

NO SENSE OF PLACE

The Impact of Electronic Media
on Social Behavior

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The Blurring of Public and Private Behaviors

The impact of electronic media on social situations is not limited to a simple reshuffling of already "public" information. Electronic media do much more than take the information that was once available only in print and deliver it to new audiences. Print media and electronic media also differ in the *type* of information they convey.

Electronic media further integrate information-systems by merging formerly private situations into formerly public ones. In terms of the dramaturgical concepts discussed in earlier chapters, the shift from print media to electronic media is a shift from formal onstage, or front region, information to informal backstage, or back region, information, a shift from abstract impersonal messages to concrete personal ones. And this shift is not related directly to what "subjects" are discussed or to which particular people are placed in front of microphones or cameras, but to basic differences in the *form* of the information presented.

Information Forms

The differences between the types of information conveyed by electronic media and print media can be explained in terms of three dichotomies: communication vs. expression, discursive vs. presentational, and digital vs. analogic.

In one of his analyses of social interaction, Erving Goffman makes a distinction between "expression" and "communication."¹ Although Goffman uses this distinction to suggest what is special about face-to-face encounters, this dichotomy is helpful here because it points to the differences in the type of information conveyed by different media.

"Expression," as defined by Goffman, refers to gestures, signs, vocalizations, marks, and movements produced by the *mere presence* of a per-

son in an environment. The expressions exuded by the individual do not present any explicit "statement" or "argument" about things in general, but they do provide information about the expressing organism. The tone of voice and facial expressions of a person being interviewed, for example, give us some sense of the way the person is feeling and is responding to the interviewer's questions. The information received from expressions is always tied to the expressor and to the specific ongoing situation. Individuals' expressions were once accessible primarily to those in their immediate physical presence.*

In contrast, Goffman narrowly defines "communication" to mean the use of language, or language-like symbols, for the intentional transmission of a "message." In this special sense, "communication" involves purposeful symbolic utterances or written statements about things, events, and ideas. Unlike expression, communication can be abstract. A person writing a book, for example, can communicate about events in other countries, activities that took place in the past or are planned for the future, or unobservable abstractions such as "freedom" and "happiness."

In terms of this distinction, one can start and stop communicating at will, but one cannot stop expressing. Communications are consciously given, but expressions are unconsciously "given off." Expressions are constant and much less controllable than communications. Further, while communications can be about anything, expressions, in one very important sense, are always "about" the individual giving them off. Expressions are personal and idiosyncratic; we look to them to discover how a person feels and what he or she is "like." For these reasons, most important decisions concerning relationships rely much more heavily on expressions than on communications. Few companies will hire new executives without meeting them first, and it is the rare person who chooses to marry someone merely on the basis of a résumé or a writing sample. Communications may provide important "facts," but expressive information is used to form basic "impressions."†

Although Goffman makes no explicit connection between the communication vs. expression dichotomy and the distinction between back and front regions, they are clearly related. Communications, because they are more controllable and manipulable, may be said to have a "front region bias," while expressions, because they reveal personal and private feelings, may be said to have a "back region bias."

One of the major differences between print media and electronic media is that print media contain only communications, while most electronic

media also convey personal expressions. Electronic media make public a whole spectrum of information once confined to private interactions. Electronic media reveal information once exchanged only among people under each other's direct and close observation. In this sense, print media have a "front region bias," while electronic media have a "back region bias." A number of "dating services" have capitalized on the personal nature of electronic media by videotaping their clients for each other's consideration.

For the purpose of comparing print and electronic media, there is a strong parallel between Goffman's distinction between expression and communication and another dichotomy described by philosopher Susanne Langer: discursive vs. presentational symbols.²

Langer distinguishes between discursive symbols, such as language, and presentational symbols, such as pictures. The relationship between a discursive symbol and what it stands for is always different from the relationship between a presentational symbol and its referent. Discursive symbols are abstract and arbitrary; they bear no physical resemblance to the objects and events they describe. The word "dog," for example, does not look like a dog. In addition, discursive symbols are composed of discrete units, such as words, each of which has a meaning independent of the particular arrangement of the elements. The same words can be arranged in different sequences to mean different things ("The dog bit the cat" or "the cat bit the dog"). Making sense of any arrangement of words also involves an agreed upon grammar that has little to do with the things described. If, for example, I try to describe in words two things that have happened simultaneously, I must still mention one of them after the other ("The cat bit the dog just as the man walked out of the house"). There is a structure to discursive symbols that has nothing to do with the structure of reality.

Langer contrasts the form of discursive symbols with the form of presentational (or nondiscursive) symbols, such as pictures or photographs. The presentational symbol has a more direct link with the thing it is about. A picture of something looks like the object; there is a direct physical resemblance. The picture imitates aspects of the real world: shapes, proportions, shadings, colors, and textures. Even stick figures of people look more like people than the word "people" does. Pictures of people and the word "people" are not equivalent symbols.

The elements that make up a picture are much more numerous than the elements of language, but the elements of a picture have no independent meanings. In isolation, for example, dark and light specks of photographic grain are only "blotches." The light and dark specks gain "meaning" only when they are arranged in a pattern that reflects the shape of real objects or people. Sentences, in contrast, have meaning only when they are arranged according to the arbitrary rules of a given grammatical code.

*A few exceptions to the need for direct physical presence are the scent left by an animal or person, a pattern of footprints in the sand, or the style of handwriting in a letter—all of which may provide information about an organism's emotional state.

†Most communication theorists use the term "communication" to include both of these types of information. Thus, although I adhere to Goffman's special, limited notion of communication in this discussion, I use the term in the more typical, generic sense elsewhere in the book.

Because presentational symbols must take a form that resembles reality, they are much less "editable" than discursive symbols. One can describe a landscape in many different words and sentences, but one would not normally cut up a picture of a landscape and rearrange it in different patterns in order to describe it in different ways. Because a photograph is not composed of discrete units strung out in a linear row of meaningful pieces, we do not understand it by looking at one element after another in a set sequence. The photograph is understood in one act of seeing; it is perceived in a gestalt.

The meanings of words and sentences can be explained in other words and sentences, but the "meaning" of one picture cannot be conveyed by viewing another picture. Words can describe other things (including pictures and other words); pictures merely present themselves. The Declaration of Independence can be paraphrased and even translated into other languages, but the essence of pictures such as the Mona Lisa, or of the American Marines placing the flag at Iwo Jima, or of little John Kennedy, Jr. saluting the passing casket at the funeral of his father, or, for that matter, any family snapshot, can be only weakly conveyed in words. "Paraphrasing" is a peculiarity of language. One can express the same thoughts in different words. But it is difficult to express the same picture in different ways. Each picture conveys a unique message. Although I can use my own words to explain Langer's words, it would be impossible to present my own picture to convey an image of Langer.

A presentational symbol cannot be used to "discuss" a specific abstract idea. "Respect," "patriotism," or the theory of gravity cannot be pictured easily. In viewing a picture, we may be reminded of such ideas (i.e., the pictures may bring certain words to mind), but language is needed to conceive of them in the first place.

Langer contends that discursive language is not our only articulate means of communicating. Nondiscursive symbols are another equally important form of mental activity and another "intellectual" means of describing reality. Yet, notes Langer, presentational symbols are often devalued because they cannot be translated directly into discursive language. Symbols such as pictures, sounds, and music simply "present" feelings and emotions without the benefit of words.

The discursive/presentational dichotomy offers another means of distinguishing print and electronic media. Print strips messages of most of their presentational forms; it conveys only discursive information. But most electronic media convey a rich range of presentational information along with discursive symbols. Radio conveys sounds and vocalizations. Television adds visual forms. Like expressions, presentational information is directly tied to specific objects or people in specific contexts. More than print, electronic media tend to unite sender and receiver in an intimate web of personal experience and feeling.

The presentational/discursive distinction is similar to another dichotomy—digital vs. analogic—discussed by Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson in *Pragmatics of Human Communication*.³ Digital symbols are discrete units such as numbers or words. Digital systems are based on discontinuities—either/or. A number is either a 3 or a 4, but not both. A word is either one word or another. Analogic messages, in contrast, are continuous; they are based on the principle of more or less.

The difference between digital and analogic forms is exemplified in the two different types of watches and clocks now available. A digital watch presents the time in discrete units. It is either 12:57 or 12:58 (or some discrete unit in between, such as 12:57 and 10 seconds as opposed to 12:57 and 11 seconds). With an analogic watch, however, time is continuous. A person who sees the time as "12:57 and 10 seconds" on a digital watch, may see the time as "about one o'clock" on an analogic watch. A similar difference exists between a digital calculator and the analogic slide rule. The slide rule is excellent for making "approximations," but it cannot yield precise digital data.

Human communication can also be broken down into digital and analogic systems. The words we speak or write in a letter are digital messages. Words and sentences are discrete units with relatively specific meanings. The blank in the sentence, "I _____ eating fish" might be filled with the word "like" or "hate," one word or another word. But a hug or a handshake or a smile involve analogic expressions. There are no isolated units with independent meaning within a smile; there are no discrete degrees of sincerity in a handshake.

Watzlawick and his colleagues suggest that digital communications convey "content" messages, while analogic expressions convey "relationship" messages. That is, digital communications can be about things in general, while analogic messages tend to reveal how the persons emitting them feel about people and things around them or about the digital messages they are speaking or hearing.

This dichotomy also helps to distinguish between the form of information conveyed in print and electronic media. Print conveys digital information; most electronic media convey both digital and analogic information.

Personal vs. Impersonal Response

The three dichotomies summarized above offer a means of explaining why our responses to print media and to electronic media are so different. Print's communicative-discursive-digital messages and electronic media's expressive-presentational-analogic messages have different possibilities and limitations.

The messages in print and electronic media are about different things. Television, for example, can "present" an object or person in a manner in which verbal descriptions cannot. Thus, if the police hope to capture a

fugitive, a verbal description would be much less helpful in identifying the fugitive than a videotape of the fugitive. Similarly, few people would trade an only photograph of a lost loved one for a poem about the loved one. But presentational messages are severely limited in their own way because they cannot convey abstract ideas or concepts. Thus the *idea* of "fugitive" or "justice" cannot be expressed in a videotaped image. It is possible to photograph two people eating together, but it is impossible to picture the concepts of "kindness," "friendship," or "love." It is possible to present a picture of a specific woman, but it is impossible to picture "femininity." One can present a picture of a ball or of a wedding ring, but the ideas of "toy," "roundness," or "continuity" must be discussed in words. The abstract idea of "great leader" can be spoken about in language, but a picture of a President is only a picture of a specific person.

Further, unless words are used to explain expressions and presentational symbols, their meanings are often ambiguous. Expressive messages have no qualifiers to specify which of several possible interpretations is the correct one. "There are tears of sorrow and tears of joy, the clenched fist may signal aggression or constraint, a smile may convey sympathy or contempt, reticence can be interpreted as tactfulness or indifference."⁴ Similarly, people often rely on a picture's verbal caption to determine the picture's specific meaning.

Ironically, electronic media's analogic messages are both more direct and more ambiguous, more "natural," yet less precise. The analogic message comes directly from the sender/subject; it suggests how the sender/subject "really feels." Yet one cannot base a contract on a smile and a wink. Words must be exchanged if the exact meaning of the message is to be understood.

Electronic media's presentational messages have no equivalents to linguistic grammar or syllogistic logic. A person's gestures or tone of voice cannot be rearranged and edited the way words can be manipulated because gestures and tone of voice are not divided into discrete units. Expressive messages have no logical links, such as "if-thens" or "either-ors." Expressive messages cannot be used to distinguish between the past, the present, and the future, and they cannot be used to make propositional statements that are capable of being proven true or false ("It will rain tomorrow" or "I have three hands"). The thesis of this book could never be developed in a series of television images. Ideas live through language.

Yet the discursive means through which authors convey their messages are highly "impersonal." The words on this page, for example, tell you very little about my personal existence. I may speak with a lisp or a heavy accent. I may have shifty eyes and I may constantly mispronounce words. I may be tall or short, young or old, mischievous or sober. But you cannot tell any of this from the words I write. Even an awkward phrase or a misspelled word cannot be attributed directly to me. Perhaps an editor or a typesetter made the mistake. Print offers shared responsibility, and a

printed page is a shield behind which human idiosyncrasy and frailty may hide. After thirty seconds of face-to-face interaction between us (or after seeing me on television), however, you would know things about my *personal* being that you could not discover from reading everything I have ever written.

The impossibility of translating many of the presentational messages on television into discursive language may explain why television is often looked down upon by many "intellectuals." Yet while most of the messages in television entertainment are hardly "realistic" or "educational" in conventional (discursive) terms, they do present viewers with realistic images and sounds of people and places. These presentational symbols feed our store of "experience" rather than our store of discursive knowledge, arguments, and ideas.

Discursive and presentational forms are so distinct that they are apparently produced and perceived primarily by different hemispheres of our brains.⁵ In most right-handed people, the left hemisphere is the language center and the right hemisphere deals with tasks related to visual and spatial patterns. The left hemisphere is dominant in the handling of linear, sequential, and discrete symbols, but the right hemisphere is the primary realm of images, shapes, feelings, insights, and intuitions.⁶

As a result of all these differences, the messages in television tend to be "about" something different from those of print. Our response to a verbal message (such as a speech printed in the newspaper) is often to ask whether it is true or false, whether the arguments are logical, and whether it is well-written. Print messages can be "issue"- and concept-related. But expressive messages on television often lead to a different response. They are more personal, more tied to the speaker. Expressive messages constantly tell us something about the expressors' orientations to the situation, how they are feeling, and what their emotional response to their own behavior is. A common response to a speech on television, therefore, is to think about the speaker rather than the speech. While watching a politician on television, it is not unusual for people to think or say: "He seems nervous"; "She looks like she's going to cry"; "I don't trust him"; or "She's tough!"

One can choose, of course, to write about very personal matters—as in Augustine's *Confessions* or in letters to *Penthouse* magazine—but unlike presentational media, one's physical self is completely absent. Even when printed words are about intimate matters, the form in which the message is conveyed is impersonal and abstract. Relatively little about the flesh and bones *person* is ever revealed in print. On television, in contrast, one can speak about very impersonal matters, and yet be unable to escape sending, along with the abstract "topic," a broad range of personal cues.

Much more than print media, television thrusts the personal, private realm into the public arena. Television provides the type of information we are accustomed to responding to when we are with family members and friends. Compared to print, television provides a rich personal profile

of the communicator. The separation between private emotion and public communication is blurred. The sudden loss of breath, the welling of tears in the eyes, the voice that cracks with emotion or moves steadily through a difficult passage—all these convey information that is not discursive, digital, or communicative, but presentational, analogic, and expressive. When presidential candidate Edmund Muskie stood on the steps of the *Manchester Union Leader* in 1972 to denounce a newspaper story attacking his wife, the response to the televised message was based primarily on his expressive behavior rather than on his communicated verbal message. Most people remember that Muskie cried; few can remember what he said.

A good example of the differing importance of verbal and nonverbal messages in different media comes from George E. Reedy, who served as Press Secretary for President Johnson. In a 1977 article on Jimmy Carter's use of television, Reedy suggests that, "at the very least, [Carter] has demonstrated that one need not resort to words to put across rather sophisticated points." Reedy suggests that the best example of this comes from Carter's "fireside chat" on the energy crisis.

I have discussed this with individual Americans in many parts of the country and, except for news reporters who had to write stories about it or public officials who had to react to it, I have found no one who can remember anything he said. The fact that he wore a sweater while delivering the statement, however, has become legend and, significantly, everyone to whom I have talked ascribed a complex meaning to the act.⁷

The presentational nature of television affects our response to presidential debates and elections. The campaigns on television are rarely about issues; they are about personality and style. Media advisors often play more important roles in campaigns than political advisors and speech writers. In general, it is important for politicians to avoid getting upset or looking angry during television appearances. A politician's demeanor on television is often more important than his political programs. On the night of the Carter-Reagan debate, Reagan aide James Baker passed Reagan an index card with one word of advice: "Chuckle!"⁸ When most people think back on such televised debates they tend to remember the general style and emotional state of the participants rather than their specific verbal arguments.

There is no great mystery to the focus on the expressive aspects of television's messages. It is not as if television deadens people to verbal messages to an "abnormal" degree. The same focus on expressive information exists in many interpersonal encounters. Anthropologist Albert Mehrabian's studies of nonverbal behavior suggest that the relative weight people give to messages in face-to-face encounters is 7% to the verbal, 38% to vocal inflection, and 55% to facial expression.⁹ If these figures are accurate, more than 90% of the meaning of a message is derived from expressions rather than "communications." This explains why, when two peo-

ple go out on a first date, they carefully monitor each other's expressions to get a sense of how good a time the other person is having. The formulaic verbal messages ("That was a very good movie" or "I had a very nice time") provide relatively little pertinent information.

It is primarily in written language that the words themselves become all-important. Without nonverbal cues, careful construction and rewriting are needed to capture the correct "feeling." Sarcasm, teasing, and other nuances of meaning are easily lost in letters and books. This is why even intimate love letters tend to have a "formal" quality, while many business meetings or telephone conversations seem quite intimate and personal.

In face-to-face encounters, the significance of the verbal message is inversely related to the amount of available vocal and gestural information. When nonverbal information is weak or absent, the verbal information becomes more dominant. The attention to a speaker's verbal message, therefore, varies with interpersonal distance. The closer the distance between people, the less attention paid to the verbal message.¹⁰ A group of friends tightly clustered around a restaurant table rarely produces a conversation that would be fully understandable from a transcript of the words they have spoken. In intimate encounters, sentences are not completed, there are changes in tense, and numerous grammatical errors are made. Less care is taken to construct and to listen to words when other sources of information are available.

There are several reasons why the focus on expressive messages may be even greater on television than in face-to-face interaction. Although very close physical proximity is the exception rather than the rule in live encounters, the opposite is true on television. There are few, if any, people to whom a viewer is supposed to respond who are not seen extensively in close-up. Further, the one-way direction of information flow allows the viewer to do something that is generally considered impolite in face-to-face interaction—*stare*. Finally, in live interactions, a person cannot devote all his or her energy to monitoring the behavior of others because he or she is also deeply involved both in producing expressions and communications and in thinking about how other people are monitoring those behaviors. But with television, the viewer can slump in a chair and focus exclusively on the expressive behavior of those televised. The viewer remains unobserved and relatively inexpressive. (Indeed, for all these reasons, television may have been a stimulus to the recent growth of the field of nonverbal communication.)

Because of the rich expressive dimensions of television, interviews on television are completely different from print interviews. On television, even a "no comment" or a long pause is a meaningful and significant "answer." It is rich in expressive information. It shows the speaker's response to the situation and to the content of the question, even though the response is essentially nonverbal. One of the most popular programs on television, "60 Minutes," often uses footage of interviewees pausing between words or stammering. Very tight close-ups are often used, so

tight, in fact, that any move of the head makes it appear that the subject is trying to escape scrutiny. Such shots seem to suggest that the interviewee is hiding something or is dishonest. (In a sense, the use of such shots may itself be a kind of deception, because sudden head movements or the expressive signs of discomfort do not necessarily mean deception; they can simply signify excitement, nervousness in front of a camera, tiredness, a lapse in memory, or an upset stomach.)

Although some analysts attribute the new "personal" coverage and exposure of political leaders to a conscious decision on the part of journalists and editors, it is more likely that the new bias is supported by the ability of electronic media to "capture" personal attributes. It now seems fair (and necessary) literally to "expose" the personalities of leaders because the revealing behavior emanates from the leaders themselves, and unlike quotes in a newspaper, expressive behavior cannot be easily rearranged or edited.* If a politician cries while speaking a certain sentence, it is not necessary to mention it in print, but you cannot play a tape of the words without also conveying the crying. It is fitting that in the jargon of broadcast journalism, taped reports and interviews are called "actualities"; the expressions are allowed to "speak" for themselves.

For a number of reasons, the decisions surrounding the broadcast of a videotape of a person are different from the decisions to quote someone in a newspaper. If I overhear a politician swearing, and I print the words, I seem to take some responsibility for them, as well. If, however, I record the words and expressions on audio or videotape and then broadcast them, the words and expressions seem to come more directly from the speaker, and my responsibility (though arguably the same) seems greatly diminished.

In this sense, when magazine editors printed a picture of Vice President Nelson Rockefeller making an obscene gesture in response to hecklers in 1976,¹¹ the editors deferred responsibility for the gesture's appearance in their magazine to Mr. Rockefeller. Yet had no photographer caught the event on film, it is unlikely that the same editors would have printed an artist's rendering of the gesture or a detailed verbal description. The ability to capture personal expressions through cameras and microphones increases the extent of their incorporation into the public record.

*Films and videotapes can, of course, be "edited" in the sense that strips of action can be arranged in any sequence or cut to any length. But one cannot manipulate a person's actions and speech on videotape or film quite as freely as one can edit words on a page. In print, an editor may add words, delete words, change punctuation, and perhaps alter the spellings from American to British (in a sense, changing the author's "accent"). With film and tape, however, the deletion of a word is often obvious, the addition of a word almost impossible, and a sentence cut off in the middle sounds odd. To edit out a whole phrase or sentence, videotape editors must often cut to another shot (such as an interviewer nodding) so as to avoid a "jump cut" in which a person's head, body, and hands suddenly jump to a new position. Even the smoothest editing job, however, cannot change the cadence of a person's speaking or edit out a tone that smacks of conceit or uncertainty.

The expressive nature of electronic messages offers one explanation of why the public is no longer offended by the idea of political ghost writers. Presidents and politicians once wrote (or claimed that they wrote) all their own speeches. After all, if most people in the country can only *read* what you have to say, they will want to believe that you really wrote the words yourself. If someone else wrote the words, there would be no message directly from or about you. The expressions accompanying a speech over radio or television, however, are so personal and revealing in themselves, that the authorship of the words is now less significant.* Indeed, a politician speaking on television could probably please an audience even by reciting a collection of quotes from others' essays and poems that reflected his or her philosophy. Conversely, a politician might alienate an audience by having someone else *deliver* a media speech—even if the words were written by the politician. On television, expressions usually dominate words.

The personal and emotional response to expressive cues on television explains some otherwise baffling findings in political polls. In recent years, pollsters have found a split between the voters' political views and their personal feelings toward politicians. In February 1982, for example, only 47% of the national population approved of "the way Ronald Reagan is handling his job as President," yet 70% approved of him "as a person."¹³ Another poll found that nearly a third of those interviewed disapproved of Ronald Reagan's policies, yet personally "liked him."¹⁴ In an electronic age, therefore, it is quite possible that many people will vote for candidates with whom they largely disagree, or vote against candidates who share their political philosophy. Such voting behavior would be unthinkable if the voters only had access to transcripts of the candidates' speeches and policy statements; it only makes sense when the voters feel they "know" the candidates personally.

The programs that thrive on television depend heavily on expressive rather than communicative content. The transcripts of talk shows such as the "Tonight" show and of game shows such as "Family Feud" would make boring and unenlightening reading. Talk shows do not succeed because of talk. And in spite of the common belief that quiz shows are "educational" in a traditional sense, little or nothing is "communicated" in these shows. Game shows, however, are rich in expressions. People are placed in situations of stress and they react and respond. (Indeed, potential contestants are screened for their expressiveness.¹⁵) The "learning" in these programs comes from the "truth" and "reality" inherent in human behavior and experience.

*Although I have focused on media such as radio and television, the loudspeaker also has had a tremendous impact on the style of public address. With a microphone and amplifier, for example, a speaker could speak more softly and intimately, and more nuances of expression could emerge. It is probably no coincidence that the first use of amplifiers for presidential addresses, the birth of broadcasting, and the formal addition of a "speechwriter" to the President's staff all took place in the same year.¹²

The most expensive content on television—advertising—also relies much more heavily on expression than on communication. Few campaigns for nationally advertised products present a formal, logical, verbal “argument” for buying their product. Instead, they present people in highly expressive situations: smiling, laughing, hugging, kissing, singing, running, playing, or diving into water (often in slow motion). The implicit nonverbal arguments are that buying the advertised product will make you feel good, make you more huggable and lovable. Even when verbal messages are used, they often push discursive words as far as possible toward nonlinear presentational messages (“Have a Coke and a smile”; “Me and my RC”; “Coke is it”). The expressive messages of advertising are almost impossible to regulate. As nondiscursive presentations, they cannot be proven true or false. If a diet soft drink commercial *said*, “Drink this and you’ll be beautiful and have beautiful friends to play volleyball with on the beach,” they could be prosecuted for fraud. But commercials rarely make such verbal claims. They do not appeal to rationality, but to the emotions and the senses.

It is not surprising that advertisers would want to circumvent rationality, but it is upsetting to realize that television news and documentaries often do the same. Transcripts of television newscasts often contain surprisingly little “information,” and they seem strangely informal compared to newspaper reporting. The style of television news is often more suited to the neighborhood coffee shop than to the newspaper column.* Videotaped segments on the news frequently contain much more expression than communication. A microphone and camera thrust in the face of an airplane crash survivor or a mother who has just heard that her son has been killed yield very little communicated information, but offer viewers a rich source of expression.

*I still remember my surprise the first time I read a transcript of the “CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite.” The news program was aired on October 25, 1972, and began as follows: “Good evening. North Vietnam today stepped up its propaganda war over the subject of peace. Hanoi said President Nixon is tricky, and crafty, and the real stumbling block to peace in Indo-China, not President Thieu of South Vietnam. In Paris meanwhile, the Viet Cong said a cease-fire could come within hours, but not until Mr. Nixon either dumps Thieu, or gets him to accept a coalition government.” These words *sound* fine when read out loud, but they are very different from the reporting style of respected newspapers. Note the informal constructions and the use of words such as “tricky,” “crafty,” “dumps,” and “gets.” Later in the same broadcast, Cronkite opened another serious story with the line, “More of those deadly little letter bombs turned up today.” The next day’s *New York Times* reported the same events quite differently. The mention of the Communists’ accusations was buried deep within the story on the cease-fire and began as follows: “The Communists’ statements from various quarters concentrated . . . on warning that they would fight on to victory if a settlement was not reached. There were renewed accusations that peace reports were a ‘political trick’ by the United States designed to ‘dupe public opinion.’” One of the two newspaper stories on the letter bombs began, “Explosive devices sent by mail critically injured an Arab postman and a secretary here today, and other letter-bombs exploded or were intercepted in Algeria, Libya and Egypt.”¹⁶

The informality of television news content is often supported by a chatty style and informal interaction among newscasters. (This is especially true for local news programs.) Indeed, the perceived quality of the relationship among television news “teams” is often the key to the success or failure of a news program. The quips and interchanges are generally low-level communications, but they are meaningful expressions. They are intended to make the viewer feel that the newscasters are “nice people” and that they are friends off the set.

One of the oddities of television news is the fact that the newscasters become part of the news in a way that newspaper reporters rarely do. Broadcast reporters and interviewers are also personally exposed on television. Because we experience their personal expressions and responses to events, they are now as prominent as the public figures and stories they report on. After revealing the personalities and homes of many world leaders and celebrities, veteran interviewer Barbara Walters felt it only fair and sensible that she do a television program on her own home and personal life. Similarly, Walter Cronkite’s retirement from the “CBS Evening News” was itself a major news story.

If, as discussed above, expressions are ambiguous and imprecise, why do so many television programs, including news shows, rely heavily on them, and why are viewers apparently so accepting of them? Expressions are powerful and effective because they seem more natural and real than words. Expressions come directly from a human being, and the sender has significantly less control over them than over communications. A person can lie verbally much more easily than he or she can “lie” nonverbally.¹⁷ An unethical person could say or write the false statement: “I love you.” But it is much more difficult to *express* the same feeling nonverbally—especially over an extended period of time—unless it is true. Even beyond the issue of truth and falsity, however, is the basic sense that one has “met” or “knows” the persons one sees on television because one experiences their personal expressions.

It is also very difficult to have people change or manipulate their expressive behavior on demand. A threat or a twisted arm might force someone to write something he or she does not believe (such as a confession to a crime), but it is much more difficult to coerce someone into “sounding sincere.” Further, expressive messages are so “personal” that it is very difficult for most people to “forge,” or accurately mimic, another person’s expressions. As an April Fool’s prank, you might type a letter to a friend and sign it with the name of the friend’s employer. If you do a good job, your friend may take the letter at face value. Yet if you call your friend on the telephone and pretend to be the employer, your task is much more difficult because you must capture the vocal style of the employer. And if you come to the door of your friend’s house (or send a videotape) and pretend to be the employer, your chances of fooling your friend are very slim.

While words carry more precise meanings than expressions, they are often untrustworthy or insufficient when they are isolated on a page. When words are seen on a printed page, it is impossible to tell if they are composed out of fear or confidence, spoken with humility or conceit. It may be difficult to ascertain the true authorship of words, and it is impossible to check the sincerity of a statement by looking to expressions for evidence of deception. Even accurate quotes in a newspaper may be denied later by their speakers.

For all these reasons, expressive "evidence" on videotape is very powerful. Many police departments have found that videotaped confessions yield higher rates of conviction than written confessions because it is more difficult for defendants to deny such a confession or claim that it was forced out of them.¹⁸ Similarly, the FBI's Abscam videotapes of U.S. Congressmen accepting bribes presented much stronger evidence than would have been provided by verbal accounts of witnesses. For the same reasons, the "living will"—a videotape of a person speaking his or her own last will and testament—is growing more popular. It is difficult to contest a will in which your wealthy Uncle Harold leaves you only a spare tire, when you see and hear Harold himself bestowing that gift on you.

The relative difficulty of controlling or forging expressive messages explains why electronic media are more intimate, personal, and revealing than print media. The rich range of expressive information in television suggests a reason for the claim by many Americans that they find television the most "trustworthy" of all sources of news.* For even though the news on television is highly packaged, with much information coming from the same sources used by newspapers and radio, at least there is someone you "know personally" speaking it to you. The power of expressive messages is also probably the source of the credibility of "hidden camera" interviews, person-on-the-street interviews, and such shows as "Real People."

Different electronic media vary in terms of the range of expressive cues they transmit. Radio, for example, conveys only vocal expressions. Those who are capable of managing their vocalizations well may be able to use the medium very effectively—even if they cannot control other expressions simultaneously. A nervous speaker may be able to control his or her voice, but not the nervous shaking of a leg or swaying of the body. Radio is more revealing than print, but radio remains an active filter of any expressive cues that are visual.

The trend from print media to electronic media (and from radio to television), therefore, is a trend from formal and social front region messages to informal and personal back region messages. Print media present crafted, stylized messages, while electronic media present spontaneous

*According to the Roper surveys, television has been viewed as the most believable source of news since 1961. Since 1968, it has held better than a two-to-one margin over the next most believable source, newspapers.¹⁹

and "natural" messages. Even when the "content" of news and entertainment programs is tightly scripted and planned, the expressions of the individuals in them present a "slice of life" view that is not comparable to printed messages. All other things being equal, electronic media tend to merge personal and public spheres.

The merger of personal and public has a dual effect on the information-systems associated with people of different ages, professions, and educational backgrounds. The expressive nature of electronic media of communication both homogenizes access to information and merges the general types of images projected by different people into the public realm.

Expressive messages are more equally accessible than verbal and printed messages. As Watzlawick and his colleagues note, young children, mental patients, and animals can accurately assess the general meaning of expressions, even when the linguistic cues are not meaningful to them.²⁰ Similarly, two researchers of nonverbal behavior, Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen, note that a lay person's interpretation of expressive messages often coincides with those of experts.²¹

Although people could never learn a strange foreign language from reading a book written in that language, they can generally make some sense of the information presented by foreigners interacting on television. The "language" of action, vocalization, and interaction is rich in meaningful expressions. Lech Walesa, leader of the Polish workers' union, Solidarity, became an international hero through television even though many of his admirers could neither understand the words he spoke nor comprehend the complexity of the issues his union dealt with. Similarly, the average American may not understand all the implications of a politician's policy statements, but anyone can grasp the "meaning" of a campaign advertisement that shows a politician eating breakfast with his or her family, and anyone can sense the implications of an FBI sting film that shows a politician stuffing money in his or her pockets.

The expression/communication distinction sheds more light on the differences between reading habits and television viewing habits, as discussed in the last chapter. A book on a mental hospital may contain specialized discursive data which can be understood only by those with training in the subject. But while a television show may discuss similar specialized topics, the program usually presents very nonspecialized information as well. In one sense, all television programs that present the behavior of people are about the same thing: human gesture, feeling, and emotion. The expressive quality of television makes almost any television program accessible to the average viewer.

The heavy reliance on expressions in electronic media also tends to equalize the types of messages sent by different people. While some people have more pleasant and persuasive expressive styles than other people, there are no clear graded levels of expressive competence. One does not learn "to express" by going to Harvard. Even animals and children can express "effectively"—though not necessarily to the effect desired.

There may be ways to teach people to express more pleasingly, but our educational system takes that realm of behavior for granted.*

Every organism exudes expressions, and children and illiterates may be, at times, more pleasing expressors than renowned scholars and poets. The writing styles of people of different ages and educational backgrounds vary much more predictably than their presentational styles. While essays, articles, and books must be composed by trained "authors," the content of a video "essay" can be provided by almost any passing man, woman, child, or animal. In these terms, there is an underlying similarity among the messages presented by different people on television—a similarity that does not exist in any other form of communication except face-to-face interaction. Groups of people who were excluded from the public forum created by print because they lacked the requisite entry skills are now able to participate in the public arena created by electronic media.

There are, of course, expressive "superstars," people whose personal styles are pleasing to large sections of the population, people who are not only *able* to express (as we all are), but able to express in a way that many people find exciting. Talk show hosts such as Phil Donahue obviously have exceptional expressive abilities that can make them public "personalities," but, ironically, part of the appeal of Donahue's programs is that almost any member of his show's studio audience seems capable of providing some comedy or drama.

Further, those people who are excellent expressors are not necessarily excellent "communicators." The charismatic Lech Walesa, for example, is a powerful expressor in person and on television; but he would not command much attention in printed speeches or books. As *Time* magazine reports:

His working-class Polish is rough and often ungrammatical. . . . His speeches frequently are riddled with mixed metaphors and skewed analogies; Solidarity's leaders admit that Walesa . . . is more intuitive than intellectual. He rather defiantly claims that he has never read a serious book in his life.

Yet Walesa got through his message of hope to his countrymen. Said a Warsaw journalist: "Sometimes he doesn't even make any sense, but he is always reassuring."²²

The accessibility of expressions compared to the elitism of discursive communications may explain why most people feel that they do not need political experts to help them interpret and understand televised political "speeches." And the "truth" and "reality" of all people's expressive mes-

*Actors are among the few people who consciously study expressive skills. In contrast to the stage, however, television "acting" often means learning how to behave "naturally" and pretending that no camera is present. Many business leaders now take training in speaking into television cameras so that they can address their employees through videotapes (or star in their companies' TV commercials). But again, a major part of their training is learning how to be comfortable about the presence of a camera. We know from the television series "Candid Camera" how good many unselfconscious "performers" can be.

sages explains, in turn, why the televised reactions of the person-on-the-street are so acceptable in news programs and documentaries.

The information form of electronic media is changing our perceptions of the world and its people. And through electronic "documents," future generations will experience a new sort of past. "History" was once a discursive script written and acted by the rich, the powerful, and the educated. Because of their discursiveness, historical sources were also filled with arguments, propositions, ideas, and ideals. The growing archives of audio and video tape, however, thrust the common person into history; simultaneously, they reveal what is common even about our leaders. And the "language" of these records is the expressive-presentational-analogic form of gesture, feeling, and experience. It is not surprising that in the last three decades many historians have discovered a new vacuum in our understanding of the past—the everyday experience of the common people who did not write down their thoughts and who did not make history, but who only occupied it. A whole new historical industry has developed that involves analyzing parish documents, gravestones, and other traces of "the world we have lost."²³

"Imprint of" vs. "Report on"

All media act as filters that exclude aspects of "reality." Each medium, however, is a different type of filter. The more abstract, obtrusive, and slow the encoding process, the less messages resemble the things they are about. And the less messages resemble reality, the more the medium can be used to present stylized and idealized images of events. Conversely, the more the medium simply "captures" what is happening in a situation, without any particular effort on the part of those present, the more messages will closely resemble the behavior they are about. And the more messages are tied to real behavior and events, the less they can be manipulated and controlled. In this sense, slow, obtrusive media have a "front region bias," while fast, unobtrusive media have a "back region bias."

Written and printed messages tend to be more formal than electronically conveyed messages. Sitting down to write a letter involves an abstract, obtrusive code. It is difficult to forget about the intervening medium because you must "translate" information into its form. But sitting down in front of a microphone or television camera does not involve a complex recording activity. You simply "behave," and a "message" is automatically "captured."

The informality of electronic messages is heightened when the medium is bidirectional and interactive. Speaking to someone on the telephone, for example, is so natural that we almost forget about the intervening medium. (We often say "I spoke to _____ last night," not even thinking to add that it was a telephone conversation. We rarely say "I spoke" when we mean that we wrote someone a letter.) Because of the unobtrusiveness of the medium and its code, the telephone conversation is much more

spontaneous and much less contrived than most letters. Letters to a close friend are often more stylized than telephone conversations with a stranger. People often rewrite letters several times, but rarely does one say on the telephone: "Let me start this conversation again."

This analysis also explains why one post-print medium—the telegraph—tends to be even more formal and less expressive than print. The telegraph's Morse Code is a code of a code. A student's letter asking for money from his or her parents would contain less expressive information than a telephone call involving the same request. But a telegram would be the least expressive of all three. It, like a hieroglyph, deals with stock communicative phrases ("IN TROUBLE STOP SEND FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS STOP LOVE BOB"). For the same reason, computer messages can be rather "stuffy" when the computer is used for discursive communication rather than presentational information.

The striking difference in formality of the telegraph compared to the telephone is suggested by the first messages that have commonly been attributed to these media. Morse's first telegraph message is said to have been either "What Hath God Wrought?" or "Attention Universe!" Both messages are highly formal and abstract; they are clearly front region messages. They convey little personal expression or affect. The first telephone message, in sharp contrast, is reported to have been "Watson, come here, I need you"—a personal, back region message.

If the content of a medium requires complex encoding, then the encoder needs time and effort to formulate messages. The encoding energy and time pull the sender out of live, ongoing situations. In live interactions, one can compliment a cook while eating a meal, but to write about a delicious meal, one must usually wait until the meal is over.

The burden of writing, however, can also be a blessing. The time a person *must* take to write something can be used to facilitate the more careful crafting and molding of the final message. The time can be used to eliminate mistakes, resolve ambiguities, and hide the fact that one needs time to construct and edit the message. Thus, we may feel that a postcard written to hosts a week after a visit may better convey our thoughts about the visit than the spontaneous thank you's mumbled as farewells were said.

The great traumas of writing are hidden by the delays inherent in the medium. Just transcribing and proofreading an essay take a great amount of time. Anxieties, revisions, doubts, sweating, and swearing can all be concealed within this buffer time zone. Writing not only excludes all expressive behavior, it also conceals the physical process of producing the message. A final essay, therefore, can have a tone of confidence and formality foreign to the first fumbling drafts.

The more slowly messages are encoded, sent, and received, the more formal their typical content. Slow messages must "summarize" events; instantaneous messages can present a "transcript" or an "imprint" of events. A moment-by-moment account is less organized, involves many insignificant details, and contains many aspects of behavior that role per-

formers would often prefer to keep secret. An instantaneous message is "messier" and more back region in flavor.

In writing a letter to a close friend, for example, you might summarize events of the last few weeks or months. You might tell your friend how the weather has been, that your child has begun to talk, or that you have been growing your own vegetables. Yet if in the middle of your letter writing, the same friend calls you on the telephone, the type of information you convey often changes. While the letter provides a general summary of the past, the telephone conversation often deals with the specifics of the present. You may look out the window and comment on the wind blowing your lawn chairs over, or you may have to get off the phone for a moment to tell your child to stop screaming in the next room. On the phone, your tone of voice might reveal that you are tired today, and you may feel obligated to explain that your stomach is a bit upset from eating a bad tomato. Even when the subject matter is the same—you and your life—the letter tends to present a more formal front region view, while the telephone conversation includes informal, moment-to-moment, back region experiences.

In the same manner, television's live coverage of events is more back region in style than newspaper accounts. Television reports of hostage situations, assassination attempts, union negotiations, and airport accidents include the stream of moment-to-moment rumors, suggestions, indecisions, anxieties, and incorrect assumptions. The choppy, disorganized, and mostly uninformative live coverage of a man's threat to blow up the Washington Monument in 1982 demonstrated how little police and reporters actually knew about what was going on. The newspaper stories the next day presented a much cleaner image.

Similarly, when John W. Hinckley, Jr., attempted to kill President Reagan, the videotape recording showed the disorganized scuffle around the assassin and his victims. Television news then reported that Press Secretary James Brady was dead and carried an announcement by Secretary of State Alexander Haig saying that, according to the Constitution, he was in charge at the White House, pending the return of the Vice President. Then, television news reported that James Brady was alive and that Haig was mistaken in his claim of authority. Then, the misinformation and mistakes on the part of reporters and officials became news stories themselves.²⁴

Most television news is not "live," but unlike other media, television has the constant potential for instantaneous visual and aural coverage. In times of crisis, therefore, we expect television to use this potential. The videotape of the Hinckley assassination attempt went on the air four minutes after the first shot was fired.²⁵ The speed of the spread of news forced other actions to occur quickly. According to later reports, Alexander Haig rushed to speak to the press because he feared that silence from the government would be interpreted at home and abroad as a sign of confusion and leaderlessness. The result was that he literally ran to the press room,

and came before the cameras out of breath and sweating, thereby contributing to the impression he hoped to forestall.²⁶ Similarly, television reporters felt the pressure to confirm or deny the rumor of Brady's death quickly. In one instance, CBS correspondent Lesley Stahl saw White House aides "dissolved in tears," which she suggested to viewers probably meant that Brady *had* died. Unknown to her at the time, the White House aides had just heard the false report of Brady's death on another television network!²⁷

In a sense, the instantaneous coverage of television created some of these "events." In an earlier time, the slower reporting would have filtered out many of these stories. The rumor that James Brady was dead, for example, might never have been reported, and then, certainly, the fact that there were mistaken reports concerning Brady's death would not have become a significant news event. The small details, mistakes, and confusions would have been hidden and forgotten in the invisible backstage fostered by the slower print media (just as the letter to your friend would probably not mention overturned lawn chairs, a screaming child, a bad tomato, and tiredness on a particular afternoon). Further, because government officials would have been unable to give an instantaneous response to the nation, a few hours delay could not have been interpreted as a sign of confusion.

Slowness, of course, is not a guarantee of accuracy (witness the headline "Dewey Defeats Truman"), but the speed of encoding in television, combined with its wide spectrum of nonverbal information, leads to a new degree of exposure of the many details, fluctuations, and uncertainties that were traditionally filtered out in newspaper reports. What was once part of the backstage area of life is now presented as "news."^{*}

Thus, while much of the *content* of news is shaped by journalistic decisions and by political and economic factors, the *form* of the news is often greatly affected by the nature of the medium. For whether one believes that television news in the United States is biased or unbiased, controlled

*Motion pictures stand between print and electronic media in terms of this variable. Film must be developed before it is projected. Filmed newsreels and interviews can be screened and edited in the backstage created by such necessary delays. But the telephone, radio, and television permit (and therefore, in a sense, demand) instant "live" coverage and transmission. If John Hinckley's attack on Ronald Reagan had been filmed instead of videotaped, for example, there would have been time for the Secret Service and the FBI to request a screening of the film before it played on television. There would have been time for authorities to ask for a delay in its showing or to decide that parts were too graphic to display on television. And the public need not have been informed of such control and censorship since films can *never* be shown immediately. Because electronic images can be transmitted instantly, any attempts at control or censorship become difficult and apparent. Such "biases" of electronics sometimes operate even in countries where the press is tightly controlled by the government. When the Pope visited Poland in 1983, for example—in part to criticize the government—the possibility of covering his trip "live" seemed to demand at least some live coverage. As a result, the Polish people heard serious criticism of their government on the government's own radio and television.

or free, censored or uncensored, its style remains very distinct from print news.

The speed with which messages can now travel from senders to receivers limits the rehearsal and preparation time for many social performers (and makes whatever backstage time *is* taken more apparent). Even when one sits down to write a letter "immediately," several hours may be spent preparing the message. But if one is interviewed on the telephone, radio, or television, the message may have to be developed on the spot. The beginning of a sentence must be spoken before the end of the sentence is fully formed. The apparent inarticulateness of many of our leaders today may be related more to this change in media than to a decline in our leaders' basic intelligence.

Regardless of the specific symbol system used, all written messages separate behavior from reports of behavior. Electronic media, however, present behavior and experience much more directly. Many of us are willing to share with our friends detailed verbal or written descriptions of our experiences. But we would not necessarily want our friends to be present during all the situations we describe. Similarly, few of us would want even our closest friends to monitor constantly our behaviors and interactions through a video and/or sound system.

A written or verbal account of an event can be "packaged" and "cleaned up." An executive may tell his or her spouse that a training session for employees went "very well." The executive may forget to mention that at one point he or she tripped over a chair. And the executive may be largely unaware of the degree to which he or she made speaking errors, paced back and forth, or left out steps in a sequence of arguments. Clearly, whatever the executive later *says* about the event is not equivalent to the spouse having experienced the event directly. Thus, even in a technically "public" performance, such as a talk before one's employees, there may be many "back region" idiosyncrasies and mistakes that performers do not care to have publicized beyond the situation of their occurrence. A videotape of the executive's performance, however, would tend to carry such situation-specific behaviors beyond the live setting.

Electronic media, of course, do not simply "present" an event. Whenever you aim a camera or microphone in one direction, for example, you inevitably ignore things in every other direction. But electronic imprints of events do not allow for a clear separation between the "stream of behavior" in a situation and the information about the situation made available—later or simultaneously—to those not physically present. (Indeed, a videotape of an event may even shock and upset participants in the event who are not accustomed to seeing themselves "as others see them.") Cameras and microphones tend to force people to have memories and accounts of events that resemble the electronically captured images and sounds. As many politicians have discovered recently, it is impossible to deny quotes once they have been preserved on audiotape.

For these reasons, no doubt, many judges and legislators are hesitant to permit the televising of trials and legislative sessions. A written statement or a brief public appearance allows for a highly controlled performance. But it is much more difficult for someone to sustain a good "onstage" performance during many grueling hours of a trial or legislative debate. A camera at such events may capture public officials looking tired, getting angry, yawning, scratching an itch, picking their noses, or not paying attention. It is interesting to imagine how our image of great leaders of the past would change if we had thousands of hours of videotape of them instead of having only transcripts of their speeches and glowing (and sanitized) descriptions of their actions.

The live, ongoing nature of most electronic communications makes it much more difficult (and at times, impossible) to separate the public thread of experience from the private one. A wide spectrum of behavior is conveyed through electronic media. Emotions and feelings "leak out" through television. A depressed person may be able to write a cheerful note, but unable to make a cheerful telephone call. Not only does the nature of electronic media make it simple to forget that one's behaviors are mediated, but it also leaves one few options even if one remembers. For when the camera captures how you behave, then how you choose to act *for the camera* is also how you *really* behave in the situation, and how you behave in the situation is how the camera captures you. When a wedding is videotaped, or when the reunion of hostages and their loved ones is televised, the record of the event is an imprint of the behaviors themselves. Clearly, there is a relationship between private behavior and public message in electronic media that does not exist in print media.

Given the principles developed in Part I, this discussion offers another reason why the widespread use of television and other electronic media may be having a profound effect on social behavior. To the extent that traditional distinctions among various group identities, different stages of socialization, and different ranks of authority were dependent on pre-electronic distinctions between public messages and personal, expressive behaviors, we would expect significant changes in a wide spectrum of social roles.

This analysis has suggested that electronic media lead to a form of interaction that was once found exclusively in immediate physical interaction. All that has been discussed, therefore, brings us to the threshold of the subject of the final chapter in this part of the book. For when electronic media begin to provide the information once available only when participants met in the same place at the same time, then electronic media begin to reshape the meaning of "place" itself.