their own work is tedious and sensually stultifying compared to actual cultural production? Yes. But such attitudes are also common among those in any cultural trade who work for artists and entertainers—the hangers-on, handlers, groupies, agents, nightclub staff. What is different in the case of "tech" workers is that they are ensnared in the T.V. Stream constantly, and are force-fed ideological drivel about internet and digital technology taking over most of life's tasks. Undoubtedly, they also see such beliefs as bulwarks against the middleman role of their profession. If they did not believe such nonsense, they would happily take a background role, accept that their knowledge of web design and computer programming does not qualify them to do every known job in the world, and focus on what they do best. That is, they would become professional adults.

In the absence of that, they content themselves with being Digital Utopianist-Dystopianists, perhaps skim a new "e-book" about Digital Minimalism. The contributions to "social media" made by Pod People, on the other hand, pathetically mimic the actions of celebrities. Celebrities (entertainers or politicians, the latter increasingly being merely the former) take to Twitter easily, because their posts there are little more than edits, or exact copies, of what are otherwise known as press releases, or can be interpreted as snippets of interviews or press conferences, decontextualized, since of course celebrities prefer pre-arranged questions in the first place. The non-celebrity employs "social media" to make pointless transitory comments about important

matters, and nonsense comments about nonsense things, as if their "social" world cared about them in the same way that millions upon millions succumb to outright idiocy when reading gossip about celebrities. This imitation of celebrityhood in turn only enhances the tendency of Americans to identify with the rich, and thus feel discomfort about governmental measures crucial to a successful democracy.

When a connection on Facebook "likes" one of our posts, or makes a comment upon it, or shares it, we can see that person becoming a part of our identity taking form digitally. Perhaps we can see these "friends" of ours becoming one of the tiles of a photographic mosaic built atop one of our profile pictures. The resulting mosaic, we could call our Mirror Face. The problem, though, is that we would never see the full mosaic, because its content is quickly replaced by new content, as we keep clicking and scrolling to earn our keep. Even worse, if we do not allow ourselves time away from the T.V. Stream, to pursue creative outlets and foster original thought, is there really a self upon which to build the mosaic? In other words, if we constantly consume due to the mobile devices attached to our bodies, do only the products that we consume exist? The Dystopianists would say at this point that we must have a discussion of Phenomenology. They would not take the time to read any Phenomenology books, and those conversations would be interrupted by their tiny T.V.'s, but they would feel good about themselves anyway.

The results of Postman's unserious television are the same as the result of Boorstin's extravagant expectations and the pseudo-events that satiate them and my own update of their analyses, emphasizing an excess of information in audio-video form: a Narcissistic

embrace of our own ignorance, or in other words being addicted to base, regurgitated bits of entertainment to such an extent that we cannot escape the T.V. Stream. To escape would rob us of the fundamental belief that we hold dear: each of us is free, powerful, and compelling, when in fact nearly all of us are condemned to only fleeting knowledge of our world, the barest glimpses of any attempt at genius on our part, and by our own standards of beauty and health are fated to be ugly and gluttonous. Boorstin's summation brings forth another take on the idea of the Mirror Face: "One of the deepest and least remarked features of the Age of Contrivance is what I would call the mirror effect. Nearly everything we do to enlarge our world, to make life more interesting, more varied, more exciting, more vivid, more 'fabulous', more promising, in the long run has an opposite effect. In the extravagance of our expectations and in our ever increasing power, we transform elusive dreams into graspable images within which each of us can fit. By doing so we mark the boundaries of our world with a wall of mirrors. Our strenuous and elaborate efforts to enlarge experience have the unintended result of narrowing it" (255).

The comparison of "social media" to Narcissism has become common, probably excessive. For Boorstin, Narcissism manifests itself most perniciously in the replacement of heroes with celebrities who are themselves pseudo-events. Their status, being known, perhaps initially for some feat or skill, but eventually only for being known, leads to further pseudo-events used by journalists and celebrities' agents to justify and enhance this mere well-known-ness. Actors, athletes, and the new breed of "reality" stars of documentary T.V. series are all given an enormous amount of attention, by

their fans and detractors alike, well after they have done anything genuinely popular or impressive (sports stars, granted, can be forgiven for not repeating the triumphs of their youth). This might seem like a charitable act on our part, since celebrities get advertising and promotional deals based on this extended popularity of their personalities. Alas, when it comes to what we hope we can still without sarcasm call the finer things in life (the arts, academic knowledge, theology and philosophy, food, sexual play, conversation) we must also dwell on the unpleasant fact that obsession with celebrities' lives does next to nothing to improve the lives of non-celebrities, except of course to entertain. This entertainment never ends: whereas an artist can only produce so much work, celebrities' lives can constantly be turned into new pseudo-events and more audio-video amusement.

Modern celebrityhood reflects a society where the mass dominates the individual, and these finer things are reserved for the elites. Boorstin argues that much of what truly astounds us now, and elicits the kind of appreciation that we once granted warriors, priests, and other leaders, is in the realm of science. "The heroic thrusts now occur in the laboratory," at times accomplished collectively via large organizations. Of course, "the work of profound thinkers has seldom been more than half-intelligible to the lay public," but in the age of democracy, we want the masses to understand, or excuse their misunderstanding with further celebrations of the scientific genius of the few. "In the great areas of human progress, in science, technology, and the social sciences, our brave twentieth-century innovators work in the twilight just beyond our understanding" (54-55).

For the likes of Boorstin, the folk, as opposed to the mass, produced creative work that continues to enchant and inspire us; the mass, though, seems to produce what it is told to produce. I would both expand and edit that argument: traditional arts, both folk and classical, made demands upon the artist (telling the same stories or singing the same ballads that their ancestors already worked with; mastering the rigorous technical standards of European and other classical musics) but in meeting such demands, the individual artist found a way to express both himself and his people. The utter lack of standards for participants in the "reality" entertainment offered by the T.V. Stream, in contrast, encourages the individual to catch viewers' attention quickly, likely in a sensationalist manner.

The Medium's Message

For Web designers and computer programmers, the online world is still one of vast, extraordinary depth of meaning. For most users of the Web and "smart" phones, it has become television, crap culture. Devoid of significant meaning. When discussing perhaps one of the most brilliant of all examples of television's meaninglessness, the scandalous "televangelists" that were a sensation throughout the 1980's, Postman comes back to an argument central to his entire thesis: "It is naive to suppose that something that has been expressed in one form can be expressed in another without significantly changing its meaning, texture or value" (117). This notion, that the medium shapes content and meaning, that the dominant forms of information in any given society change the way that its inhabitants think and act, is obviously important to understanding the effect of the T.V. Stream in our present situation, which

is also to say: the way in which the T.V. Stream has turned into such a cultural disaster. Again, though, we emphasize the distinction between the broader medium of digital audio-video, not itself a problem, as opposed to digital audio-video transmitted as an unending stream (broadcast, satellite, or internet) so that it is constantly available. No matter how many files downloaded or streaming services subscribed to, music does not prosper in the televisual environment of the Web and computer interfaces, except as background music. One can see a similar misplacement of cinema in the recent shift in emphasis to television series on the part of young filmmakers lacking the name recognition required to get financial support to make a feature film. Context matters, which means that, in the arts since the rise of phonography and photography, medium and format matter as well.

When considering the possibility of genuine religious content on television, Postman comes back to his second crucial argument. "The screen is so saturated with our memories of profane events, so deeply associated with the commercial and entertainment worlds that it is difficult for it to be recreated as a frame for sacred events. Among other things, the viewer is at all times aware that a flick of the switch will produce a different and secular event on the screen. [...] Both the history and the ever-present possibilities of the television screen work against the idea that introspection or spiritual transcendence is desirable in its presence. The television screen wants you to remember that its imagery is always available for your amusement and pleasure." In the same way, the T.V. Stream offered today by internet technology does not create a space in which the arts thrive, certainly not when any non-video medium is

transferred to its awkward fittings, especially absurdly the tiny T.V.'s taking over society. Dwell for a moment on Postman's idea that "introspection or spiritual transcendence" makes no sense, is simply not possible, in the presence of T.V. screens (120-1).

The Real Dystopia

What then becomes of a world wherein we cannot escape that presence? What happens when text comes to us – all reading and writing is done – via screens? Even worse, on interactive screens where the viewer easily succumbs to the prospect of a better source of entertainment, or just another quick fix of facts, awaiting him at the next click or scroll. In Postman's world, that of broadcast television networks and only limited cable-T.V. connectivity and channel options, "the average length of any story is forty-five seconds." In ours, it's potentially zero. Postman again: "While brevity does not always suggest triviality, in this case [that of television journalism] it surely does. It is simply not possible to convey a sense of seriousness about any event if its implications are exhausted in less than one minute's time. In fact, it is quite obvious that T.V. news has no intention of suggesting that any story *has* implications, for that would require viewers to continue to think about it when it is done and therefore obstruct their attending to the next story that waits panting in the wings. In any case, viewers are not provided with much opportunity to be distracted from the next story since in all likelihood it will consist of some film footage. Pictures have little difficulty in overwhelming words, and short-circuiting introspection" (103; original emphasis). In his time and place, Postman was too harsh. Of course, a viewer could consider the implications of any information newly

attained via T.V. by turning the T.V. off. However, in the new millennium, this is not as likely, as many of us justifiably do not turn off their phones because we fear missing out on emergency information.

Shifting our scope back again from the social to the cultural, since we do after all face Digital Utopianists insisting that all music, text, and video can be streamed (allowing for the clutter-free antiseptic, polished living spaces that their mental restlessness and psychological terrors seem to require) we will end up with nothing but crap or nothing at all. The important act, as far as the developers of online and televisual "content" are concerned, is the movement, the swiping, clicking, tapping, scrolling. If the users are moving so quickly that little to no "content" is necessary, all the better! Imagine flipping through an endless number of the blank channels below channel 2 on your old T.V. set, the ones set aside for V.H.S. or D.V.D. inputs. Imagine millions upon millions of humans doing the same thing, staring at their tiny T.V.'s, walking and driving through a city, fixated on the movement of blank screens or static "snow," waiting for content. Their waiting conquers all other tasks. They stop and stare, do nothing else until they die. Any speculative fiction of a future derived from our current situation presents exactly such a scenario.

As ridiculous as this may seem, consider the overall effect of the technologies described by Postman, from telegraphy to television, on our daily habits. Reading a portion of a book, listening to a musical album or two, watching a film... these are tasks hard enough given the divers social tasks that an individual is obliged to attend to, by family, friends, work, or health needs. But the want for a creative recourse grows precisely due to these obligations, and creates the mental energy

needed to partake in cultural affairs. Beginning in the Nineteenth Century with newspapers filled with information obtained via the telegraph, then into the Twentieth with radio, and finally to the present with T.V. and its computerized extension, that energy has been increasingly deflated, drained, and filtered throughout the day, leaving little need for the level of engagement demanded by books and music, the cinema and theatre.

When we consider what kind of social interactions or events which we could participate in, or cultural artifacts to enjoy and study, we also consider our obligations, so to speak, to our favorite television programs and Web sites, without even consciously realizing that we are doing so. We are not just experiencing social relations being continually disrupted in real time by mobile televisions. Though that is an issue of much concern, clearly so in the case of distracted automobile driving, we are much worse off than that issue suggests. We find ourselves indirectly limiting our commitment to, say, an arts scene, a political movement, a philanthropic effort, because of the specter of an alternate activity persistently protruding into our minds, the comforting aura of the screen's warming glow.

5. The Troll Culture of "Social Media"

This new catch-all term used for the Web, plus the "apps" that do on portable devices what Web-based programs could do just as well (but not in the form of disparate interfaces that draw more money—swipes, clicks, taps, scrolls—out of you) largely has positive connotations in contemporary society. This is unfortunate. We use "scare" quotes because the term, social media, is generally used oxymoronically. The digital, computer-based media referred to by the phrase, social media, are decidedly, obtrusively cultural. They are examples of documented, preserved forms of (granted, in some cases social interactions but mostly) cultural production. To borrow and alter a ridiculous phrase making the rounds ("the internet of things"—computers are not things?) they are the culture of things. A medium used almost entirely for social purposes could perhaps be called social. Even then, when its products can be recorded, however primitively or partially, they become culture. For example, when certain U.S. presidents taped their conversations on the old "dumb" telephones. The counterargument, you could make: what some refer to as social media are indeed used primarily for social purposes and that, as with telephone conversations, users make contributions without considering the implications of their contributions being documented, copied, and commodified.⁷ You would be wrong.

⁷ Granted, those who develop and maintain the Web sites and computer programs identified as social media seem to want users not to engage in critical or retrospective thought regarding their contributions, precisely to increase the number of contributions and the number of clicks and scrolls enacted in the process of making them.

Telephone conversations, pre-digital, were rarely recorded. While most users of the T.V. Stream are aware that their contributions are documented, we often lack the authority or technical know-how needed to stop those contributions from being documented. Besides, users generally don't want to delete their contributions. We eagerly take on the cultural tasks that these "social media" allow us: the image that we would like others to have of us, via personal profiles and links delivered with an ostentatious yet hackneyed officiousness; snippets of thoughts, quickly dispensed with and forgotten; and of course lots of videos and photos, ambiguity masking the inability to capture with words what the images make us feel. We are aware of this cultural body of ours taking shape in the virtual world. We want to make this digital version of our life attractive and self-helpful, and thus spend a lot of time organizing our "inputs," even as the designers of many sites and "apps" gushingly claim they can organize them for us.

Commentators on "social media" in the press and even in academia unsurprisingly study the social effects of these new media, as if trying to deflect any consideration of them as culture. Especially if they can find righteous protestors able to disarm the powerful with their tiny televisions. They continually remind you to use them as if you were a penitent performing religious rites, an employee always being monitored, or a patient on medication. Unspoken ideological biases and the unyielding strength of popular opinion overwhelm the writings of mainstream media's acolytes of the major "tech" corporations. David Carr, the *New York Times* columnist who received copious accolades upon his untimely death in February, 2015, for example.... When he expresses reservations about our

"screen-obsessed lives," adds caveats assuring us of his own embrace of every latest gadget. He can attempt humor when talking of the outdated non-internet world, saying he can't open a C.D. case without a crowbar, but, alas, what do we not hear any jokes about? Say, the absurdity of people constantly looking for electrical outlets for their devices; the inability of services like Spotify or Pandora to provide even a semblance of accurate or consistent information about music artists despite the easy availability of such information; the lack of uniformity in the presentation of web sites across different browsers, even after 20 years of the Web as a mass-consumption product—indeed the hideousness of so many sites, most of all Amazon, the hoarder's nightmare. As noted previously, among the young and "connected," or the older and wealthy, you can laugh at newspapers or any sort of physical "legacy" media, and the guffaws of easy arrogance will come spewing out, the arrogance that comes from disparaging low-data (low-class) options. Laugh at "the internet," however, and watch the furrowed brows and serious reservations of the committed ideologue emphatically beat you back. Talking to the Pod People at this point lets you know what it was like to have a Communist friend in 1956 who still defended Stalin, who would not stop talking about the future to come, the future that would retroactively justify the absurdity of the present.

A fair counterargument, acknowledging the pointlessness of the endless commentary and pointless video of "social media," would say that it all merely reflects the transient nature of much of our daily lives, that most of the information which we deal with at any given time is indeed worthless, not worthy of preservation. In other words, "social media" represents a

growing embrace of the notion that culture is not distinct from society. Like the argument above (that the "social media" are indeed used primarily for social purposes) this argument falters because it relies upon a social-culture binary, which, we should state very clearly again, does not help us at all. Obviously social interactions are always infused with culture: the ways in which people dress, talk, and move represent or reflect the influence of cultural products (clothing, dialects, dance) that ideally will be documented, or social acts (conversation, hiking, attending a concert or play) that potentially could be documented, even if only for academic or commercial purposes. In stark contrast, "social media" are mostly not consumed socially. Individuals watch a screen that only rarely is watched by others. In fact, personal computers and "smart phones" have made us all less likely to watch audio-video content at the same time and in the same setting as others.

Meanwhile, newer formats or interfaces for "social media" interaction push users away from older models that encouraged an authorial presence or required greater effort to maintain, such as "blogs," personality profiles on social networks, and Web "one-point-O" personal sites, toward those asking only for shorter, constricted, and fleeting contributions, such as comments or, on "smart" phones, no stated thoughts whatsoever: rudimentary content created with the movement of a finger or wrist. We see, in the shift from My Space to Facebook, a rejection of curated material being fixed semi-permanently on an individual's page in favor of both that page and the site's home page consisting of regularly-updated feeds of data. Users have seen their control over these feeds progressively taken over by the site's controllers, with greater censorship and

more advertisements. Consider also the difference between the older model of “chat” rooms, wherein a separate space was entered into by the user, or, rather, a unique experience was chosen by the user much like he chooses to go to the cinema or listen (and only listen) to an album or read a book; and the newer model of “chat” performed by “texting,” wherein the user does not feel obliged to respond to others’ texts because “chat” functions have been taken over by, or made to look more like, “e-mail” applications. Indeed, the movement toward a larger amount of our social activity taking place asynchronously via the filter of television screens liberates individuals from direct personal interactions, with their greater obligation upon participants, at the expense of an erosion of civility and communality. When you call a land line of a neighbor or someone else who you know to be at home, the recipient of your call deciding not to answer is itself a significant piece of information. When you call a mobile phone (if you ever still do that), the recipient has little obligation to respond. You’re always potentially talking to yourself. Again, we have a “lose-lose” situation here: fewer social interactions, more crap culture supposedly superseding those interactions.

As much as we attempt to present the T.V. Stream as an extension of T.V. itself, even looking more strictly at cultural production, the “lose-lose” dynamic is at work. We lose the “cool” nature of television, as McLuhan defined it: the potential for individualization and permanence makes the T.V. Stream too “hot” for mere television. After all, a significant portion of the T.V. Stream still consists merely of image-text and, in its interactive nature, demands “content” from us in exchange for what it offers. At the same time, despite the

“social” nature of our contributions to the T.V. Stream: conversation-like, fleeting, and with hindsight often embarrassing or at least pointless; those contributions take on cultural form, are preserved (haphazardly). Because the T.V. Stream grows as more “social” interactions take place in its realm, but it comes to you via cultural products, “tech” companies and “social media” adherents demean culture that exists independently of, or contrary, to daily, money-making society, culture that will last, and thus could block potential future commercial transactions. Again, the corporations, the government, want information about you, social data, but they must present content to you, and get you to make content, that takes a cultural form, to draw you in.

Consider, as a counter-example, a few exemplary public intellectuals who used television to spread ideas while enhancing their own fame (and sales): say, John Berger or Gore Vidal. Do transcripts of their T.V. appearances sit beside their books on our shelves? Certainly not. Perhaps they should, in edited form. Alas, as many of these kinds of figures have not only been banished from the airwaves but are also deceased, and did not leave behind any strong models for how to deal with their contributions to non-scripted television, a lot of great material, if not floating around the Web, is tucked away in archives or lost entirely, much like our non-scripted (but editable) “social media” sputum. At least those public intellectuals had time to write the books that have lasted, because the T.V. appearances (which have not) were few and far between. Because they knew those television appearances were secondary, the exact opposite of our current cultural scene. They did not have tiny televisions on their person constantly.

At the same time, a contradictory development takes place: the angry, at times moralistic, demand on the part of major internet-technology companies, especially Facebook, that their users not be anonymous, that they assert their online identity for any and all to see. This demand of course arises from their need to make money: to track users as we move across the Web, and, with mobile devices coming into the equation, our movement in the real world as well, in order to generate the data that advertisers want. Considering the cultural implications of this shift, it dramatically departs from the broad trend in popular music, most of all in Hip Hop and the multitudinous electronic dance genres, away from given names toward pseudonyms. Even worse, the excessive documentation of one's daily life made possible by the latest recording devices and encouraged by "social media" will in turn encourage the unfortunate trend towards non-fiction writing, worst of all the confessional memoirs that have marred contemporary literature. Are we experiencing a growing inability to understand ourselves, and the loved ones and acquaintances that take up most of our lives, as part of a larger society, as archetypes and symbols, or alternately, on the social side of the equation, as citizens whose actions are necessary to accomplish radical change?

Do we resign ourselves to ignorance and hopelessness in relation to larger forces, taking refuge in endless commentary about them? Even that's increasingly a rarity. Besides the trend toward merely swiping, clicking, tapping, and scrolling, much of the content of "social media" has come to be relentlessly positive in nature, well suited to its ultimate task: selling stuff; or, at its extreme opposite, barbarously negative and defamatory—yes, the Trolls you've heard so much

of— which unsurprisingly encourages more activity on "social media," thus generating more money. Indeed, for many, anodyne online contributions appropriately counter the negativity of much of what they encounter on the Web, or just hear and read about others encountering. The same business leaders and commentators who herald "social media," and insist upon all of us abandoning pretenses to privacy and anonymity, claim that we must take such a course of action because of the lamentable, negative nature of many of the almighty users' contributions to those very media. These people at times publish the anti-social, often sensationalistic and blatantly inaccurate, and generally either sarcastic or sadistic, contributions of the Trolls, yet they refuse editorial responsibility for doing so. Instead, you must take responsibility because they claim comments and posts made on their site are "social," taking place in the proverbial public square.

This argument— how about Troll Denial?— brings us back to the Web's destruction of the music trade. When those working for the companies that peddle "social media," as well as many commentators on the phenomenon, deny that the content of "social media" is primarily cultural, they are not only refusing to accept the responsibility for having published Troll comments that they claim to dislike (or working for outlets that publish them) they are also reinforcing inconsistent, at times illogical, arguments that have been made about copyright infringement on the Web and unfortunate aspects of copyright law in the U.S. that have enabled internet companies to allow or encourage the digital pillaging of creative work. The aforementioned legal scholar Siva Vaidhyanathan, despite being a strong voice for reform regarding the study of media and specifically

Google's widespread effects on the dissemination of knowledge, in his book *The Googlization of Everything* makes jumbled, at times specious, claims about copyright as it pertains to the illegal downloading of audio files. First of all, we should say that, as he, Lawrence Lessig, and others have argued, copyright indeed goes too far in some situations, stifling creativity and discouraging the seeking of new information. The infamous Mickey Mouse-Sonny Bono copyright law of 1998 undoubtedly allowed for excessive extension of both individual and corporate ownership of copyrights. In other aspects, though, copyright law does not protect artists and businesses that they work with to publish their work commercially. In both that 1998 legislation, the earlier 1996 telecommunications reform, and subsequent court cases, the U.S. government has not held internet-service providers responsible for their users engaging in criminal activity. Vaidhyathan argues that this rule has a precedent in that "phone companies cannot be held responsible for crimes planned or executed using the phone." Insofar as a company like Verizon provides an internet connection, that is, a public utility of sorts, this comparison holds. But Google, via YouTube and its blogging platform, or Facebook, or any online publication that allows reader comments, are all publishing content. The internet connection being used to access publishing platforms is demonstrably different from the publishing platform itself. A utility is not making any sort of editorial decision: the same connection allows for the user to post at YouTube, which cares not a whit about releasing to the world an inferior copy of an artist's work, or at Vimeo, which does. Why should the law consider whether an automated system published, say, a user's crappy video copy of an artist's

work, instead of an individual human purposely choosing to bootleg that work?⁸

We have become so accustomed to Web sites necessarily allowing user contributions, as if this editorial/ curatorial choice on the part of publishing entities has become a sacred right guaranteed to all humans who can get their hands on an internet-connected computer, we do not consider how strange it is to offer a product whose final form one cares little about. Virtually every journalist is put into a position of having their work besmirched with pointless comments from supposed readers. Or search sites find themselves having to edit the results delivered by their automated processes, examples of which Vaidhyathan provides: the search for "Jew" turning up neo-Nazis and so on. Are we really so addicted to the easy, quick fix of searching for information via these kinds of search "engines" that we genuinely think of them as a long-term solution? The sleight of hand, whereby pressure to conform encourages us all to believe that companies like Google or Facebook should not exercise control over what they publish, leads Vaidhyathan unwittingly to undermine his own arguments about copyright. He inexplicably conflates an indexing tool like Google Search having to make copies of the web sites, on one hand, with peer-to-peer networks making copies of commercially-available, published music, on the other. Much like he could not understand the difference between a utility and a publishing company, here he inexplicably cannot

⁸ And let's not even get into the crucial issue of "net neutrality," wherein nearly all of the Digital Utopianists, as well as many of their harshest critics, do make the distinction between a utility-like internet connection and the kind of content transmitted via that connection. That is, they make the distinction when it's convenient for the "tech" companies whose propaganda they seem to have swallowed whole.

understand that Google or Bing do not copy web sites in order to offer bootleg versions of those sites.

Both Vaidhyanathan and Jaron Lanier, like many commentators purporting to offer critical, skeptical views on "social media" and the companies behind such services, also tend to exaggerate the influence of Google, Facebook, Netflix, and the like. Start with the fact that a significant number of searches performed at Google or Bing are for sites that users already know exist, or for which they already know the U.R.L. but are simply too lazy to type it in its entirety. We all do this, it's understandable. Alas, it also makes money for these companies and inflates the statistics measuring usage of their sites. They would never let outsiders know to what extent (to the extent they could determine) users of their sites are not actually searching for information but rather using the search function built into Web browsers' address bar to access previous sites visited, call up bookmarked pages, or find sites for which they know a second-level domain name but don't want to bother guessing the top-level domain (*i.e.* one remembers an online periodical called *Amodern*, doesn't remember that it's at *admodern.net*) or for which the exact second-level domain could be one or all of several possibilities (the *Independent* newspaper is at *independent.co.uk*, not *theindependent.co.uk*). If these searches were removed, how would our reliance on Google compare to our use of sites like Quora? Meanwhile, vague notions of "big data" have become a favorite trope of commentators, giving an aura of scientific value to the data being collected about users, as if the major "tech" companies were comprised of computer scientists engaged in a grand experiment instead of shady operations serving as the online equivalent of highway billboards.

Another hypothetical: what if the Yahoo Directory or similar indexes of the Web had remained more active, and been turned into programs that could function much like Google or Apple's Siri guessing what you want based on what you type? Though Vaidhyathan talks of the concept of public failure, wherein the inability or unwillingness of public institutions to provide basic information services, forces us to rely on search sites, he does not consider, given the limited extent to which these services are provided, that users are simply too lazy or uninformed to use them. College students often are not even taught how to do proper searches using indexed subject terms and Boolean operators. Vast storehouses of information on federal-government sites go unused except by academics and those with highly-specific information needs. Why do we expect companies like Google to organize information adequately when the principal selling point of its original product, its search "engine," comes down to its users being lazy and not wanting to devote time and effort toward seeking information? Perhaps Google and their ilk lack any serious interest in the matter. For example, obsessive digitization of books, with little care for who wrote them or what they contain, hardly suggests any desire to read them.

Ultimately, the delusional, grandiose claims about the effect of "social media" mask the worthlessness of the contributions made by Trolls (not to mention that much of the Web remains devoted to pornography). Being tied to our personal, real-life identity, and thus subject to self-censorship so as not to offend and get thus get dismissed as a Troll, our contributions to "social media" are cast in a way that denies their cultural import, especially their permanence, despite that, even with all the chatter about immediacy and accessibility, a video

post or quickly-written message essentially created in real time is not necessarily going to be received quickly or at all. (As we have seen, this often-asynchronous nature of online communication gets ignored in favor of an excessive emphasis on interactivity.) In fact, this strained effort to erase the differences between daily social interaction and the Web, to take away all anonymity and perhaps, eventually, all privacy, only goes to show that "social media" contributions are no such thing; they are, rather, crap cultural products that cannot be given away for free. No matter how much consumer branding and corporate propaganda present them as dynamic social interactions, quickening the pace of information exchange, keeping us abreast of what we need to know and rerouting power from its sanctioned channels (nevermind that most of this exchange takes place via companies that always were, or at least now are, supported by governments and other corporations) users themselves seem quite convinced of the literal worthlessness of their "social media" input. Crap culture may be fun at times (as an American of a certain age, I love an occasional Frito-stuffed Hot Pocket, vampire movie taking place in the Star Trek universe, or visit to the mausoleum housing Whitney Houston's embalmed body) but it is also quite, indeed, Trollish. And it better be cheap.

The uncomfortable truth of the Web, revealed slowly as it devolved into "social media," is that nearly all of its "content" is as worthless as contributions made by the Trolls. In fact, as virtually every human who has been online has contributed to "social media," we are all Trolls. Some are just worse than others. If you only listen to music streaming online, or only read the disemboweled Web versions of newspapers and magazines, or only watch films streaming online, or

don't read books at all, or find out about all of the cultural events that you attend from "social media"—congratulations! You're a Troll! You're enacting in the cultural realm the equivalent of what Trolls, as we commonly define them, do in comments sections and message boards all over the Web. You're saying to the creators of film, music, literature; journalists; activists who do more than sign online petitions; honest civil servants: what you do is as worthless as a You Tube video, disposable, replaceable, garbage. Especially if you convince yourself that you're an informed citizen or an intelligent, observant human, that all the information that you need is available online, when in the past those who didn't read books at least admitted who they were: the functionally literate, if not illiterate. As "social media" provides a way out of social interactions, streaming/Web technology provides a way out of cultural engagement, to watch television all the time instead. And one thing that the Digital Utopianists are right about—the one thing that does not need to change in the current definition of the term—is that Trolls are anti-social and likely deranged. "Social media," in common parlance, represents the light that trolls darken. In fact, Trolls are not an exception or deviation. They are the epitome of the T.V. Stream, the true face of the specious concept of "social media." They are not a blemish that will disappear with careful washing; they, for the most part, are what "social media" offers.

The Troll persona is terrifying because the Trolls take advantage of the most significant of the Web's distinctions from older, ordinary television: its interactivity, allowing the users to talk back, make their own contributions. They do so in a way that makes interactivity seem regrettable. As for the Web being a repository for all culture and knowledge, an infinitely-

adaptable tool to make daily life easier... the Trolls disclose the contrary truth: the Web offering little more than bad facsimiles of culture, "social media" being more of a trifling annoyance that people accept like they accept small talk, or at times a bullying obstacle that people resign themselves to like they resign themselves to violence committed by young men. The Trolls let the Digital Utopianists know that their contributions to political discussion, cultural life, (real) social milieux are at worst delusional gibberish and at best recycled jargon, representing submission of their thought, and increasingly their individual identities, to the dictates of the advertising which supports the feedback loop of low-quality product in the Wal-Mart of the mind. Troll contributions to "social media" offer a counterargument to both Digital Utopianism and its earnest, fretful Dystopian counterpart: digital, online technology will not allow all culture and knowledge to be available at the click of a button; indeed, the very notion of anything of value being easy to access and understand shows that "social media" equals crap, disposable, forgotten culture: Again... laziness, immediate gratification of base desires. Are the Trolls really so hateful? Or are they filling a valuable role? The definition of a troll, from Robertson Davies's novel *The Manticore*:

"Yes, spook is a very good word for it—another Scandinavian word. Sometimes a troublesome goblin, sometimes a huge, embracing lubberfiend, sometimes an ugly animal creature, sometimes a helper and server, even a lovely enchantress, a true Princess from Far Away: but never a full or complete human being. And the battle with trolls that [Henrik] Ibsen wrote about is a good metaphor to

describe the wrestling and wrangling we go through when the archetypes we carry in ourselves seem to be embodied in people we have to deal with in daily life."

If we understand this crap culture as part of society, instead of being a magical media-as-society bypassing the crucial step of documentation-codification-commodification, then the enormous amount of time that many younger persons with ample leisure time and disposable income spend in front of a screen (estimated at more than half of their waking hours) becomes more than just a fascinating, perhaps disturbing, characteristic of the new century. Does the society referred to in the phrase, social media, still exist?

6. Bring Back the Gutenberg Revolution

A broader historical perspective regarding technological change and its effect on cultural practice and production may soothe our fears but fails to resolve them. The rise of printing, the Gutenberg Revolution, contributed to the decline of an international Latin-based theological and scientific community spanning West and Central Europe. We can picture an intellectual of the Eighteenth or Nineteenth century lamenting the rise of nation-based communities which divided peoples by language, the members of those communities promoting national literatures (not so much in place of Latin or the culture surrounding it, as against the threatening imperial languages English, French, Spanish, Chinese, and Russian) at the expense of an international, and potentially global, language that could more effectively ensure the value and perseverance of culture.

The Gutenberg Revolution, in addition, can be said to have destroyed our ability to memorize large amounts of literary information, especially when written in verse, ensuring the effective demise of what remained of oral literature. However, its effect on writing was obviously, and massively, positive. In turn, the Twentieth Century saw cultural revolutions brought by photography and phonography, which certainly eroded our reading and writing capabilities to an extent, but had extraordinary additions to make: the creation of a new intermedia form, the cinema; and of course that vast new realm of music noted above: recorded, often not intended to be performed live in real time.

In the long run, though, in this new millennium, cheap audio-video recording and documentation has impaired our appreciation of both cinema and sound,

and in its wide availability made possible by the greater amounts of data being sent to and fro, threatens humanity with widespread illiteracy. If the Web did cause an increase in reading, it did so only temporarily. Meanwhile, those increasing number of high-quality audio files that the Digital Utopianists herald (and probably never get around to listening to) represent only a half-solution, as one also needs high-quality playback systems to appreciate them.

Granted, the T.V. Stream rose to pre-eminence almost coinciding with a worldwide economic slump, the kind that can have a depressing cultural effect as well; nonetheless, the years since, roughly, 2006 have been a cultural wasteland of previously-unimaginable proportions. In these years, a new kind of cultural system took hold, wherein multimedia conglomerates that began as internet/ computer companies, generally bestowed with clever abstract titles (Google, Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Spotify, or "GAAFS," to keep up the coyness factor) push their way into the fields of cultural production, the predominant result being the pauperization of artists and others who produce "content." Those "tech" companies that did not understand the need to "switch lanes," most of all Microsoft, continuing merely to make products with which to make things, instead of making or at least owning the things themselves, have been increasingly ignored in recent years even as they remain economically significant. Microsoft's name, after all, is quite literal: software for microcomputers. Reminds one of Standard Oil, General Electric. Even the big multimedia conglomerates started out as companies with such basic names: the Columbia Broadcasting System, the Radio Corporation of America. From there, we get to

companies named after men, like Disney. The next step is the approach taken by book publishers, record labels, periodicals, artist collectives, music ensembles: evocative, at times metaphorical, names that encroach upon the meaning of the words used, like the companies would come to encroach upon fields of cultural production. Apple is not an apple or Apple Records (as they simply had to rub it in that they wanted to destroy the music industry) and Google is not a googol or Barney Google. Either way, what do we expect to have happened when a few large corporations run by tasteless buffoons begin to have a major effect on our culture?

Digital phonographic and photographic technology and its dissemination via internet technology are the culmination of the development of printing, not its replacement. In other words, computers and digital technology do not constitute a new revolution, succeeding the Gutenberg. Marshall McLuhan concurs at least on print's significance: "printing from movable type was [...] the major break boundary in the history of phonetic literacy, just as the phonetic alphabet had been the break boundary between tribal and individualistic man." The concept of break boundaries comes from the writings of Kenneth Boulding. They are points at which an "overheated medium" flips into its "peripety or reversal" (39). But in both McLuhan's and Boulding's formulations, the content of a new medium is a previous medium (*e.g.* speech is the content of print, print the content of films, films the content of digital audio-video). This set-up not only seems of limited value for the examples that they give, but does not apply to the T.V. Stream. First of all, in one major sense, scrolling through a digital document brings us not forward in time but backward to—simply enough: scrolls, which preceded

books and were rightly considered, in comparison, to be cumbersome, discouraging reading. The codex format replaced scrolls a full millennium before Gutenberg, meaning that the attempted push of readers toward scrolling on a digital screen takes us back 1500 years. Second, as Postman explained, television takes as its content all previous media, even those it is not suited for.

Our perspective here is more limited than McLuhan's, intended for the few who pursue lifelong cultivation and appreciation of the arts. What should be paramount for them: books, film, and magnetic tape documented and reformulated the arts, allowing for works that only existed in handmade form, or in real time, or as single objects, to have a second life as commodified, recorded, and copied versions of themselves. Digital audio-video on the Web has entranced us with the novelty of its speed and accessibility, its main contribution, and we have gravitated to its products out of inertia. The problem being: it reduces those commodified, recorded, and copied versions of art to bits, nothingness. The question remains: what will be left after the novelty of constant television has worn off? When will we stop watching, reorganizing, regurgitating, and watching those fragments time and again?

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In the final chapter of the novel, *I Am a Cat*, by Natsume Soseki, the leading male characters, as witnessed by the novel's narrator, an unnamed cat, engage in a rambling talk about modern life. Two characters, Sneaze (the pitiable disrespected teacher) and Waverhouse (the goading Socratic intellectual), dominate the conversation with a shared vision of the

future, indeed one hundred years into it, that begins with the former's rebuke of individualism run amok in the new, Westernized Japan of his time:

"The heightened self-awareness of our contemporaries means that they realize only too well the wide gap between their own interests and those of other people; as the advance of civilization daily widens that gap, so this so-called self-awareness intensifies to a point where everyone becomes incapable of natural or unaffected behavior. [...] We impose constrictions on ourselves and, in that process, inhibitions on society."

For him, modern civilization's supposed "moderation of the combative spirit" is a lie. Another character, Singleman, responds positively with standard Eastern ("life is suffering") arguments: "In the old days, a man was taught to forget himself. Today it is quite different: he is taught not to forget himself and he accordingly spends his days and nights in endless self-regard. Who can possibly know peace in such an eternally burning hell? The apparent realities of this awful world, even the beastliness of being, are all symptoms of that sickness for which the only cure lies in learning to forget the self." Sneaze pursues this line of thought, suggesting that in the future most men, on this path of excessive attempts at self-control, will choose suicide as a best option among the possible causes of each human's inevitable death.

Waverhouse envisions humanity's future on a more-serious tack: Our expanding individualism, he argues, will ultimately destroy both love and beauty. As

Japan has already followed the Western model in extended families no longer residing in the same household, especially due to the clashing egos of father and son, eventually the liberation of women will destroy marriage. For our purposes here, though, his brief analysis of what's to come of beauty is more important:

"The irreversible development of individuality will bring ever greater demands by individuals for recognition of their singular identity. In a world where I and you both insist that 'I am I, and you are you', how can any art endure? Surely the arts now flourish by reason of a harmony between the individualities of the artist and of each appreciative member of his public. That harmony is already being crushed to death."

Turning to his poet friend, Beauchamp, he adds that in this future, "No one at all will read your poems. Not because your poems are bad and you are a bad poet, but because individuality has intensified to such an extent that anything written by other people holds no interest for anyone."

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The narrator of Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, roughly seventy years later, has this to add:

"Graphomania is not a mania to write letters, personal diaries, or family chronicles (to write for oneself or one's close relations) but a mania

to write books (to have a public of unknown readers).

"Graphomania [...] inevitably takes on epidemic proportions when a society develops to the point of creating three basic conditions: (1) an elevated level of general well-being, which allows people to devote themselves to useless activities; (2) a high degree of social atomization and, as a consequence, a general isolation of individuals; (3) the absence of dramatic social changes in the nation's internal life.

"But by a backlash, the effect affects the cause. General isolation breeds graphomania, and generalized graphomania in turn intensifies and worsens isolation. The invention of printing formerly enabled us to understand one another. In the era of graphomania, the writing of books has an opposite meaning: everyone surrounded by his own words as by a wall of mirrors, which allows no voice to filter through from outside (127-128).

"By writing books, a man turns into a universe[...], and it is precisely the nature of a universe to be unique. The existence of another universe threatens it in its very existence.

"Someone who writes books is either everything (a unique universe in himself and to all others) or nothing. And because it will never be given to anyone to be everything, all of us who write books are nothing. We are unrecognized,

jealous, embittered, and we wish the others dead. [..]

"One morning (and it will be soon), when everyone wakes up as a writer, the age of universal deafness and incomprehension will have arrived" (147).

In the Twenty-First Century, though, everyone does not aim to be writer; instead, a video star, though in fact a Pod Person constantly viewing his audio-video waste product on screens. The excessive individualization of culture predicted by Soseski's fictional characters is now mediated by television. Via Postman and Boorstin, we have answered the inquiry suggested by Kundera's narrator's musings: one must wade deeper into the waters, now murky, of the print era to find out exactly how the T.V. Stream has come to dominate both entertainment and journalism in the computer era and, with that outsized role, caused much wreckage.

7. Television and the Post-Modern

Additional historical explanations of the effects of the T.V. Stream—perhaps the T.V. Deluge is a better term at this point—may help us begin to answer the question that demands attention at this point: do we want to encourage, demand—coerce?—ourselves to moderate, in some cases severely limit, usage of digital audio-video? Especially intriguing is the role that television plays in theories of Post-Modernism as developed by Marxists and non-Marxists alike. Perry Anderson writes in his *Origins of Postmodernity* [1998],

"The development that changed everything was television. This was the first technological advance of world-historical moment in the post-war epoch. With it, a qualitative jump in the power of mass communications had arrived. Radio had already provided, in the inter-war and war-time years, a far more potent instrument of social capture than print: not merely by reason of its lesser demands on educational qualification, or greater immediacy of reception, but above all because of its temporal reach. Round-the-clock broadcasting created potentially permanent listeners—audiences whose waking and hearing hours could at the limit be one. This effect was only possible, of course, because of the dissociation of the ear from the eye, which meant that so many activities—eating, working, traveling, relaxing—could be performed with the radio in the background. The capacity of television to command the attention of its 'audiences' is

immeasurably greater, because they are not simply such: the eye is caught before the ear is clocked. What the new mechanism brought was a combination of undreamt-of power: the continuous availability of radio with an equivalent of the perceptual monopoly of print, which excludes other forms of attention by the reader. The saturation of the imaginary is of another order. [This recalls Boorstin's notion that television "encompasses all forms of discourse."]

[...] "If there is any single technological watershed of the postmodern, it lies here. If we compare the setting it has created to the opening of the [Twentieth] century, the difference can be put quite simply. Once, in jubilation or alarm, modernism was seized by images of machinery; now, postmodernism was sway to a machinery of images. In themselves, the television set or the computer terminal, with which it will eventually merge, are peculiarly blank objects — null zones of the domestic or bureaucratic interior that are not just inapt as 'conductors of psychic energy', but tend to neutralize it. [Frederic] Jameson has put this with characteristic force: 'These new machines can be distinguished from the older futurist icons in two related ways: they are all sources of reproduction rather than 'production' and they are no longer sculptural solids in space. The housing of a computer scarcely embodies or manifests its peculiar energies in the same way that a wing shape or a slanted smokestack do.'

[Anderson is quoting Jameson's *Signatures of the Visible* [1992].]

[...] "On the other hand, image-resistant themselves, the machines pour out a torrent of images, with whose volume no art can compete. [...] Since the seventies, the spread of second-order devices and positionings in so much aesthetic practice is comprehensible only in terms of this primary reality. But the latter, of course, is not simply a wave of images, but also—and above all—of messages. Marinetti or Tatlin could erect an ideology out of the mechanical, but most of the machines said little. The new apparatuses, by contrast, are perpetual emotion machines, transmitting discourses that are wall-to-wall ideology, in the strong sense of the term. The intellectual atmosphere of post-modernism, as doxa rather than art, draws many of its impulses from the pressure of this sphere" (87-9).

Capturing Jameson's pessimistic take on Post-Modernism in recent years (which followed a similar trajectory on the part of Ihab Hussan, another early developer of the concept) Anderson writes, "the postmodern release from the bonds of the modern Sublime [...] has tended to degenerate into a new cult of the Beautiful" where "art appears to sink back once again into a culinary condition." That is, one arrives at the aestheticized urban and domestic spaces noted by Mark Simpson, in his book, *Saint Morrissey*, about the Manchester-born singer: "Pop music is of course over. It isn't needed any more. What is the point of an aesthetic

rebellion against the world if the world has been aestheticised? How can you deploy your youth to refuse the world—or demand it—when the world is much better looking than you could ever hope to be?" (28). That world discourages artists from remaking it, charting new vistas in the language we use, how we see and hear, instead demands decoration and adornment. Pretension is out, prettiness is in.

"Second order" too is a crucial concept. Commentary on things, not the things themselves. Then commentaries on the commentaries, and commentaries on the commentaries on the commentaries *ad nauseam*. Obviously, to some extent all art is as such (*a la* Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence") but the T.V. Stream pushes us into the position of commenting too quickly on what has been received. We do not seem to ponder the effect of having automatically at our disposal a means of accessing others' commentary on all sorts of issues. For example, before the Web, when one bought a new music album, that person might have read a review. But television programs rarely discussed a new work of art. Our proverbial listener was usually left to develop his own opinion, and to wonder what others thought. Now he can instantly find others' opinions, and moreover mystical mathematical averages of these opinions at sites like Metacritic and Rotten Tomatoes (which generally fail to explain how they compute numerical scores for reviews that do not give any such number or school-style grades). This is another way that constant televisual amusement creates a constant push not to think.

As for those of us old enough to recall the time before the Web grew more prevalent in our lives, we lose the habits that allowed for appreciation of the arts. When

you go to the store, you buy a product, not second-hand information about it. That is, you bought a music album, not an encyclopedia article about the artist in question. You took chances, certainly; no mountain load of customer reviews sat in the store awaiting your perusal, discouraging you from anything and everything except more customer reviews. More obviously, we see the same development in the incessant desire to take photographs with "smart" phones at concerts and other public events, distracting from the event itself, and essentially creating a commentary on the event, in the form of the crap culture of the T.V. Stream.

Again, the trolls! Always ready to disperse a quick negative retort to an article whose author can be said to have at least tried to produce a text with a modicum of literary value. Or make pointless comments, often repeating each other *verbatim*, so that those who have read the article and want to contribute a valuable comment are put off by the thankless task of sifting through the hundreds already there. True Trolls do not care if they repeat someone else, they do not care to respond coherently to what has been said before, they just keep going, keep the stream flowing. The Troll mentality, writ large, would create a mass of alienated, amoral, sexless, and often excessively-drugged drone-humans who callously dismiss all collective effort and interpersonal activity. Those who try – to foster spiritual gatherings, artistic pursuits, philanthropic endeavors, or any sort of attempt at community – get the Trollish sneer, the same sort of all-knowing-know-nothing cynicism we see from political-news parody and "social media" activists.

While I prefer Anderson's earlier skepticism about even the concept of Modernism, as delineated in his

essay on Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, 'Modernity and Revolution', the need to challenge those projecting a universal history – imposing it – of the digital utopia spanning the globe, does suggest the saliency of a return to Modernism. Indeed, in my estimation, it requires an alternate teleological perspective, that of resisting the effects of vast amounts of information made available quickly and easily. Jean-François Lyotard's own later works seem to accept that the grand historical narratives supposedly made obsolete by Post-Modernism had come back with a vengeance upon the end of the Cold War. The U.S., despite its own contributions to the annals of racism and imperialism, ultimately decided upon a classist version of authoritarianism that subjects the poor and at times the middle class to abject financial servitude and unpredictable restrictions on civil liberties, both impelling self-censorship. The T.V. Stream's attachment to the human body is the representative cultural product of this wayward conservatism that began to develop in the 1970's and matured in the Aughts. It drives humans to be always consuming cultural products as they go about the very movements and thoughts that make them human. Pod People are willing to stop their thinking, their interpersonal moments, their production and appreciation of genuine culture right there in front of them, in favor of money makers telling them something else is ready for them to look at so that the money makers can make more money.

Contrast this with the effects of industrialization. Similarly, it put humans into situations where they were nearly always consuming, but the constant products were water, electricity, coal. While the usage of electricity in a particular household suggested the possibility that

cultural products were in the process of being consumed, these grids or networks did not learn many details of such situations. With many commentators and academics, as noted above, apparently confused by the distinction between a public utility and a publishing outfit, the cultural consumption of any human can to some extent be tracked. This will inevitably lead to censorship and persecution. This is what the Digital Utopianists want when they dream of everything streaming. They want you watched at all times, the Huxleyan prophecy. These are the unwitting results of the pursuit of profits and comfort, instant gratification needing to be instant because we never received gratification: the Wal-Mart model.

The professed lack of ideology on the part of the U.S. government and its aim to eliminate barriers to economic freedom and social progress, and on the part of "tech" companies and their sycophants, disingenuously libertarian as they are, should not preclude us from understanding that the T.V. Stream is pushing us in a definite direction, guided by specific ideologies and actively opposed to competing world views. These ideologies, in short, are that making money is primary, indeed that all actions pertain to making money – that is, you do not even stop making money so as to enjoy what you can buy with money already made, so that the wealthy who cultivate refined tastes in varied quirky pursuits seem increasingly a rarity – that making art is simply people doing things they enjoy to make money, often by crafting a cult of personality that enables the artist merely to play the role of the artist. On political matters, these ideologies demand that the world will continue on its march of imitating America at all costs, making politics mostly about managing the medical and

ecological problems created by more humans consuming goods at the level which Americans have enjoyed since the 1950's.

And let not the right wing, or any sort of neo-aristocratic anti-modern intellectual movement, kid themselves with an ironic embrace of a new world order that would make feudalism seem egalitarian. As much as our new elite will appreciate and patronize fine cuisine, new technologies, the ever-booming trade in the visual arts, or for that matter any cultural pursuit that also serves to satisfy their desire to appear on the vanguard of the culturally respectable, they will not do so to the same extent and with same authority as royalty and aristocracies did in the pre-democratic past. First of all, they face the same distractions from the T.V. Stream that the rest do, because time, again, is the dearest commodity of all, and the same money that allows for time away from screens also makes those screens bigger and more plentiful, with more options at higher quality. Secondly, and more obviously, the demands of tradition, essentially religious in nature, hold little sway in the post-Enlightenment epoch. In short, without vibrant middle *and lower* classes, and the popular, commercial arts that they support, all culture will wither away, simultaneously with the ideal of democracy.

8. Sounds and Sights

In the quest to define an ideological perspective opposed to the dissemination of vast amounts of information quickly and easily, we must disclose a deeper understanding of how we relate to sound and moving images. After all, we propose to reject addictive products that have the full ideological and economic backing of the U.S. government and many leading global corporations. First, another defense of the T.V. Stream should be broached, interpreting the dominance of short-form video (television, "Webisodes," "viral videos") in a broader historical, and positive, light. Perhaps with the greater sense of connectedness with others, known and unknown, art that seems tied to social settings, more fleeting and random, also seems more pertinent and enriching. Like the theatre is more social than the cinema, the T.V. Stream seems to be closer to the very reality it constantly intrudes upon. This new art form has overwhelmed us precisely because it is attuned to the "online" lives we now have. Consider especially the quicker turn-around in production of television programs compared to movies, a facet made into great satirical art in the case of *South Park*. This is a return—a rerun, if you will—of the counterargument above: the erosion of the society-culture divide as a positive development. A point of view that ignores the T.V. Stream's destructive force upon society, assuming its oxymoronic "social" nature and an unhelpful society-culture binary. In addition, the writings of Sherry Turkle and others have shown the corrosive effects of the T.V. Stream's newly-won preeminent place in our lives. That is, we do not have second, additional lives, we still have the older, first life, corroded and defaced.

To start with the plainly obvious, television is not another venue for cinematic screenings or an extension of cinema, as heard from those announcing a Second "Golden Age of Television," convinced as they are that soap operas are novels; or that if a T.V. series looks like a movie, it must be good. As noted above, the word, film, has changed meaning over time, no longer only referring to analog photography. Naturally, the word would come to pertain both to video tape or digital video, leading to the term, digital film, which originally would have seemed a misnomer or contradiction. This is not a problem, as this essay is not an argument against digital video *per se*, nor an argument against digital technology more broadly. Another way of saying all this is that the fascination with moving images in many ways remains strong. We see this as potential buyers sample the latest products (Ultra High Definition and so on) on giant screens at the few "brick and mortar" stores left selling them. Unlike with pre-digital technologies (from flip books and Magic Lanterns to Technicolor film and V.H.S.) digital video is not rare or special. The quality and size of images grab our attention, allowing for a role, even if a minor one, for the cinema.

The term, digital film, beckons you with an elision of the physical: forget that physical film spools, comes to an end. Though photography is split in two based upon its form: still and motion, not upon its format: digital or analog, the term, cinema, maintains a strong connection to analog motion photography's origin in physical film being projected onto a screen, and its effect on the viewer in the form of the seen succession of still images and the unnoticed black spaces between them. The human eye's persistence of vision is crucial to physical film, allows for its continuity, its narrative capability. Digital

photography, and the T.V. Stream, refuses closure to the eyes' temporary capture by film, takes the habits created by persistence of vision in an era of film scarcity and runs with it, exploits it, pushing the viewer into endless video excess. In contrast, physical film keeps the filmmaker on edge, anticipating the coming end of a shot, even aware, if so inclined, of how many frames are flipping by, most obviously with animated film, where the viewer knows that each still was drawn individually, requiring a choice about its content, even if that choice was largely made before the fact and not by the illustrators themselves. The viewer can place himself in that position, seeking to understand and critique the choices made. With tape and digital video, such concerns wither. Without the novelty and rarity of film caused by limited technology (if not film itself, which multiplied dramatically in the 1910's and '20's, and certainly not video tape once it became a mass commodity, then the means of distribution, copying, and archiving) video never ends, will not let us go. Of course, all segments and episodes making up a video stream are of finite length and were created with a beginning and an end, existing on their own at least to some extent. The creators of some of them even hope that ultimately their product will be appreciated as such. Within the stream, though, the viewer need not accept these separate identities; rather, is discouraged from recognizing them.

The term, cinema, though it allows for digital-video or video-tape motion photography, also appropriately emphasizes the art's distance from television. Like theatre, cinema gets its name from the place where consumption takes place. Granted, in theatre, the performance constitutes a significant part of the final form of the work in question, whereas in cinema

a singular screening is rarely important (usually test screenings perhaps showing a rough edit). On the other hand, cinematic screenings do take place in darker settings, further removed from the currents of everyday society, than theatre or opera. When we strive to create a "home theatre" in our living spaces, we turn out the lights. The lights tend to stay on during television, though to be fair that practice seems to be less prevalent as more T.V. shows take on the trappings of feature films. Either way, the not-at-home cinema might come to be, if not rare, at least strongly associated with the Twentieth Century, that is, with the history of a certain technology: analog photography.

And more on that "golden age of television".... Put aside for the moment that comedy, the unserious, works best in television space. As Postman argues, T.V. land is decidedly profane. Even the finest of the recent serial dramas, like *The Wire*, hardly measure up to cinematic greats. To point to a few recent examples, visual splendors like *Synecdoche, New York* and *Enter the Void* would never get made as original television productions. And the finest serial dramas of the past, say, *Hill Street Blues* or *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, or – going back further – *The Defenders* or *The Fugitive*, lack the far-reaching aesthetic bravado of Fellini films or the rigorous formalism of Godard. If you are convinced that a Netflix Original or the latest rant from a righteous T.V. political commentator will in the long run be held in the same regard as, say, *3:10 to Yuma* or an I.F Stone report, I have one question: (with apologies to John Lennon) are you a "victim of the insane" – the valorization of the transient and the common? Or is it merely standard American anti-intellectualism?

At its most "arty," especially in Europe, cinema distinguishes itself from the "small screen" in its emphasis on single shots, and at times in using a limited number of shots as well. Most conspicuously, two filmmaking feats: Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* and Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark*, both consisting of one extended shot. T.V. Stream addicts lie when they assert that the fast pace of video-ized information pummeling their consciousness reflects their hectic life, because for decades so many of us have bemoaned the slow pace of many long films precisely because their representation of reality cuts too close to the bone, too close to the murky, inexplicable development of both our personal melodramas and broader societal events. Much like humans act dumb to make the artificially intelligent seem smart, they quicken the tempo of their thoughts to match the quickness of the infinite accessible video of the T.V. Stream. After all, the persistent temptation of streaming audio-video would falter if "real-life" events demanded our attention as quickly and consistently: say, quite morbidly, if one gets in an automobile accident due to sheer incompetence precisely every time one's eyes were wandering toward a tiny television. More positively, let us say objects of remarkable beauty intrude at every moment that the T.V. Stream was about to, yet again, capture our attention. Of course these are impossibilities.

As the editors of *N + 1* (the publication that comes closest to capturing the intellectual zeitgeist of the Twenty-First Century like the *Partisan Review* did for the 1930's or *Ramparts* for the 1970's) remind us in one of their collectively-signed editorials: "Scholars tell us that since the twin revolutions of the 18th century – industrial and political – a general sense of time speeding up has

been recorded with regularity in documents of all kinds. Political and technical progress somehow meant that people were always losing ground, unable to keep up, out of breath" ("Too Fast, too Furious", no. 21). This feeling in turn leads to both political hopes of freeing humanity from the burdens of work and, in recent years, "clickbait" journalism telling us how to save time or at least focus on the right tasks the right way. Alas, new technologies come along, making us feel evermore stressed about time, even as those technologies do indeed grant (to the fortunate) more free time than our ancestors would have ever dreamed of. While *N + 1* draws upon the work of the German academic Hartmut Rosa to argue that social changes accompanying or caused by technological change create the felt need to keep pace with all of these changes by altering our habits to mimic their speed and flightiness, we feel the need to add that this observation shows how our opinion of new digital audio-video media being significant, and impossible to counter, is an opinion we chose to have. It was not imposed on us.

As the *N + 1* editorial notes, in the Nineteenth Century, novels were considered to be mostly cheap entertainment for the masses, especially women. Then in the Twentieth Century they became high art, and now appear doomed to be a fringe interest. A similar fate could befall long-form audio-video entertainment. Cinema is slow, television is fast. This adage complements another: you choose cinema, television chooses you. Digital film, producing more still shots than ever before (because digital always produces more content of all kinds than ever before—as noted above, more books, more music, more films) encourages us to keep filming, keep producing, keep the content coming

and going, so that those who control the flow can make money, and all of us who are captivated by the flow can keep asserting that this constant entertainment reflects how our senses and mind work. Again, art is not supposed to be like this, like us. It is supposed to transcend us, allow us fleeting glimpses of how such transcendence feels. It changes the way we perceive with our senses, that is, enables us not to be constrained by our senses but to expand our uses of them. One only needs to decide to focus upon a still photograph after having stared at moving images for a short time in order to begin to grasp how extraordinary the gulf is between the two experiences. Sitting at a bar, one's friends, strangers, and the bartenders during a lull in social activity stare at their tiny T.V.'s and the regular T.V. planted atop a cabinet behind the bar's northern end. One person moves his sight downward to a photograph taped to the cabinet, refusing to screen-stare any longer. The photograph that this person has already seen many times, an image that in most films would be one of thousands, must be studied closely to maintain the interest of its newly-fixated viewer. The person notices parts of the image that he had ignored, makes guesses about the context in which the photograph was taken. This is to gaze as well as to view. One does not have the option to gaze when casually watching audio-video, though admittedly with digital technologies pausing and moving through the feed are easier. In philosophy and history, the gaze suggests lack of freedom, in that an awareness of the gaze directed at us comes when we learn that others study us and judge us. It also suggests oppression, especially in the case of the male gaze upon women or the imperialist upon the other. When we take the next step—when we progress—onto cultural

pursuits, we return others' gazes, we reformulate the world of sight and sound for our purposes. We take control. If we only view, if we only are gazed upon, we fail as artists and as humans.

To gaze, however significant a victory it is, nonetheless is not to read. To what extent is the human ability to read impaired not merely by shortened attention spans and competing audio-video entertainment, but also by the lack of practice that each of us gets in moving our eyes *across* a line of text as compared to remaining stuck at a certain spot? When watching moving pictures (and when listening to music, at least sound recordings) we are geared to stay focused on the center of the action. Reading does not ask this, indeed is impaired by such an approach (even as certain speed-reading techniques encourage the eye's focus remaining on the center of the page). Alas, if we really wanted to appreciate the unique nature of reading, and as many argue its superiority over the appreciation of other arts, we could turn to Oscar Wilde's 'The Critic as Artist', still unsurpassed on that topic.

Being audiovisual, not just aural or visual, allows for cinema's life-like quality, and much of its narrative power. But when we move from the cinematic to the merely televisual, and to the portable televisual, constantly following us, tracking us, even if we do not invite it onto our person, the presentation of life-like cultural content persistently distracts from both life itself, objectified by culture, and art-making tasks that liberate objectified objects into subjecthood. As the common expression goes, people are the product (to be more precise, data that users provide constitute part of the product) and those people transformed into product become less interesting, less substantive, mere objects

instead of subjects: Lanier's Siren Servers slowly suffocating cultural production by demeaning its makers.

Contrast this with music, which even at a loud volume can blend in with, complement or supplement, the social interactions it accompanies more effectively than audio-video. Music works great as background filler. When we must interact with real humans (the horror!) at least we can have part of our trusted audio-video signal playing along. Though this attribute of music impairs its competition with other arts in the hyperactive interactive world of today, and the use of music as ambient noise is hardly encouraging to most musicians, even when they ironically embrace the practice, in the end this aspect of music serves a useful purpose, alleviating the inevitable, positive boredom of human lives that are not constant struggles to survive, the very boredom that ideally leads to creative pursuits. Video, on the other hand, rather than make this boredom more palatable, eliminates it. Or, perhaps, the boredom becomes negative, because rarely is the audio-video we use merely to take up time characterized by either artistic merit or practical use. Music, though, can be artistically value and still drift into the ambiance. This eternally-unsettled relationship between sound and sights when they accompany each other warrants further study.

Sound recording may prove to have been a victim of its own aesthetic feats. As listeners grew accustomed to the elaborate studio productions of many of the most popular of Rock and other artists (say, Pink Floyd, ABBA, U2), they also recognized the impossibility of replicating those concoctions in a live, performative setting. Cinema, on the other hand, took a photographic route away from theatre, and rarely returns. Imagine if

filmmakers were expected to go on tour and present theatrical adaptations of their latest movie. The Beatles hinted at an independent route for phonography, abandoning concerts, but in their separate careers returned to the stage, though extremely rarely in Lennon's case; X.T.C. followed suit more permanently, and Kate Bush for much of her career, but such choices are outliers when not made by the biggest band of all time. Only further afield, in experimental music, especially that which is primarily electronic, do we see artists rejecting live performance. Though listeners embraced recording experimentation to a (chronological) point (namely, up to the work of Björk and Radiohead), they over time evinced a disenchantment with the rigors of stereophonic reproduction in their residential settings, even mocking "hi-fi" enthusiasts, paving the way for the M.P.3's destructive revolution. The positive interpretation of this situation, noted above, is sincere in the case of those who genuinely love playing music, and seeing music played live on a weekly, at times daily, basis, but for many others is a bad excuse for no longer supporting the art form which they claim to love. For, these listeners remember the recordings; they were hooked by recordings, disks, tracks. Not generally music, but specifically electro-acoustic music. Then, unexpectedly, unwittingly, their own laziness and reflexive consumerist behavior led them to accept the degradation of that music. Why? Ultimately, once all the excuses are made and the liquor is bought, it's because they got too much T.V. to watch.

If you were to transplant a contemporary Digital Utopianist to the 1980's, rather than jumping into the budding world of digital video and computers, as you

may expect, they'd probably become crazed proponents of video tape, ignoring its obvious limitations compared to film by asserting that its convenience trumps all other concerns. The fact that few such proponents existed tells us a lot about the insanity of our times. Tape is hardly superior to film, and digital video is better than neither, even as digital technology might provide the best way to preserve and transfer copies of physical film. In a similar fashion, you may be better off recording music on magnetic tape, then distributing it via digital means, in stark contrast to the current hip trend of recording music digitally then pressing it to L.P. because "vinyl sounds better." But magnetic tape (and film) are not better because of the mystical authenticity that louts who learned that "vinyl sounds better" from the Web want you to celebrate, or because of the ridiculous notion that the mere fact of vinyl records being analog means that they provide a better capture of sound recorded on analog media. They may be better if they add some texture and nuance to recordings that dearly need such qualities, but more likely because they force the artists to work with less, rehearsing more in a live setting beforehand and picking with care what overdubs to use, instead of dumping them all in a mix that has been aided by little actual mixing.

We will look back upon the Twentieth Century with a definite, poignant reverence for its phonographic and photographic arts as they developed through and out of their analog stages. The canonical works of those arts will come to hold a place akin to that of the writings of the ancient Greeks in Western civilization from Roman times until the Twentieth Century. That is, they will captivate listeners and viewers as obligatory yet tempting due to the precedents they established. Artists

working with digital audio and audio-video will look back, longingly, with great envy, upon these predecessors who had no choice but to work with analog methods that required greater effort and skill. They also will marvel at the intellect and study clearly evident, not understanding that they could probably develop the same mastery and devotion if they would turn their damned televisions off. Is that why the Trolls are really there? Why we are all Trolls—repeatedly making the same points about the same things so that we do not dare even to begin making art that could surpass the gods of the Twentieth Century? Centuries from now, we will still listen to David Bowie's *Low*, "waiting for the gift of sound and vision" that has long since been lost.

Transferred to the cultural world created by the T.V. Stream, we see these Twentieth-Century archetypes all of the time because of both the mediocrity that inevitably comes from being bombarded with an excess of the present (the endless video fragments) and the nostalgia culture that slowly developed in the final three decades of the century and has been in full swing since then. Many of those video fragments regurgitate and reference the analog past, and the nostalgia culture does not continue to progress chronologically: thus the thwarted growth of '90's nostalgia. It is instead inexorably and ironically tied to the era in which it began: namely, the Baby Boom and Second World War generations and their immediate ancestors and heirs.

Then there are deeper mysteries regarding how humans appreciate sound.... if listeners suffer from "noise fatigue" caused by extensive exposure to low-quality audio and the droning noises of our daily routines, why do we not hear of a similar "video fatigue"? Surely our eyes suffer too. We do hear of "light

pollution," and workplace guidelines ask to watch for eye strain. But those of us who enjoy electronic sound, avant-garde Jazz, or atonal modern Classical are often left perplexed when the same persons who viscerally reject harsh, unexpected sounds in music seem to enjoy the bombardment of their senses by low-quality video, even as that video is accompanied by dissonant audio that even Merzbow would find a bit tinny. Are they being unfair to music? Do we not trust it because it gives us nothing to look at? Does close listening ask too much of us in suggesting that sight and the other senses, if not be shut off completely, at least be thrust into a secondary position? After all, sight and touch and taste tend to command immediate, primary attention. Smell, though, is even less important, and it is similar to hearing in that it sometimes only commands attention when it encounters the offensive: cooked cabbage is funky after all. Then again, maybe addiction to the T.V. Stream means that we ignore the aural discomfort. Is this television's great feat? Getting humans to degrade their bodies, agitate their minds without realizing it? Alongside irrational politics and poisonous factory food, being a major cause of industrialized life's decimation of humanity, the negative counterpart to the comforts and medical care it provides? (More on that below.)

Is sound, especially sound alone, more difficult than.... But, wait, listen, hearken, if you will – what do we call the content of what we view, a term comparable to sound or at least corresponding to music or noise, either of which can be defined as the content of what we listen to/ hear? Is it sight? Vision? Those refer to the ability to see; their counterpart is hearing. As the narrator of Bowie's 'Sound and Vision' emerges from an apparent state of unconsciousness, "waiting for the gift of sound

and vision," he presumably means to say, "hearing and vision." There were things waiting to be heard and seen, to be listened to and viewed; the sounds and the sights were already there. Yes, sights; to some extent, that works. Image also suffices, but it's a broader term. We also have a term for sound art: music, lacking a counterpart with regard to visual arts. Wouldn't it be nice to have a single-word name for the visual arts, like "music" so evocative yet mystifying? Sound/ music is apparently quite special. Or especially arcane.

9. All You Need Is—Fast Food, Cigarettes, a Car, and a Tiny T.V.

If the tiny televisions that dehumanize such a large number of people in much of the world are not accurately described as "social media", a new dynamic form of interpersonal contact, but rather as crap culture, similar historical developments could provide answers regarding what to do with them. The best analogies have been identified by a few writers, here and there, but not thoroughly or with much critical insight. They are, first, the automobile; second, cigarettes; and, third and probably most pertinent, "fast food." These comparisons, needless to say, suffice to counter the gushing Digital Utopianist that lurks inside all of us. But they are not made in jest or for polemical or ideological purposes.

The comparison of mobile tiny computers to cigarettes works in part: excessive use is harmful especially in its cheapest, yet most convenient, forms. The musician Ian Svenonius tangentially broached this analogy in his satirical book, *Supernatural Strategies for Making a Rock 'n' Roll Group*.

"Smoking was another attempt to industrialize the person. With the magical factories heroically churning out smoke as they improved society, many people felt the need either to contribute or somehow conform. The cigarette, once lit up, linked mankind to the factories. When belching industrial towers were imported to the third world, the stink of smoke was no longer seen to be sexy to first-world workers and smoking

become essentially verboten, lower-class, and degenerate. [...] When cigarettes were deemed *déclassé*, they were almost immediately replaced with mobile cellular towers. The cell phone is a postindustrial version of the same thing. When a person uses a cell phone, it is an attempt to close the gap between them and their new gods, the computers. The smoke of the factory chimneys is replaced with the radiated satellites of the digital society" (120).

Not far-fetched if you have driven behind an old exhaust-flowing car with a smoke-blowing person driving it, both fumes puffing toward you. Cigarettes took a social practice, smoking, engaged in at moments of repose or perhaps as part of rituals, and made it common.

The comparison to automobiles works better and has been broached more frequently in commentaries on the "social media" phenomenon. Ideally, personal cars would complement communal transportation; and in areas where their usage has grown out of control, efforts need to be made to limit it. Cannot this model apply to at least tiny T.V.'s, if not all of the Web? Consider this proposition as applying to both cars and mobile phones: we should not need them absolutely or regularly in order to be successful members of society, especially as their excessive use can have horrible effects (deadening the senses and eroding all sense of cultural identity in the case of the latter, literally deadly in the case of the former, when so-called accidents happen—rarely genuinely accidental, actually the result of illegal acts by careless, hurried, and unskilled drivers). And yet, few who know the pleasure of being able to get in one's own car and

drive to a different part of the country in a day's drive (say, from the Quileute reservation to Big Sur, from the Driftless Area to Appalachia, from the suburban megalopolis Houston to the Okefenokee Swamp) watching the scenery and the junk culture of highway strips, would want to deny such experiences to others. And of course the tiny T.V.'s could aid us on such journeys. At the present moment, cars and computers have aligned in the form of internet-based taxi services, which the Pod People are convinced offer a sure way of reducing the number of cars (dependent of course upon low wages paid to the taxi drivers). In fact, they have found another way to ignore the need for better (that is, more ecologically sound and economically efficient) communal forms of transportation like buses and trains.

Comparisons of internet media to cars, however, could lend misguided support to the argument already discussed here: internet connectivity as a public utility, comparable to electricity and clean water. The ideal of internet connectivity, open to all users, provided by governments is worthy, even as it seems urgent precisely because of the failure of government offices and libraries, understaffed as they are, in providing accessible information. As more people come to see internet access as a human right of sorts, they could unwittingly push societies that do have stable public sectors further down the path of deregulation and privatization while creating the impression that a poor person in India or Africa in possession of a mobile phone no longer has any excuse for not becoming the latest uplifting Horatio Alger success story.

But the best historical analogy for understanding the proliferation of constant television is "fast food." In both cases, the key concern is product made available too

easily and too cheaply, and thus consumed too easily and too quickly. The T.V. Stream has not offered an original medium, it only debases audio-video. "Fast food" obviously did not create new kinds of food; it's just bread, meat, potatoes, sweets, corn—and salads topped with more meat. It offered food as a mass commodity. Its ill effects on our health have to do with our inability to use it in moderation (hinting that the T.V. Stream and "fast food" must both be compared to synthetic-drug use as well). So too are the ill effects the T.V. Stream has on our society and culture. The problem I foresee is not that we will fail seek to control those negative social effects (albeit, tardily and insufficiently) but that we will barely address the negative cultural effects.

Perhaps, when "fast food" was spreading rapidly across the land in the 1960's and '70's, its defenders asserted that this cheap, convenient food met their daily needs, that they required such debased sustenance for their fast-paced lives. In fact, a little bit of planning ahead of time allows most of us to avoid it. It is not a necessity. It was the beginning of the Wal-Mart model: convincing people they need more crap because the crap you already sold them was crap. These days, any given American willingly joins the chorus of condemnation regarding "fast food," yet its long-term effects remain. If we had not been so willing to join the hive mind, we would have resisted its pandemic-like growth more effectively, to the benefit of our health. The hyperbole about the T.V. Stream's salience to our lives is nonsense. Soon enough, like "fast food," it will cease being nonsense, become deadly. And as with "fast food," Americans seem particularly obsessed with it, deluding themselves that they're on the vanguard of global change.

Much like we have barely begun to learn how to ameliorate, lessen, or reverse the negative ecological and medical effects of processed, cheap food (especially as it entails dramatic increases in meat consumption)—in fact, despite all the new and accumulating knowledge about how to eat healthily and exercise effectively, those negative effects are spreading across the world—we too will require hundreds (thousands?) of years to begin to moderate or reduce the effects of constant T.V. on our minds. Working in tandem with growing obesity rates, both mass functional literacy (at best) and, on the other hand, extreme alienation from others as social beings and ourselves as physical living beings have become accepted side effects of progress and technology. Like automobiles, the T.V. Stream that we welcome onto our body drives us to an unacknowledged, masochistic embrace of the risk of death, except that the death will be mental, emotional, and intellectual—physical only in a roundabout way.

The T.V. Stream can and must be used in moderation. You must always be on watch. It never has your well-being in mind. Would the Pod People ever go back to what now seem like quaint glory days, of only linking to the Stream aurally? Reject the constant flow of audio-video? Fat chance (no pun intended); the popularity of "podcasts" (that is, talk radio), seemingly a sign of health for audio-only media, seems to this writer to be an indication that their listeners prefer to hear others talking at them instead of listening to music and that they resort to "podcasts" only because the subjects that they cover are too obscure to warrant the resources needed for audio-video production or the moment of listening comes when they cannot access any television (often while driving). What are the chances that they

would willingly restrict their use of the entire Stream? Low? If so, when will that change? When will we even arrive at the point that we're at now with "fast food," where we know of its dangers and some of us try to use it in moderation?

10. The Greatest Extinction

Of all the commentators on the predicament of “screen time” who attempt to adapt the critical sociological perspective of, say, Sherry Turkle or the neurological concerns of Nicholas Carr, to cultural pursuits, the essayist and novelist Will Self has proved most adroit. In ‘The Novel Is Dead (This Time It’s for Real)’, a 2014 essay based on a lecture and published in the *Guardian*, he correctly defines “a hallmark of our contemporary culture”: “an active resistance to difficulty in all its aesthetic manifestations, accompanied by a sense of grievance that conflates it with political elitism.” Of course, this has been a defining trait of previous eras (in the U.S., for example, during periods when political repression accompanied cultural stagnation: say, 1981-87). What’s different now is the strong link between a format (portable internet-based audio-video) and the stagnation, and that the format’s explosive debut came precisely at a moment (2006-9) when the U.S. was supposedly moving away from a disturbing period of reactionary imperialism and new police-state measures. As long as the format exists, what can overcome the stagnation?

Self asks the same question: If “the vast majority of text will be read in digital form on devices linked to the Web, do you also believe that those readers will voluntarily choose to disable that connectivity?” Except, though, that he focuses on the novel and to a lesser extent other creative writing. Buttressing his argument, he turns to McLuhan’s notion that “the content of any given medium is an irrelevance,” and finds, much as we did in our read-through of Postman’s magnum opus, that the gradual development of photography, sound recording,

and all of the techniques in the arts that they engendered, spelled doom for close, devoted reading of long texts long before the rise of the Web. At that point, presumably he seeks solace. Though this piece apparently faced curt dismissals in response, characterizing Self as too concerned with his own interests, as “stuck in the past” (like those dismissals of Lowery *et alia*), Self evinces some optimism about our current state, for example claiming that the new emphasis on live performance has “reinvigorated musicianship,” that literary culture has moved to creative-writing programs at universities, and, more recently, in a 2018 essay for *Harper’s*, that bold new forms of writing are developing exclusively online.

While I wish I could share Self’s sangfroid about a new literary culture birthed via “social media,” the always-on/ always-available nature of such formats leads to the question: Are those who read and write entirely via a screen actually reading and writing or are they creating images, which happen to include text, forming part of a moving-images entertainment for an audience of one? Ask yourself: after watching a film with sub-titles, do you get the feeling that you have read a play? Even in the case of an adaptation that hews closely to the original work, like Kenneth Branagh’s version of *Hamlet* [1996]? In some respects, we learn how to re-watch films, or re-listen to sound recordings, by reading theatrical works that could, if we had been so inclined, have remained real-time experiences, happening only once or, if more than once, with such a distance between the experiences that little remains in our memories from the previous times. When will this happen, though, if we do not turn off the moving images?

To read only on-screen is not the next step in the evolution of human culture; it will not lead to new

genres, new art forms, as Self suggests. Rather, it is another way of saying you do not want to read at all. Put simply, screens are not a medium designed for reading. Stop trying to make them so. Granted, not all writing works best in print form. And undoubtedly some remarkable work has been done online-only. The problem? No-one cares, however much we claim to. We have moved on to the next amusing “clickbait” equipped with pompous “likes” and emoticons. We have twenty-plus years of unique work created on and for the Web eventually being lost and forgotten, with little to no attention paid to preserving it in accessible yet authoritative form. The evidence is there. Alas, we have moved on to the next – (on that note, perhaps the legions of “tech” workers could retire from active duty, so to speak – shut down their sites and concentrate future efforts on preserving the recent past, for example, filling in holes at Internet Archive’s inconsistent collection, in order to play less of a role in the Twenty-First Century becoming the first years of the new Dark Ages).⁹

The possibility of an unpredicted literary culture existing somewhere in the vastness of “the internet” brings to mind that earlier Utopianist-Dystopianist argument that, with the rise of the Web and its attendant interactive communication platforms, its frequent users are doing more reading than they otherwise would. In fact, those who would never any book, regardless of their internet connectivity, are very likely doing more reading via a variety of programs and formats. However, more

⁹ Meanwhile, Self’s preferred term for what I call the T.V. Stream: bidirectional digital media, or B.D.D.M., unfortunately reasserts the “tech” companies’ emphasis on interactivity. Especially given the awkwardness of that acronym, perhaps Bidirectional Asynchronous Media works better. B.A.M., or BAM...not bad rolling off the tongue. BAM can be good, but it can also be bad, when it’s a BAM besmirched by GAAFS!

interactions taking place as written text instead of as conversations undoubtedly means we miss non-verbal information and, sadder still, are less likely to remember or attain a lasting impression of what was “said.” Of course, with written communication, technically speaking one can review the text. But how many of us do that? Digging through one’s past messages/ chats/ posts is tedious at best. Another ironic result for Self’s hope, and all of those who publish online, is that us writers find ourselves in a feedback loop of writing more yet having fewer non-screen experiences to draw upon when writing. “Lose-lose” again and again.

One of the Media Ecology scholars who have sought to build upon Postman’s work, Lance Strate, in his book, *Amazing Ourselves to Death: Neal Postman’s Brave New World Revisited*, offers contradictory recommendations. He reassures the Pod People. “There is no turning back the clock, no point in arguing that we abandon our media and technology and try to retrieve an earlier age.” Then he adds a few suggestions of his own to the 12 offered by Postman in *Technopoly*, the latter’s 1992 follow-up to *Amusing Ourselves*. Strate wants his readers to reject Power Point presentations in favor of a renewed emphasis on oratory, recite poetry, avoid “e-books,” and, most tellingly, follow Douglas Rushkoff’s recommendation to resist continually engaging in “text” messaging. These are all fine ideas. But, to “turn back” and “abandon” certain developments deemed to be irreversible by conventional wisdom is precisely what they ask us to do. With tiny computers in our pockets or hands, declining to check for new messages continually throughout the day would register with most Pod People as a pointless rejection of a practical and easy task.

When Strate moves into the same territory traversed by Turkle and Nicholas Carr, he notes the effects of persistent usage of television and computer screens, which creates “a state of mind even more diffused than multitasking,” persistently thrust into a fight-or-flight reaction to new bits of information coming in. And yet Strate and other Media Ecology scholars seem to take a benign or neutral view of these screens when it comes to cultural affairs. Like Postman, a moralistic Philistinism creeps in, as Strate’s book proceeds to update Postman’s main topics: education, religion, politics, journalism. Yet, as we have seen, in the age of the computer’s extension of television, the T.V. Stream, recorded music and books are the first major victims, harbingers of the future. If our multiple digital audio-video devices did not give us entertainment, we would not use them so often. Though prescribing sociopolitical policies may be empowering, Media-Ecologists would do better to focus more strictly on culture.

In a time of digital, internet-granted plenty with regard to cultural consumption, we must make our own scarcity in order to inspire cultural production, to recapture the obsessive attention paid to the few potential liberatory options that we had when only a small collection of artifacts were available for our immediate use. Where is the wherewithal to do this? A passing comment in the first volume of Doris Lessing’s memoirs comes to mind, referring to the old working class: “products of an, alas, now dead culture – killed by television – the working men’s colleges, the socialist, liberal, Communist and pacifist study classes, summer schools, night schools, literary groups” (408). Note how, until the rise of the Web, such assumptions about the

negative effect of television were an accepted part of the discourse among not only readers and the cultural elite but television commentators themselves and many journalists and educators. The Utopian-*cum*-Dystopian perspective of the T.V. Stream, in contrast, does not allow such outright rejections of its medium.

We need a countering teleological, ideologically-driven yet metaphysically-inspired, alternative to the classism and materialism prevalent among the American Digital Utopianists. Apropos of the comparison between portable computers/ tiny T.V.'s and cigarettes noted above, we must first of all, socially, come to regard the public use of computers as vile, a hostile encroachment upon space, regardless of whether it is urban or rural, manmade or a preserved "natural" environment. Or, working with the comparison to automobiles, we can see internet technology as a necessary evil only, to conceive of the discourse enacted by computers linked to each other to be as contemptible as a corporation destroying a forest to make agricultural products or a politician lying to win an election—yet of course we do not, because we cannot, rid ourselves of government and agriculture. Thus, as advances in computer technology can continue to be made, they would be arrived at in a society allergic to wasteful, redundant communication and production accomplished via computers, striving to avoid human-computer interaction. Computer programmers would become heroic in this scenario, like they were until quite recently, akin to scientists researching infectious diseases or historians studying genocide. *Those poor tech guys, having to stare at screens all day.* Instead of the unfounded claims often heard in workplaces that we must digitize and network all data, we should limit workers' time working with computers. Certain professions will

obviously have to spend more time in front of the awful things than others. Many other professions, though, and most artists, would benefit at this point by a pointed, purposeful return to tangible things (*anything* tangible: for example, high schools should have classes on building computers before they have classes on using them).

A sort of counter-revolution is also necessary with regard to the place of cultural practices in our lives. Too many of the artistically inclined, the aesthetically attuned, and the culturally knowledgeable allow political/ topical concerns to divert them from better tasks. A cultural crisis marked by the decline of literacy and recorded music may seem minor amid all the talk of pending ecological disaster for the global civilization created by the international economy of the 1970's-to-present (that is, since the U.S. ended its Cold War against China). But those with strong cultural interests must resist distraction by such issues. If civilization as we know it turns out to face debilitating challenges in the Twenty-First Century, the least we can do is not contribute to the cultural side of those challenges. Art is more important than life. Why? Because when you enact a cultural experience—that moment of reception—you are doing the one thing, save bearing a child, that allows us to leave a legacy, to create in a way that the gods, in our myths, create our world. Only very rarely, and usually at the local level, does any political choice that an individual makes even begin to rise to the stature and far-reaching implications of that same person choosing to read a long poem or novel, listen to a whole album of music, or watch a play or film, unimpeded by fragments of other cultural phenomena or social obligations which,

relative to the integral beauty of a work of art, are sheer nonsense.

What change in the political and economic order could have caused this cultural-suicidal embrace of the T.V. Stream? As we noted previously, contemporary discourse about new digital online media, not least among both its worry worts (Lanier, Sven Birkerts) and its detractors (Nicholas Carr), consistently—like a custom strong enough to make its adherents unwittingly dogmatic—exaggerates, often absurdly, the magnitude of the historic shift portended by these media. Case in point: Birkerts, in his book *Changing the Subject: Art and Attention in the Internet Age*: “Has any population in history had a bigger gulf between its youngest and oldest members?” The answer, unequivocally: Yes. Perhaps that which experienced the appearance of electricity as an everyday phenomenon? And sound recording and photography? And the internal-combustion engine? And airplanes? Or, perhaps, the next few generations, who witnessed of course the continued evolution of those technologies but also saw a significant number of the political structures that had organized the world for the previous millennium either collapse or wither away (the Chinese, Ottoman, and Russian empires, one decade, the British, French, and Dutch, two decades later)? Seems worthy of consideration.¹⁰ Of course, the whole point of

¹⁰ The answer to Birkerts’ question is likely negative for any other period of human history, if not due to the pace of revolutionary changes then because they were too limited in their effects to elites. Again, though, this confirms the significance of the *fin de siècle* as the turning point toward modernity (as the one and only *fin de siècle*, not one among many, and certainly not one alongside the transformation that has occurred with the rise of the Web, as the latter period is proving to be decisive precisely because of the lack of genuine change and novelty offered by BAM/ GAAFS with regard to cultural products and yet excessive use and ideological obsession with these non-changes, non-novelties).

this essay is that, to an extent, we agree with the would-be prophets that a dramatic shift has occurred. We disagree with the nature of that shift. It is not a technological revolution. It is a great refusal—to do anything of meaning, or at least to value anything of meaning; a great pig-out on accessible digital audio-video and ensuing “food coma” happening simultaneously and without interruption. If our ecological problems turn out to be of world-historical importance, let us rephrase the demand of the previous paragraph: if the Sixth Great Extinction eventually destroys the humans who caused the Extinction, shall we not contribute to it culturally as well as socially? The Industrial Revolution, having reached a peak of sorts with China and India in the past half-century having pushed its peasant masses into the modern world, has long since destroyed traditional cultures. The endless stream/ feed of moving images will destroy what we built in the way of modern culture to replace (and, sparingly, preserve) such traditions if we do not turn off our screens right here and now.

Perhaps an echo of the suggestion that Mark Greif makes at the conclusion of his historical tome, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, helps to clarify the simultaneous simplicity and difficulty of our task. Sensing a return to the sweeping claims and gestures regarding the nature of “man,” “humanity,” and the “human condition,” like those made mid-Twentieth Century in response to totalitarianism and the Second World War, but in the present day incited by the realization that we are living in a potentially-devastating Anthropocene, Greif demands, “Stop!” Since he discusses arguments being made regarding “posthumanism” (read: the Singularity) his demand warrants repeating here. When it comes to

how to deal with the use of mini-computers in public life, as I immodestly suggest, or how to protect ourselves against climatic disaster, as Greif says, we should heed “the practical matters, concrete questions of value not requiring ‘who we are’ distinct from what we say and do, and find the immediate actions necessary to achieve an aim. Important investigations of ‘who we are’ can exist and are conceivable, but you can be sure that they transpire somewhere else than here in our sermonizing about responsibility, urgency, and hapless prescription” (327-328). Indeed, they transpire when we create new worlds, to excite and satiate our senses, when we leave behind the practical.

Much like the “crisis of man” thinkers of the middle Twentieth Century seem to have focused too broadly and obtusely on philosophical matters as compared to the concrete challenges of authoritarian government, war, and imperialism, both the Digital Utopian-Dystopianists and their worry-wort opponents stray too far into bold claims about the revolutionary times in which we live. Revolutionary times can be, indeed, quite prosaic and absurd in their origins. They do not always offer obvious villains and heroes, or clear landmarks, or definite outcomes. If, for example, the claim that the digital-media revolution of these times will be of greater significance than the Gutenberg Revolution turns out to be true, it would not be, as we have explained here, because these new media supplant the print media; it is because their effects are so plainly apparent that we ignore them in favor of McLuhan-approved exaggerated effects that we imagine will come to be.

The plainest, most immediate, effect: in this new millennium, humans with constant access to the T.V.

Stream have decided, or merely tended, not to listen to recorded music without visual accompaniment, and have resigned ourselves to (even, in some cases, perversely embracing), a growing illiteracy, or at least (worst?) aliteracy. We have done this to ourselves. Technology did not force us. Information did not overwhelm us, at least not without being invited in. The abstract quality of both sound-alone and literature hinder their ability to capture our attention relative to the representational accessibility, and allure, of audio-video. Music and literature do not benefit from the two central characteristics of the cultural epoch in which we now live: the enormous amount of audio-video content and its speedy accessibility in satisfying immediate, temporary wants.

This audio-video comes via ugly portable devices that have laid waste to our social milieux. Whatever may be achieved in moderating the public usage of these devices, their fast and steady rise to prominence in less than a decade in the U.S., if not most of the world, belies any hopes that with extraordinary material progress humanity would also progress culturally and intellectually. On the contrary, great wealth and comfort inevitably leads to depravity (not the good kind!) and stupidity. Are we shocked that a global civilization living with more food and better medicine than humanity has ever had in the past, and superior forms of communication and transportation, would simultaneously waste away such prosperity in a frenzied leap into irrationality driven by addiction to amusing moving images and other means of instant gratification? This addiction gives its victims the same excuse that all addicts have for accomplishing nothing, and as a result our culture disintegrates, accompanied by gushing talk

of instantaneous communication and accessible information. For decades now, we have heard about humans who live in urban environments not being able to handle the quiet of the countryside. Soon, perhaps, the new phenomenon of humans unable to handle the quiet of their own minds when left alone without a television or internet connection will manifest itself, transforming those humans into near-comatose automatons, sheer data. The question remains: will you become one of the few who refuse, who say no?

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