

NO SENSE OF PLACE

The Impact of Electronic Media
on Social Behavior

Joshua Meyrowitz

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York Oxford

PART II

From Print Situations to Electronic Situations

Regardless of the ways in which new media change a society, the resulting new social order must grow out of the old one. New media have an effect by being *different* from older media and by changing those aspects of society that depended on earlier means of communicating. The printing press, for example, was able to spur both the Reformation and scientific inquiry because it bypassed the relative monopoly of information created by the slow, tedious writing of the scribes.¹ The potency of a new medium emanates not only from its own uses and inherent characteristics, but also from the ways in which it offsets or bypasses the uses and characteristics of earlier media. The same media, therefore, may have different effects in different societies. The impact of electronic media in many third world countries, which have not yet become widely literate, is no doubt quite different from the impact of electronic media in our own country.²

Yet while new media merely become part of the existing spectrum of older media, it is still meaningful to ask how the "media matrix" in a particular society is altered when a new medium (or new *type* of medium) is added to it.* To explore the impact of electronic media in the United States, this part of the book examines the differences between electronic media and print media as they have been used within our particular cultural and economic context.

Within the category of print, I include media such as books, newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets. Within the category of electronic media, I include technologies such as television, radio, telegraph, telephone, tape recorder, and computer. Unfortunately, it would be impossible to com-

*The idea of a "media matrix" and the related issue of the limited sense in which an "electronic society" is purely electronic are discussed further in the Appendix.

plete a detailed analysis of each of these media in this one section of the book. I have focused, therefore, mainly on a prime medium within each category: the book and television. In many ways, these two media are the quintessential representatives of their respective categories. It is around the book that traditionalists rally in the face of threats from new media; and among electronic media, it is television that continues to be most besieged by criticism and controversy. But since all media used in a society interact with each other, and because all print media share certain characteristics that distinguish them from all electronic media, I bring in many relevant examples from other media as well.

As in the rest of the book, the approach taken here is that media are types of social settings that include and exclude, unite or divide people in particular ways. This discussion of changes in media, then, is analogous to the study of architectural or geographical change, or to the effects of migration or urbanization. The focus is on the ways in which a new medium or a new type of medium may restructure social situations in the same way that building or breaking down walls or physically relocating people may either isolate people in different situations or unite them in the same or similar situations. Within this situational analysis of the differences between print and electronic media, the relevant types of questions are: Who in society has access to the information in this environment and who does not? To what extent do people of different ages, sexes, races, and educational backgrounds have access to the same or different information-systems because of this medium? How does the type of information available in this environment differ from the information available in other social situations? In general, in what ways does the widespread use of this medium affect "who knows what about whom"?

Part I described how behavior changes when the boundaries of situations change. In addition, we have seen that the number of distinct group identities, stages of socialization, and ranks of hierarchy is closely related to the number of distinct social information-systems, the extent to which "backstage" behaviors are kept separate from "onstage" behaviors, and the relative strength of the link between physical location and social experience. This part of the book, therefore, is divided into three chapters based on three major questions concerning the differences between "print situations" and "electronic situations":

1. To what extent does the medium tend to divide or unite different types of people into different or similar informational worlds?
2. To what extent does the medium allow for great distinctions between people's informal, private "backstage" behaviors and their formal, public "onstage" behaviors?
3. To what extent does the medium support or weaken the traditional relationship between social situations and physical locations?

New media need not destroy or replace older media in order to have a significant effect on the structure of social information-systems. The discussion here details how electronic media have tended to merge many formerly distinct social situations, blur the dividing line between private and public behaviors, and tear apart the once taken-for-granted bond between physical position and social "position."

5

The Merging of Public Spheres

Perhaps the primary characteristic of any medium is its ability to impinge on our senses and connect with our processes of thought and expression. If no one has access to a medium, then no one can send or receive its messages. This idea is almost too obvious to mention. What is less obvious, however, is the related fact that the type of access and the steps needed to achieve access are different for different media. Different media tend to establish different types and numbers of social information-systems. The widespread use of a new medium, therefore, may increase or decrease the "sharedness" of social information. One medium may tend to create separate information-systems for different people; another medium may tend to include many different types of people in a common set of situations. This chapter describes and discusses the characteristics of electronic media, particularly television, that tend to lead to a breakdown in discrete information-systems for different sections of the population.

As a number of media critics have observed, part of the reason for television's heterogeneous audience is that the economic system of television is based on "selling" viewers to advertisers.¹ While viewers often think of television programs as "products," themselves as the "consumers," and advertising as the "price" paid to watch the programs, the true nature of the television business is quite different. The products are the viewers who are sold to advertisers. The more viewers a program draws, the more money advertisers are willing to pay to have their message aired. Because of this system, network broadcasters have little interest in designing programs that meet the specialized needs of small segments of the audience.

A basic rule of network programming is "Least Objectionable Programming" (LOP). That is, the key is to design a program that is least likely to be turned *off*, rather than a program viewers will actively seek out. After

all, any program that will delight one segment of the population (opera, advanced auto mechanics, hard core pornography, Shakespeare, introduction to quantum physics, etc.) is likely to turn off—and be turned off by—most of the rest of the population most of the time. And if the cost of producing and distributing the program and commercials exceeds what advertisers are willing to pay to reach the number of viewers the program draws (or if another program of the same cost can draw more viewers), then the program will almost certainly go off the air. Most television programmers, therefore, consciously try to design programs that will reach as large an audience as possible.

The economic structure of broadcasting, however, does not fully explain the relative heterogeneity of television audiences compared to book readers. Without making any excuse for the poor quality of television entertainment or for a dubious use of public airwaves, we can still discuss other factors that lead to homogenized information-systems in electronic media.

Media "Access Codes"

The skill and learning required to encode and decode messages in a medium determines, to a large degree, who in a society can use the medium to send messages and who has access to the information the medium carries. Even within a given form of communication, such as writing, different coding systems can have significantly different social consequences. Complex writing codes tend to support a literate elite that controls cultural information and ritual. The Chinese, for example, use a "logographic" writing system in which one symbol represents a whole word. This system requires the learning of up to 5,000 symbols for basic literacy and the mastery of as many as 20,000 symbols for scholarly pursuits. Such a system clearly limits the number of people who have full access to the medium.²

Other codes, such as the syllabaries of the Phoenicians and the Hebrews are simpler to learn, but because they lack vowels, they still require special reading skills. In a syllabary, the same written syllable, "B," for example, can be pronounced in many different ways, including "bā," "bē," and "bō." A given group of written letters might be used to represent a number of completely different words with different pronunciations and meanings. To read these codes accurately, a person must have some previous knowledge of the text and its subject matter.*

The greater the ambiguity in a writing system or the more symbols that must be memorized, the smaller the number of people who can master it. Syllabaries, then, are more "democratic" than logographic writing, but

*If our alphabet were a syllabary, the written symbols "wtr wth brd" could stand for "waiter with beard," "water with bread," and many other combinations of words (whiter, bird, breed, brood, bride, etc.). Such a symbol system is best interpreted by someone who already has some "inside knowledge" as to what is likely to be in it.

more elitist than truly phonetic alphabets. In addition, if the written material is in limited supply because of slow production or high cost, then only a limited number of people will have full access to the communication that the writing system offers.

The phonetic alphabet minimized the ambiguity of many written codes, and the spread of printing made books accessible to those who could not afford hand-written manuscripts. Yet even with relatively plentiful and inexpensive printed books, reading and writing have remained both means of access to, and restriction from, social information. In a print society, a person has to read and write well in order to gain full access to the society's stock of knowledge and communication networks. Even a dime novel requires minimal reading proficiency; a short note to a friend requires some writing ability. Because we begin to learn to read and write when we are very young, we often forget that reading and writing are incredibly complex skills that require years of learning and rote practice.³

Reading and writing involve an abstract code of semantically meaningless symbols that must be memorized, internalized, and then forgotten—forgotten in the sense that when literate people read and write letters of the alphabet, they *hear words* rather than focus on the shape and form of the written symbols.⁴

Further, reading is not mastered "all-at-once"; it requires years of practice and involves many discrete stages of proficiency. The sequence of the stages is based on increasing linguistic, grammatical, and stylistic complexity. One has to read simple books before reading complex books. Even among adults in the most cultured and civilized of societies, the literacy rate has never reached 100%.⁵ And even among those who are literate, only a small percentage reaches the highest levels of reading and writing skill. Any writing system is more selective and exclusive than spoken language.

The skills needed to read and write affect access to print in two ways: Communication through writing and books is "automatically" restricted to those who know the required access code, and—even among those who have knowledge of the basic code—messages can be directed at different groups by varying the complexity of the coded message. Young children and illiterates, therefore, are excluded from all printed communication, and society is further divided into many distinct sets of information-systems on the basis of different levels of reading ability.

In contrast to reading and writing, television viewing involves an access code that is barely a code at all. Television by no means presents "reality," but television looks and sounds much more like reality than sentences and paragraphs do. Even two-year-old children find television accessible, and this explains why television is so readily used as a "baby-

⁵It has been estimated that at least 23 million and perhaps as many as 72 million American adults are "functionally illiterate," that is, unable to read a want ad, understand a bus schedule, fill out a job application, or address a letter so that it reaches its destination.⁵

sitter." Children aged two to five watch over twenty-five hours of television per week.⁶ These active television watchers are of an age when the letters of the alphabet are little more than odd shapes and lines—except perhaps those dynamic letters that are pictured for them on television's "Sesame Street."

Television's code of electronic signals, which produces facsimiles of everyday sights and sounds, has basically one degree of complexity. Once you know how to watch and listen to one television program, you essentially know how to watch and listen to any television program. You may not understand all that you see and hear—just as you may not understand all that people say and do in a real-life situation—but you need not penetrate a complex superimposed filter of printed symbols to "enter" the communication situation.*

Many television "techniques" are based on natural experience. The low angle shot, for example, wherein the camera "looks up" to the subject, is generally used to give the subject dominance and power. But surely this is not simply an arbitrary convention. All of us as children have craned our necks to see those adults for whom we have felt love, respect, and fear—people we literally "looked up to." There are many other strong relationships between the structure of television sequences and the structure of everyday face-to-face interaction.⁸ Such relationships suggest that learning to understand televised sequences is far simpler than learning to understand the arbitrary codes of reading and writing.

In general, there is no set sequence in which television programs must be watched. A person does not necessarily have to watch "simple programs" before watching "complex programs." Adults who have watched television only for a few months probably understand television approximately as well as adults who have watched television for many years. Whatever differences might exist are minimal compared to differences between adult illiterates and adult readers. There are no specific "prerequisites" for watching a television program, as there are prerequisites for

*There are some television techniques that require more learning than others. Flashbacks, dissolves, and parallel editing (cutting back and forth between two or more simultaneous sets of action) are conventions that must be learned. Also, studies have shown that very young children do not always realize that an object pictured in a close-up is the same object that was pictured in a long shot.⁷ But even these conventions are probably learned in a "gestalt" rather than in set stages. Once you understand the idea of "flashback," you understand all flashbacks. Once you learn that a dissolve is used to show a passage of time or a change of location, you do not need to "practice" understanding other sequences using the same technique. The key points are that *compared to the code in print*, television's coding elements are limited in number, one does not have to go to school for many years to learn and master them, and, most important, one can "experience" television without fully understanding them. In contrast to the content of books, whatever behaviors and words are on television will be accessible to most people regardless of their age and level of education. Of course, both print and television also have "content codes," such as the structural elements of various genres and forms, which are not immediately grasped even after gaining basic access to the medium.

reading *Ulysses*. While the complexity of the *content* of television may vary, the ways in which the content is *encoded* in different television programs is relatively constant: pictures and sounds. The often-used phrase "visual literacy," therefore, is a misnomer.⁹ Understanding visual images has nothing to do with literacy.

It is not surprising that people of all ages, educational backgrounds, and income levels watch many of the same television programs. In recent years, for example, children have enjoyed the adult soap opera "Dallas," and adult viewers have found pleasure in a children's puppet show, "The Muppets." Indeed, in 1980, both of these programs were among the most popular shows in *all* age-groups in America, including ages two to eleven.¹⁰

While the coding variable in print has its most noticeable impact on the information made available to children, the same variable also subtly shapes the organization of adult knowledge and experience. The different levels of complexity in the print code offer a seemingly natural means of segmenting information. All fields develop "introductory" books and texts. These books generally must be read before moving on to "intermediary" and "advanced" texts. Knowledge is compartmentalized; readers are segregated. An expert in one field may direct messages to other experts in the same field simply by writing in a complex shorthand that assumes a great deal of prior training and reading. Specialized terms and phrases, names, and quotations in foreign languages are used in "advanced" texts without explaining them or placing them in context. The increase in the complexity of the content is often accompanied by the use of longer words, smaller type, fewer pictures, and more complex grammatical constructions. I remember being frustrated when I was a child by the prefaces to many schoolbooks; they were addressed "to the teacher" and were written in small print and long words that made them difficult for me to decode.

The coding of print does not make all such compartmentalization necessary, but it makes it possible and expedient. What would be rude in interpersonal communication—addressing only part of the audience—becomes the standard, efficient, and appropriate style of communicating in print. The complexity of the code and the effort needed to read bring only certain people to certain books. Books "gather" specific readers to specific information-systems.

The growth and maintenance of distinct information-systems in print over several centuries have fostered the growth of implicit assumptions and specialized jargon that are not comprehensible to "outsiders." In print situations, people cannot easily cross from one field into other fields. As a result of such a system, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists now discuss similar phenomena in different "languages." The communication patterns encouraged by print make it difficult for experts in one discipline to communicate with experts in other disciplines. Outsiders who want to gain access to a discipline must often become neo-

phytes all over again and work their way up a new ladder of segregated information-systems. Barriers of time and pride generally keep people within the confines of their own "field." Such a system allows for many interactions that might be called "private-public," that is, the situations are technically public, but functionally restricted to members of a single group. Medical specialists, for example, can communicate with other medical specialists without being "overheard" even by other members of the educated population.*

The complexity of print's code, therefore, separates information-systems both within and among age-groups. The stages of learning required to master complex information in print support many distinct groups, many stages of socialization into each group, and many levels of status and authority.

Despite our familiarity with this system, there is nothing "natural" about such divisions and stages of knowledge. In normal oral discourse, for example, there is no clear sequence of difficulty. The idea of stages and sequences of texts was an innovation that followed the spread of printing.¹¹ Education in oral cultures involves relatively few "sequences" of courses and little separation of people into many different groups based on age and years of learning. School systems in literate societies, however, are usually designed to divide people into groups based on differences in reading ability. How well one reads is used as a guide to one's intelligence and one's capacity for understanding new ideas. This system makes sense in a print culture, but it is not the only logical means of organizing information or categorizing people. Electronic media, including the telephone, radio, television, and even the computer, have fewer stages and compartments of knowledge. Unless one places the content of print directly into these other media, the messages of electronic media are closer to the nonlinear information of sounds, pictures, and actions.

Some information that might be found only in "advanced" books, such as medical texts, may be presented on television in a form accessible to a wide audience. A thirty-minute program I watched recently, for example, offered detailed instruction in "Cardio-Pulmonary" Resuscitation (CPR). This emergency procedure to revive heart attack victims was described with words, pictures, and actions. The doctor on the program emphasized several times that, contrary to earlier medical thought, one needed no special training or prior knowledge to learn this procedure. It was so simple,

*This system of dividing knowledge has become so ingrained in our consciousness that new, interdisciplinary areas of study, such as "American studies," "popular culture," and "communication," are sometimes considered to have no substance because they do not attempt to carve out an isolated territory or to hoard knowledge and because the questions asked are often too easily comprehensible to people in other disciplines. Sadly, in order to defend themselves against such attacks, some scholars in these fields develop their own specialized jargon and narrow methods in order to appear mysterious—and therefore valuable—in the eyes of other scholars. Yet such defensive actions destroy the original value and usefulness of the interdisciplinary approach.

he said, that even a child could learn it—indeed, his eight-year-old daughter had already mastered it.

I am not suggesting that a television program on CPR is equivalent to reading an advanced medical text. The CPR program is presented in a vacuum. The information is not tied to more basic medical information and is not a step toward developing more complex knowledge. The logical linking of pieces of information into large, complex, and connected treatises and theories is a feature of writing and print.¹² In this sense, the CPR television program is far inferior to a print lesson on the same technique. Yet what involves complex coding and decoding in a book may be presented more simply and perceived more directly through television. Information that would have been limited to, and divided among various sets of specialists if presented only in books is accessible to the average television viewer.

Books and television have their own individual strengths and limitations. The complex, step-by-step nature of print allows for the development of extended and connected descriptions and analyses, but it also tends to create sharp divisions between those who have access to a given information-system and those who are restricted from it. The linear structure of print's code leads to different specialists following different "lines" of inquiry. Television breaks down the barriers among different fields, but it favors discrete clumps of information rather than long connected arguments and analyses.

Throughout history, the vessels in which ideas have been stored have come to be seen as the shape of knowledge itself. Yet to understand the impact of new media, we need to distinguish between the inherent complexity of specific ideas and processes and the superimposed complexity of the means through which we encode and describe them. It is conceivable, for example, that if the only way people learned to tie their shoelaces was through descriptions in print, tying shoelaces might be viewed as a skill that was "naturally" restricted to the highly educated.

Because of differences in coding, electronic media have led to a breakdown of the specialized and segregated information-systems shaped by print. There is now much greater sharing of information among different sections of the population. What many people learn and experience through electronic media have relatively little to do with their age, traditional education, and social position. In terms of what and how much people watch on television, for example, the similarities among various age groups, races, sexes, and classes are much more striking than the differences.*

*Recent studies reveal, for example, that households with incomes under \$10,000 watch an average of 47 hours and 3 minutes of television per week; households with incomes over \$30,000 watch television 47 hours and 50 minutes per week. The amount of television college-educated viewers say they watch is close to 90% of the time reported by viewers overall, and men and women watch approximately the same amount of television per week. The biggest differences in viewing habits occur between age groups. Teens watch

Unlike print, television offers its content to all members of the population. Television, therefore, does not readily support an information elite that completely controls interpretation of the culture's stock of knowledge, nor does it lend itself to segregated systems of discourse. The content of television can still be manipulated and controlled by powerful economic and political forces, but controlling television is not the same as controlling print. While different people read different books, whatever is on television tends to be accessible to anyone who can make sense of it. Unlike books, television cannot readily be used by elites to communicate only among and about themselves.

Just as television messages are easy for the viewer to decode, so is it relatively simple for information to be encoded for presentation on television. Once the complex paraphernalia are set up, the presentation of messages is relatively simple. Almost anyone can stand in front of a television camera or tape recorder microphone and "send a message." Indeed, in recent years, the most expensive television content—advertising—has turned more and more to the use of "hidden camera" interviews of "real people" and to commercials in which corporation heads hawk their own products. Similarly, shows such as "Real People" and "The People's Court" are a new type of television variety show that replaces traditional forms of talent and performance with the everyday behavior of unusual, yet still very "ordinary" people.

These commercials and programs are produced, directed, and edited by trained professionals, but the strips of content can be produced by almost any willing adult or child. The relevant point is that while print requires encoding of information by people with very special skills, radio and television messages can be produced by the "person-on-the-street," even the child-on-the-street. In some ways the average person is preferable to an actor because he or she looks and sounds "authentic." For these reasons, perhaps, the technique of interviewing the common person has also become the staple of television news and documentaries. Many broadcast journalists travel to the streets to get on-the-spot-reactions, while print journalists seek out "experts" to get "statements" of official policy and informed opinion. A reader interested in eating disorders or divorce would probably read books written by doctors and psychiatrists, but the

the least television with an average of "only" 22 hours, 30 minutes a week, people over 55 watch the most television with an average of 35 hours, 6 minutes a week. But even here, the main point is that *every* age group—from 2-year-olds to the elderly—watches a great deal of television, more than 22 hours a week. And many of the same programs are watched by all age groups and social categories. In contrast to such similarities in television viewing, there are great differences in reading habits among those of different ages, incomes, and education levels. In 1971, for example, the Gallup Organization found that 50% of college-educated adults had read a book in the last month compared to only 18% of those with a grade school education; 39% of those between the ages of 21 and 29 had read a book, while only 16% of those 50 years or over had. In addition, book reading itself is a kind of "private club." For the polls suggest that, on average, almost 75% of adults have *not* read a book in the previous month.¹³

television viewer interested in such topics often watches people who have experienced the problems themselves.

Using a camera or microphone to record events is also quite different from using a pen and paper. While there is a great gulf between a home videotape of your cousin's wedding and a professional documentary film on the event, the gap is not as great as between a letter written about the wedding by a seven-year-old and a professional writer's account of it. Even a small child can turn on a video camera and "capture" many aspects of reality. In fact, a surveillance camera can capture strips of action without *any* creative human intervention.

Although broadcast television provides much information to average viewers, the average person does not have many opportunities to communicate to others through television as it now exists. Television's accessible code, therefore, now has more of an impact on the messages the average person is exposed to than it has on the channels through which the average person sends messages. The increasing use of interactive television, CB radios, home video equipment, and computers, however, is changing this balance. In the meantime, the same variation in coding that sets television apart from print, sets the telephone apart from letter writing. Just as television plugs people of all ages and classes into a single information-system, so does the telephone give the young and illiterate a new kind of social "mobility." It is not unusual for parents to allow their very young children to answer or even initiate telephone calls; it would be impossible for very young children to participate in the family's social or business correspondence.

Getting the Message

Physical Characteristics

There is a relationship between a book and its message that need not always exist in electronic media. In addition to being a medium of communication, each book and its particular contents also form an independent physical object. As objects, books must be purchased or borrowed *individually*. Each particular message or set of messages must be actively sought out, actively carried into the home.

Although the same thing is true of some electronic messages (audio and video cassettes, discs, and records), electronic media also have the potential for an entirely different relationship between medium and message. Thousands of different electronic messages can be received through a single acquired object such as a radio, television, or computer. Further, the characteristics of the electronic medium do not vary with changes in the characteristics of the message. While a long book is heavier than a short book, a television set stays the same size regardless of whether it projects a ten-second promo or a ten-hour version of *War and Peace*. The programs on television are not experienced as physical objects with independent

physical dimensions or existence. A person who owns one television set, telephone, or radio need not purchase or borrow any specific messages. Once these electronic media are in the home, the messages are able to flow constantly and indiscriminately.*

The need to select books and magazines individually, along with the time and expense involved in locating them, leads to a highly selective diet of information through print. One goes after printed messages that are worth the trouble. One's collection of books often represents select sets of messages painstakingly gathered over time. A personal "library" usually ties the individual into the information network of a group or a small constellation of groups. The personal library, therefore, also tends to isolate the individual from other groups and their information. Since one needs to search for individual books, one tends to "find" books on topics one already knows about and is interested in.

Many electronic messages are chosen with less care and discrimination. We often spend more time deciding over the model of a radio or a television set than we do selecting the particular broadcast program. People tend to choose a *block of time* to watch television rather than choose specific programs.¹⁴ According to one recent study, for example, more than half of the programs watched by viewers are selected on the spur of the moment, and only one-third of the audience for typical hour-long programs remains until the end of the hour.¹⁵ Similarly, studies in Britain and the United States have found that while the ratings for programs are often relatively constant from episode to episode, the composition of the audience changes dramatically. "On average only about half the audience on one day also watch the same programme on another."¹⁶ Surprisingly, this massive abandonment and adoption occurs even for the conclusion of a two-episode cliff hanger. Such "content disloyalty" is probably more striking in radio. Such habits suggest that people are much more likely to stray outside their traditional fields of interest when attending to television and radio than when reading books or magazines.

As with the coding variable, the contrasting physical characteristics of books and television have their greatest impact on children. A child is restricted in many ways from getting certain books because of their size or cost, where the child must go to find them, where in the library or store they are kept, and who the child must ask to get them. Even the height of a shelf can dramatically limit the information a child has access to in print. *Each* book has its own special information. *Any* television set is capable of exposing children to a wide spectrum of "adult" information.

* In relation to physical characteristics, the cinema is more like a book than it is like a television or radio program. *Each* motion picture is an independent physical entity. A person has to seek out a specific movie and go someplace to view it. Similarly, while it is simple for a warden to restrict a book or a movie on "How to Fool Burglars" from a prison library or theater, it is much more difficult to censor a similar type of program from prison televisions and radios. Thus, even though movies and television have a similar visual code, television may have social effects that the motion picture does not.

The different relationship between content and medium in different media has generally been overlooked by those who embrace the traditional concern with media content. Historian Theodore Roszak, for example, attacks McLuhan's interest in media rather than messages by saying that such interest reminds him of "Jean Harlow's quip when asked what she wanted for her birthday. 'Don't buy me a book; I gotta book.'"¹⁷ But Roszak has not followed through on his own example. With respect to television, radio, or computer, Miss Harlow's plea would be quite logical: "Don't buy me a television, I already got a television" does indeed make sense. Different media may have different effects on "who knows what about whom" because of the different degrees to which access to one specimen of the medium (*a* book vs. *a* television) leads to access to only one or to many sets of messages.

The Association Factor

As an object, a book is more than a medium of communication; it is also an artifact and a possession. As such, it serves not only as a channel to provide information but also as a symbol of self and identity. Just as we choose styles of clothing not for utility alone, so do we choose books that "appropriately" project our image and sense of group affiliations.

Each book we choose to "associate" with takes up part of our physical environment. It must be physically carried into the home and stored somewhere, whether on a coffee table or under a mattress. A book is a belonging. Although records, tapes, and disks are also belongings, broadcast television and radio content is evanescent; it is consumed and leaves no tangible evidence. Watching a program on television, therefore, is like stopping to watch an event in a public park. One does not have to take it into one's home, place it among one's possessions, and make it part of one's self. Indeed, watching television is even less of an affiliation than stopping in the park because watching something in the park is a public gesture of association, but watching something on television is often a private act that involves no public commitment of any kind and no expressed support.

Because of a difference in the "association factor," people will watch things on television that they would be unlikely to read about in a book or magazine or to pay to see in a movie theater. Many people who would be uncomfortable going into a bookstore and buying a magazine on transvestites would have no qualms about watching a program about transvestites on television. Talk show hosts such as Phil Donahue have built their careers on this dual response to the same content in different media.

The bond between the message and the medium in print gives specific types of books and magazines specific situational definitions. We may describe a particular book as "serious" or "silly," we may describe a particular magazine as "good" or "bad." But a specific television set is virgin territory until some content comes through it. Perhaps this explains why

Jerry Falwell, the head of the Moral Majority, sued *Penthouse* magazine for ten million dollars for publishing an interview he gave to two freelance writers,¹⁸ even though Falwell has no similar qualms about sharing the television forum with "immoral" people—including publishers of such magazines and the women who pose for them. (Finding Falwell in *Penthouse* is like finding him in a red light district, but finding him on television is like meeting him in a metaphysical arena that is neither here nor there.)

Conditions of Attendance

Even in private, reading a book demands more personal commitment and affiliation than watching a broadcast television program or video cassette. A book has to be held in one's hand and actively interacted with. The television set, however, is flicked on and backed away from; the images wash over the viewer.

Reading is hard work even for the literate. The black shapes on this page, for example, must be scanned, word after word, line after line, paragraph after paragraph. You are working hard to receive this message. To read these words, your eyes have been trained to move along the lines of print the way a typewriter carriage moves a piece of paper. When you get to the end of the line, your eyes dart back to the left margin and move down one line. And just as musicians often hum the notes they see on sheet music, many readers tend to sub-vocalize the sounds of the words they are reading. Because of the energy involved, people will not bother to read every book that comes to their attention. People are more likely to search for specific books in which they are actively interested and that justify all of the effort of reading them. Electronic images and sounds, however, thrust themselves into people's environments, and the messages are received with little effort. In a sense, people must go after print messages, but electronic messages reach out and touch people. People will expose themselves to information in electronic media that they would never bother to read about in a book.

With electronic media, therefore, people may represent themselves by the type of equipment they have (or by the fact that they do *not* have any), but people are less likely to represent themselves in terms of all the programs that are transmitted through the equipment into their homes.

Further, although many people believe that light television viewers are more selective than heavy television viewers, studies have found this to be untrue: Light viewers usually watch the programs that "everyone" watches, while heavy viewers often make up most of the audience for "special interest" shows simply because they will watch almost anything that is on.¹⁹ As mass communication researcher Dennis Howitt explains, "for a programme to be very popular it has to attract people who switch it on especially. A minority programme gains an audience simply from those who do not bother to switch off."²⁰

Because access to messages in books tends to be discriminatory and selective, messages encoded in print generally travel from members of one section of the population to other members of the same section of the population. Or, put differently, the selective flow of information may *create* "sections" of the population by dividing people into very different information-systems. Those who know nothing about the things you know, write, and read about seem very "different." Although television and radio may not markedly increase people's true understanding of many issues, they provide large segments of the population with at least surface familiarity with a broad range of topics and with people in very different life situations.* This familiarity helps to decrease the strangeness and "otherness" of others.

There are many exceptions, but as a rule, people read things that reflect their personal and group identity. Both the content and the writing style of a book tend to limit the number and type of readers. A book detailing poor conditions in a state hospital is likely to be read primarily by specialists and those personally concerned with the subject. A book on the experiences of Jews in Nazi concentration camps would probably be read by a similarly narrow audience. Television, however, rarely divides its viewers so clearly. A 1972 television documentary on New York's Willowbrook State Hospital, for example, reached a large audience and led to public embarrassment and reform. Similarly, the television miniseries, "Holocaust" reached 120 million people, most of whom had never read a book on the same subject.²¹

The writing style and promotion of some books may allow them to reach a wide readership that extends beyond those who have a traditional interest in the "topic." But even best sellers reach a relatively select readership. A book can usually find a place on the lists of the top 25 fiction or nonfiction best sellers for the *year* with only 115,000 hardcover sales,²² or about one twentieth of one percent of the population. A successful prime time show, in contrast, is expected to draw between 25 and 40 million people to *each* of its episodes,²³ or between eleven and eighteen percent of the population. The lowest rated prime time program is likely to reach an audience that exceeds the wildest dreams of most authors.

Even the biggest best sellers reach only a fraction of the audience that will watch a similar program on television. It took forty years to sell 21 million copies of *Gone With the Wind*, but about 55 million people watched the first half of the movie on television in a *single evening*.²⁴ Similarly, in 1976, the television program "Roots" was watched, in part or whole, by approximately 130 million people in only eight days.²⁵ Even

*Just a few of the recent topics that have been discussed on the nationally popular "Donahue" show are: men who like to dress in women's clothes, bishops against nuclear war, child prodigies, idiot savants, teenage alcoholics, porno movie stars, male strippers, and people with herpes. Through such programs, viewers have "met" and listened to people in these and many other social categories.

with the help of the television-spurred sales, fewer than 5 million copies of *Roots* sold in eight years.²⁶

The point is that there is almost no book that is capable of reaching as wide an audience as many television programs. Perhaps the closest thing to the universality of television programs is the Bible—and even the Bible has sat in many homes more as a symbol than as a frequently read book.* Finally, even if millions of people read the same book over a long period of time, the impact on group identity may be negligible compared to the impact of *simultaneous* viewing of events on television. In recent years, the viewing of a number of single programs has reached over eighty million people. The final episode of "M*A*S*H," for example, was watched by 130 million people, or almost 60% of the population.²⁸ After such "events," one is likely to find that more than one out of every two people one sees on the street the next day has had a similar experience the night before. And while some critics attribute this massive sharing of information wholly to the economic and political system that encouraged the growth of broadcasting, they often overlook the fact that such a widespread sharing of information is almost impossible in print media.

In print, there are women's books and men's books, children's books and adult books. Indeed, there is a different set of books for every age group of each sex. Each age/sex category tends to be contained in its own informational world. It is embarrassing to be seen reading a book designed for a person of another age or sex. Not long ago, a boy who read *Nancy Drew* mysteries instead of *Hardy Boys* mysteries might be mercilessly teased by friends and accused of having ambiguous sexual tendencies. Such distinctions in gender-appropriate material are much less clear on television. The *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew*, for example, have appeared on television as one combined series. Television, therefore, may be affecting many group identities, stages of socialization, and ranks of authority by changing the patterns of information access established by distinctions in reading habits.

The shared nature of the television environment creates many new problems and concerns over media content. Content that would be appropriate and uncontroversial in books directed at select audiences becomes the subject of criticism when presented on television. When television portrays the dominant and "normal" white middle class culture, minorities, subcultures, and "deviants" protest their exclusion. Yet when television portrays minorities, many members of the majority begin to fear that their insular world is being "invaded." The nature of the portrayal of minorities becomes a catch-22. If, for example, homosexuals are portrayed in a negative and stereotypical fashion, gay rights groups protest.

*In surveys taken in the 1950s, for example, the Gallup Organization found that 85% of men and 81% of women had never read the Bible all the way through, 51% of those asked could not correctly identify the name of the first book of the Bible, 79% could not name a prophet mentioned in the Old Testament, and 53% could not name any of the first four books of the New Testament.²⁷

If homosexuals are portrayed as "normal" people who simply have a different sexual preference, however, many viewers object to television "legitimizing" or "idealizing" homosexual life.

Similarly, television cannot exclusively present content deemed suitable only for young children because adult viewers demand more serious and mature entertainment and news. Yet when truly "adult" and "mature" programs are placed on television, many parents complain that their children's minds are being defiled. Ironically, many talk shows include discussions of what is appropriate television content for children; yet these shows themselves may be considered "inappropriate" because they reveal many adult secrets to the children who are watching them (including the secret that adults are confused and anxious over how to raise children).

Even a choice between happy endings and "realistic" endings becomes controversial on television. When programs end happily, critics argue that serious issues are trivialized through 30- or 60-minute formulas for solving major problems. Yet when realistic endings are presented—a criminal escapes or good people suffer needlessly—critics attack television for not presenting young children with the ideals and values of our culture.

When looked at as a whole, then, it becomes clear that much of the controversy surrounding television programming is not rooted in television content per se, but in the problems inherent in a system that communicates everything to everybody at the same time.

As a shared environment, television tends to include some aspect of every facet of our culture. Fairy tales are followed by gritty portrayals of crime and corruption. Television preachers share the airwaves with male strippers. Poets and prostitutes appear on the same talk shows. Actors and journalists compete for Nielsen ratings. However, there is little that is new about any of the information presented on television; what is new is that formerly segregated information-systems are integrated. Information once shared only among people of a certain age, class, religion, sex, profession, or other sub-group of the culture has now been thrown into a public forum—and few are satisfied with the mishmash.

It should be clear by now that the integrated nature of information-systems created by television is "overdetermined." That is, there are a number of factors, each sufficient to make a difference on its own, that work together to make television messages more inclusive than print messages.

Not recognizing all these factors, some observers suggest that new technologies will soon return us to the segregated information-systems of the past. These predictions are based on the belief that the relatively homogenized diet of electronic messages has been determined primarily by the limited number of television channels and the narrow choice of programs and will therefore be undermined by the new and expanding spectrum of options. Cable television, video cassettes, and videodiscs, it is true, have already begun to widen the range of choice through elec-

tronic media. And fiber-optics (thin glass "wires" that carry many channels of information), direct satellite-to-home broadcasts, and the marriage of computer, television, and telephone will no doubt continue the process. But it is unlikely that the result will be a return to the *same* segregated systems of discourse fostered by print.

The simple perceptual mechanics of attending to various media suggest that even hundreds of choices of television programs will not return a family to the segregated situation that exists in the traditional picture of Mom, Dad, Billy, and Susan gathered in the family den, each reading his or her own book. The interaction with a book, magazine, or newspaper is very personal and private. You hold it close to you, touch its pages, and sometimes write in its margins. No one, not even a person looking over your shoulder, knows for certain what word or line you are reading. Television, however, is not held in one's hand and a television message is usually shared by everyone in the room.

Even if each family member goes off to his or her own room (or uses a TV wrist watch), there is no complex code to restrict young children from watching "adult" programs. Further, the lack of a strong "association factor" in many electronically perceived messages continues to lead people to cross traditional informational boundaries.

Even when the content of electronic media is as specialized as book content, it tends to reach a more general audience than similar content in books. One of the unpublicized facts of cable programming is that many stations whose content is specialized do not reach only specialized audiences. According to one extensive market research study, ABC/Hearst's Daytime—which airs diet, fashion, cooking, exercise, and discussion programs aimed at women—draws an audience that is one-third male.²⁹ (This is even more significant when one realizes that most of the available audience during the day is female.) Similarly, although the magazine *Sports Illustrated* is read primarily by men, the same study found that more than one-third of the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) audience is female.³⁰ And while *Playboy's* magazine subscribers are mostly men, 40% of the viewers of "The Playboy Channel" are men and women watching together and, even more surprising, 20% of *Playboy's* television audience is composed of women watching alone.³¹ As a result, the producers of "The Playboy Channel" are now trying to modify the programs to appeal more to women without simultaneously losing the men.³² It might make sense for Helen Gurley Brown or Hugh Hefner to teach people strategies for dealing with (and, at times, misleading) the other sex in books or in magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* or *Playboy*, but such advice on television may backfire because so many members of the other sex are there to overhear it.

New technologies, therefore, are certain to break up the monolithic power of network television, but they are unlikely to divide the audience into clear and traditional categories of age, sex, religion, class, and education. The increase in electronic sources of information will not return us

to the segregated systems of print because almost every person will be able to attend easily to almost any source. New subgroups may develop, but they will be less distinct, less stable, and less recognizable.

Perhaps most overlooked by those who see a return to the segregated systems of the past is the fact that television, as it has existed, is not simply an inefficient alternative to delivering custom-designed programs to individual groups of viewers, nor is it only an economic system developed to distribute goods. Whether by design or accident, television's single web of information has also created a new "shared arena." And this shared arena has its own effects and uses apart from the viewing of specific programs and advertisements. The publicness of television, combined with the fact that television programs have no physical dimensions, do not take up any space in the home, and are passively consumed, has led to an "impersonal" use of television that distinguishes it from most book reading.

Many people read books to tie themselves into a particular network and to reinforce their special identities. That is, they read things that are of special interest to them. Although people likewise watch things about their special interests on television, they also often watch television simply to see what "other people" are interested in or doing.* Summarizing the findings of several "uses and gratifications" studies, for example, John Murray notes that books often serve specific needs related to "personal identity," but television and radio serve much more generalized needs such as escaping boredom, killing time, having something to talk about with others, and keeping in touch with main events in the world.³⁴ In this sense, reading is often used to enhance and crystallize one's *internal* reality; but television is often used as a means of monitoring *external* reality. Although many of the functions of television and reading overlap, television has more of a tendency to plug people from distinct reading circles into one public realm.³⁵

Television has joined the marketplace and the street corner as another environment to be monitored, but not necessarily identified with. Even though many people watch television alone, television is capable of giving the viewer a sense of connection with the outside world and with others who are watching. At the same time, people take much less "responsibility" for what they watch on television than for what they read in books. With television viewing, people often feel they are merely observing what the outside world is like. It is not unusual for a person to watch avidly a television show and yet comment, "My God, I can't believe what the world is coming to!" Ironically, the ability of viewers to

* People also read newspapers to monitor outside events, but even here there is a difference from television. People are generally extremely particular about *which* newspaper they bring into their homes. The writing style, typeface, format, advertising, and so forth are all expected to reflect the reader's personal identity. Further, for the past two decades, polls have shown that Americans feel they get both "most" of their news and their most "trustworthy" news from television.³³

dissociate themselves from the content of television allows for the most widespread sharing of similar information in the history of civilization.

A great part of the social significance of television, therefore, may lie less in what is *on* television than in the very existence of television as a shared arena. Television provides the largest simultaneous perception of a message that humanity has ever experienced. Through television, rich and poor, young and old, scholars and illiterates, males and females, and people of all ages, professions, classes, and religions often share the same or very similar information at the same moment. Through television, Americans may gain a strange sort of communion with each other. In times of crisis—whether an assassination attempt or the taking of American hostages—millions of Americans sit in the glow of their television receivers and watch the same material over and over again in an effort, perhaps, to find comfort, see meaning, and feel united with all the other faceless viewers.

Such times of large-scale sharing of information may be rare, perhaps only a few times a year, yet the knowledge of the existence of the shared arena is in many ways like the knowledge of the existence of the “family home” where relatives can spontaneously gather at times of crisis or celebration. It does not have to be used every day to have constant presence.*

Recognition of television’s role as a new public arena solves a number of mysteries surrounding television viewing, including: why people complain so bitterly about television content but continue to watch so much of it, why many Americans say they turn to television for “most” of their news even though—by any objective standard—there is remarkably little news on television,† and why people who purchase video tape machines often discover that they have little interest in creating “libraries” of their favorite television programs.³⁷

The shared forum of television is an arena for the declaration and confirmation of the “reality” of events. Protests, scandals, and disasters that have not been reported on radio and television do not seem to have “happened.” The Watergate scandals became “real,” not when the *Washington*

*For this reason, there is a big difference between listening to a cassette tape while driving in a car and listening to a radio station, in that the cassette player cuts you off from the outside world, while the radio station ties you in to it. Even with a local radio station, you are “in range” of any news about national and world events. Our radio and television antennae are like feelers we use to monitor the wider environment. Even “ordinary” messages on television or radio are significant messages that implicitly say: “We are not at war, no public official has been shot, no disasters have occurred, . . .” Perhaps one of the reasons Americans feel so much trust in television news, and yet do not support extending the news from 30 to 60 minutes, is that the “real news” comes in the first few minutes, sometimes seconds, of a broadcast. If the lead story is not earth-shattering, then Americans can comfort themselves with the thought that the earth will probably not be shattered for at least another day. Even in the event of a real crisis, a longer daily news is not necessarily desired by viewers because they know that a crisis will generate many late-night news specials.

†The script for an average evening network news broadcast, for example, would fill only about two columns of the front page of *The New York Times*.³⁶

Post reported the stories, but when network television news reported that the *Washington Post* reported the stories. Similarly, civil rights demonstrations and Vietnam War protests became social realities, not when demonstrators took to the streets, but when the disturbances were viewed on television. Despite the distortions inherent in any brief selection of news, the reality of television news is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. When Walter Cronkite proclaimed “And that’s the way it is” at the end of every CBS news broadcast, his statement was true to the extent that whatever is perceived simultaneously by so many people becomes a social reality—regardless of its relationship to an “objective” reality. People will watch things on network television they would not ordinarily choose to read about, therefore, because they feel they are keeping in touch with other Americans and with what is “happening.”³⁸

Implicit vs. Explicit Access

There is a final, subtle but very important point to be made about the different patterns of access to information established by different media: A change in the degree of *explicitness* with which information is made available to different members of the population will affect behavior even if there is no other change in what information people have access to.

One could argue that electronic media do not dramatically change the patterns of access to information available in print. For while print media have many restrictions and segregating tendencies, they can be overcome, and they often are overcome. A bright child, for example, often gets hold of difficult books or magazines on “adult” subjects, a specialist in one field may read books from another field, women may read a magazine directed at men, and a black person may read a pamphlet for white supremacists. In a print culture, therefore, information-systems are not entirely isolated and secure. Even when there were separate “languages” for adults and children and for men and women, children and women did know many of the “forbidden” words and topics.

What is not taken into account in these arguments, however, are the vastly different implications for social behavior between (1) simple access to information and (2) knowledge of that access on the part of others. New access to information will not necessarily affect social interaction unless everyone involved knows about the access. Or, put differently, knowledge of people’s access to information is itself a significant piece of social information.

If children gain access to a book on sex, for example, this new access to information will not necessarily affect parent-child discussions, unless the parents *know* that the children have read the book (perhaps by finding it in a child’s room). Even then, no dramatic change may occur unless the children know that the parents know about the book (perhaps by being there when it is found). Without full awareness, everyone may give every-

one else the "benefit of potential ignorance" and never bring the subject to the surface.

Traditional distinctions among information-systems for different sexes and ages once led to numerous distinct behavior patterns. In adult/child relationships there were three distinct behavioral arenas: adult-adult interaction, child-child interaction, and child-adult interaction. Similarly, in male/female relationships there were also three distinct forums: female-female, male-male, and male-female. Lack of explicit knowledge of exactly what the members of the other group knew helped to maintain distinctions in adult and child behavior and in male and female behavior. Parents did not know what their children knew, and children did not know what their parents knew they knew. Similarly, a person of one sex could never be certain of what a member of the other sex knew. Children, adults, men, and women may have always cursed and spoken among themselves about taboo topics, but they did not usually speak of such things in front of each other.

Television undermines such behavioral distinctions because it encompasses children and adults, men and women, and all other social groups in a single informational sphere or environment. Not only does it provide similar information to everyone, but, even more significant, it provides it publicly and often simultaneously.

Television removes much of the doubt as to what subjects one's children or parents know about. Any topic on any popular situation comedy, talk show, news program, or advertisement—be it death, homosexuality, abortion, male strippers, sex-change operations, political scandals, incest, rape, jock itch, or bras that "lift and separate"—can be spoken about the next day in school, over dinner, or on a date, not only because everyone now knows about such topics, but also because everyone knows that everyone knows, and everyone knows that everyone knows that everyone knows. In fact, it almost seems strange *not* to talk and write about such things. The public and all-inclusive nature of television has a tendency to collapse formerly distinct situations into one. In a society shaped by the segregated situations of print, people may secretly discuss taboo topics, but with television, the very notion of "taboo" is lost.

Compared to print, television tends to include people of all ages, educational backgrounds, sexes, professions, religions, classes, and ethnic backgrounds into a relatively similar informational world. The differences between "types" of people are muted. To the extent that traditional distinctions in group identities, socialization stages, and ranks of hierarchy were based on the isolated situations fostered by print, such distinctions are likely to be blurred by the widespread use of electronic media.