

dermine rational discourse, its emotional power is so great that it could arouse sentiment against the Vietnam War or against more virulent forms of racism. These and other beneficial possibilities are not to be taken lightly.

But there is still another reason why I should not like to be understood as making a total assault on television. Anyone who is even slightly familiar with the history of communications knows that every new technology for thinking involves a trade-off. It giveth and taketh away, although not quite in equal measure. Media change does not necessarily result in equilibrium. It sometimes creates more than it destroys. Sometimes, it is the other way around. We must be careful in praising or condemning because the future may hold surprises for us. The invention of the printing press itself is a paradigmatic example. Typography fostered the modern idea of individuality, but it destroyed the medieval sense of community and integration. Typography created prose but made poetry into an exotic and elitist form of expression. Typography made modern science possible but transformed religious sensibility into mere superstition. Typography assisted in the growth of the nation-state but thereby made patriotism into a sordid if not lethal emotion.

Obviously, my point of view is that the four-hundred-year imperial dominance of typography was of far greater benefit than deficit. Most of our modern ideas about the uses of the intellect were formed by the printed word, as were our ideas about education, knowledge, truth and information. I will try to demonstrate that as typography moves to the periphery of our culture and television takes its place at the center, the seriousness, clarity and, above all, value of public discourse dangerously declines. On what benefits may come from other directions, one must keep an open mind.

3.

Typographic America

In the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, there appears a remarkable quotation attributed to Michael Welfare, one of the founders of a religious sect known as the Dunkers and a long-time acquaintance of Franklin. The statement had its origins in Welfare's complaint to Franklin that zealots of other religious persuasions were spreading lies about the Dunkers, accusing them of abominable principles to which, in fact, they were utter strangers. Franklin suggested that such abuse might be diminished if the Dunkers published the articles of their belief and the rules of their discipline. Welfare replied that this course of action had been discussed among his co-religionists but had been rejected. He then explained their reasoning in the following words:

When we were first drawn together as a society, it had pleased God to enlighten our minds so far as to see that some doctrines, which we once esteemed truths, were errors, and that others, which we had esteemed errors, were real truths. From time to time He has been pleased to afford us farther light, and our principles have been improving, and our errors diminishing. Now we are not sure that we are arrived at the end of this progression, and at the perfection of spiritual or theological knowledge; and we fear that, if we should feel ourselves as if bound and confined by it, and perhaps be unwilling to receive further improvement, and our successors still more so, as conceiving what we their elders and founders had done, to be something sacred, never to be departed from.¹

Franklin describes this sentiment as a singular instance in the history of mankind of modesty in a sect. Modesty is certainly the word for it, but the statement is extraordinary for other reasons, too. We have here a criticism of the epistemology of the written word worthy of Plato. Moses himself might be interested although he could hardly approve. The Dunkers came close here to formulating a commandment about religious discourse: Thou shalt not write down thy principles, still less print them, lest thou shall be entrapped by them for all time.

We may, in any case, consider it a significant loss that we have no record of the deliberations of the Dunkers. It would certainly shed light on the premise of this book, i.e., that the form in which ideas are expressed affects what those ideas will be. But more important, their deliberations were in all likelihood a singular instance in Colonial America of a distrust of the printed word. For the Americans among whom Franklin lived were as committed to the printed word as any group of people who have ever lived. Whatever else may be said of those immigrants who came to settle in New England, it is a paramount fact that they and their heirs were dedicated and skillful readers whose religious sensibilities, political ideas and social life were embedded in the medium of typography.

We know that on the *Mayflower* itself several books were included as cargo, most importantly, the Bible and Captain John Smith's *Description of New England*. (For immigrants headed toward a largely uncharted land, we may suppose that the latter book was as carefully read as the former.) We know, too, that in the very first days of colonization each minister was given ten pounds with which to start a religious library. And although literacy rates are notoriously difficult to assess, there is sufficient evidence (mostly drawn from signatures) that between 1640 and 1700, the literacy rate for men in Massachusetts and Connecticut was somewhere between 89 percent and 95 percent, quite probably the highest concentration of literate males to be found anywhere in the world at that time.² (The literacy rate for

women in those colonies is estimated to have run as high as 62 percent in the years 1681–1697.³)

It is to be understood that the Bible was the central reading matter in all households, for these people were Protestants who shared Luther's belief that printing was "God's highest and extremest act of Grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward." Of course, the business of the Gospel may be driven forward in books other than the Bible, as for example in the famous *Bay Psalm Book*, printed in 1640 and generally regarded as America's first best seller. But it is not to be assumed that these people confined their reading to religious matters. Probate records indicate that 60 percent of the estates in Middlesex County between the years 1654 and 1699 contained books, all but 8 percent of them including more than the Bible.⁴ In fact, between 1682 and 1685, Boston's leading bookseller imported 3,421 books from *one* English dealer, most of these nonreligious books. The meaning of this fact may be appreciated when one adds that these books were intended for consumption by approximately 75,000 people then living in the northern colonies.⁵ The modern equivalent would be ten million books.

Aside from the fact that the religion of these Calvinist Puritans demanded that they be literate, three other factors account for the colonists' preoccupation with the printed word. Since the male literacy rate in seventeenth-century England did not exceed 40 percent, we may assume, first of all, that the migrants to New England came from more literate areas of England or from more literate segments of the population, or both.⁶ In other words, they came here as readers and were certain to believe that reading was as important in the New World as it was in the Old. Second, from 1650 onward almost all New England towns passed laws requiring the maintenance of a "reading and writing" school, the large communities being required to maintain a grammar school, as well.⁷ In all such laws, reference is made to Satan, whose evil designs, it was supposed, could be

thwarted at every turn by education. But there were other reasons why education was required, as suggested by the following ditty, popular in the seventeenth century:

*From public schools shall general
knowledge flow,
For 'tis the people's sacred
right to know.⁸*

These people, in other words, had more than the subjection of Satan on their minds. Beginning in the sixteenth century, a great epistemological shift had taken place in which knowledge of every kind was transferred to, and made manifest through, the printed page. "More than any other device," Lewis Mumford wrote of this shift, "the printed book released people from the domination of the immediate and the local; . . . print made a greater impression than actual events. . . . To exist was to exist in print: the rest of the world tended gradually to become more shadowy. Learning became book-learning."⁹ In light of this, we may assume that the schooling of the young was understood by the colonists not only as a moral duty but as an intellectual imperative. (The England from which they came was an island of schools. By 1660, for example, there were 444 schools in England, one school approximately every twelve miles.¹⁰) And it is clear that growth in literacy was closely connected to schooling. Where schooling was not required (as in Rhode Island) or weak school laws prevailed (as in New Hampshire), literacy rates increased more slowly than elsewhere.

Finally, these displaced Englishmen did not need to print their own books or even nurture their own writers. They imported, whole, a sophisticated literary tradition from their Motherland. In 1736, booksellers advertised the availability of the *Spectator*, the *Tatler*, and Steele's *Guardian*. In 1738, advertisements appeared for Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Pope's *Homer*, Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* and Dryden's

Fables.¹¹ Timothy Dwight, president of Yale University, described the American situation succinctly:

Books of almost every kind, on almost every subject, are already written to our hands. Our situation in this respect is singular. As we speak the same language with the people of Great Britain, and have usually been at peace with that country; our commerce with it brings to us, regularly, not a small part of the books with which it is deluged. In every art, science, and path of literature, we obtain those, which to a great extent supply our wants.¹²

One significant implication of this situation is that no literary aristocracy emerged in Colonial America. Reading was not regarded as an elitist activity, and printed matter was spread evenly among all kinds of people. A thriving, classless reading culture developed because, as Daniel Boorstin writes, "It was diffuse. Its center was everywhere because it was nowhere. Every man was close to what [printed matter] talked about. Everyone could speak the same language. It was the product of a busy, mobile, public society."¹³ By 1772, Jacob Duché could write: "The poorest labourer upon the shore of the Delaware thinks himself entitled to deliver his sentiment in matters of religion or politics with as much freedom as the gentleman or scholar. . . . Such is the prevailing taste for books of every kind, that almost every man is a reader."¹⁴

Where such a keen taste for books prevailed among the general population, we need not be surprised that Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, published on January 10, 1776, sold more than 100,000 copies by March of the same year.¹⁵ In 1985, a book would have to sell eight million copies (in two months) to match the proportion of the population Paine's book attracted. If we go beyond March, 1776, a more awesome set of figures is given by Howard Fast: "No one knows just how many copies were actually printed. The most conservative sources place the figure at something over 300,000 copies. Others place it just

under half a million. Taking a figure of 400,000 in a population of 3,000,000, a book published today would have to sell 24,000,000 copies to do as well."¹⁶ The only communication event that could produce such collective attention in today's America is the Superbowl.

It is worth pausing here for a moment to say something of Thomas Paine, for in an important way he is a measure of the high and wide level of literacy that existed in his time. In particular, I want to note that in spite of his lowly origins, no question has ever been raised, as it has with Shakespeare, about whether or not Paine was, in fact, the author of the works attributed to him. It is true that we know more of Paine's life than Shakespeare's (although not more of Paine's early periods), but it is also true that Paine had less formal schooling than Shakespeare, and came from the lowest laboring class before he arrived in America. In spite of these disadvantages, Paine wrote political philosophy and polemics the equal in lucidity and vitality (although not quantity) of Voltaire's, Rousseau's, and contemporary English philosophers', including Edmund Burke. Yet no one asked the question, How could an unschooled stay-maker from England's impoverished class produce such stunning prose? From time to time Paine's lack of education was pointed out by his enemies (and he, himself, felt inferior because of this deficiency), but it was never doubted that such powers of written expression could originate from a common man.

It is also worth mentioning that the full title of Paine's most widely read book is *Common Sense, Written by an Englishman*. The tagline is important here because, as noted earlier, Americans did not write many books in the Colonial period, which Benjamin Franklin tried to explain by claiming that Americans were too busy doing other things. Perhaps so. But Americans were not too busy to make use of the printing press, even if not for books they themselves had written. The first printing press in America was established in 1638 as an adjunct of Harvard

University, which was two years old at the time.¹⁷ Presses were established shortly thereafter in Boston and Philadelphia without resistance by the Crown, a curious fact since at this time presses were not permitted in Liverpool and Birmingham, among other English cities.¹⁸ The earliest use of the press was for the printing of newsletters, mostly done on cheap paper. It may well be that the development of an American literature was retarded not by the industry of the people or the availability of English literature but by the scarcity of quality paper. As late as Revolutionary days, George Washington was forced to write to his generals on unsightly scraps of paper, and his dispatches were not enclosed in envelopes, paper being too scarce for such use.¹⁹

Yet by the late seventeenth century, there was a beginning to a native literature that turned out to have as much to do with the typographic bias of American culture as books. I refer, of course, to the newspaper, at which Americans first tried their hand on September 25, 1690, in Boston, when Benjamin Harris printed the first edition of a three-page paper he called *Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestick*. Before he came to America, Harris had played a role in "exposing" a nonexistent conspiracy of Catholics to slaughter Protestants and burn London. His London newspaper, *Domestick Intelligence*, revealed the "Popish plot," with the result that Catholics were harshly persecuted.²⁰ Harris, no stranger to mendacity, indicated in his prospectus for *Publick Occurrences* that a newspaper was necessary to combat the spirit of lying which then prevailed in Boston and, I am told, still does. He concluded his prospectus with the following sentence: "It is suppos'd that none will dislike this Proposal but such as intend to be guilty of so villainous a crime." Harris was right about who would dislike his proposal. The second issue of *Publick Occurrences* never appeared. The Governor and Council suppressed it, complaining that Harris had printed "reflections of a very high nature,"²¹ by which they meant that they had no intention of admitting any impedi-

ments to whatever villainy they wished to pursue. Thus, in the New World began the struggle for freedom of information which, in the Old, had begun a century before.

Harris' abortive effort inspired other attempts at newspaper publication: for example, the *Boston News-Letter*, published in 1704, generally regarded as the first continuously published American newspaper. This was followed by the *Boston Gazette* (in 1719) and the *New-England Courant* (in 1721), whose editor, James Franklin, was the older brother of Benjamin. By 1730, there were seven newspapers published regularly in four colonies, and by 1800 there were more than 180. In 1770, the *New York Gazette* congratulated itself and other papers by writing (in part):

*'Tis truth (with deference to the college)
Newspapers are the spring of Knowledge,
The general source throughout the nation,
Of every modern conversation.*²²

At the end of the eighteenth century, the Reverend Samuel Miller boasted that the United States had more than two-thirds the number of newspapers available in England, and yet had only half the population of England.²³

In 1786, Benjamin Franklin observed that Americans were so busy reading newspapers and pamphlets that they scarcely had time for books. (One book they apparently always had time for was Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book*, for it sold more than 24 million copies between 1783 and 1843.)²⁴ Franklin's reference to pamphlets ought not to go unnoticed. The proliferation of newspapers in all the Colonies was accompanied by the rapid diffusion of pamphlets and broadsides. Alexis de Tocqueville took note of this fact in his *Democracy in America*, published in 1835: "In America," he wrote, "parties do not write books to combat each other's opinions, but pamphlets, which are circulated for a day with incredible rapidity and then expire."²⁵ And

he referred to both newspapers and pamphlets when he observed, "the invention of firearms equalized the vassal and the noble on the field of battle; the art of printing opened the same resources to the minds of all classes; the post brought knowledge alike to the door of the cottage and to the gate of the palace."²⁶

At the time Tocqueville was making his observations of America, printing had already spread to all the regions of the country. The South had lagged behind the North not only in the formation of schools (almost all of which were private rather than public) but in its uses of the printing press. Virginia, for example, did not get its first regularly published newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette*, until 1736. But toward the end of the eighteenth century, the movement of ideas via the printed word was relatively rapid, and something approximating a national conversation emerged. For example, the *Federalist Papers*, an outpouring of eighty-five essays written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay (all under the name of Publius) originally appeared in a New York newspaper during 1787 and 1788 but were read almost as widely in the South as the North.

As America moved into the nineteenth century, it did so as a fully print-based culture in all of its regions. Between 1825 and 1850, the number of subscription libraries trebled.²⁷ What were called "mechanics' and apprentices' libraries"—that is, libraries intended for the working class—also emerged as a force for literacy. In 1829, the New York Apprentices' Library housed ten thousand volumes, of which 1,600 apprentices drew books. By 1857, the same library served three-quarters of a million people.²⁸ Aided by Congress' lowering of the postal rates in 1851, the penny newspaper, the periodical, the Sunday school tract, and the cheaply bound book were abundantly available. Between 1836 and 1890, 107 million copies of the *McGuffey Reader* were distributed to the schools.²⁹ And although the reading of novels was not considered an altogether reputable use of time, Americans devoured them. Of Walter Scott's novels, published

between 1814 and 1832, Samuel Goodrich wrote: "The appearance of a new novel from his pen caused a greater sensation in the United States than did some of the battles of Napoleon. . . . Everybody read these works; everybody—the refined and the simple."³⁰ Publishers were so anxious to make prospective best sellers available, they would sometimes dispatch messengers to incoming packet boats and "within a single day set up, printed and bound in paper covers the most recent novel of Bulwer or Dickens."³¹ There being no international copyright laws, "pirated" editions abounded, with no complaint from the public, or much from authors, who were lionized. When Charles Dickens visited America in 1842, his reception equaled the adulation we offer today to television stars, quarterbacks, and Michael Jackson. "I can give you no conception of my welcome," Dickens wrote to a friend. "There never was a King or Emperor upon earth so cheered and followed by the crowds, and entertained at splendid balls and dinners and waited upon by public bodies of all kinds. . . . If I go out in a carriage, the crowd surrounds it and escorts me home; if I go to the theater, the whole house . . . rises as one man and the timbers ring again."³² A native daughter, Harriet Beecher Stowe, was not offered the same kind of adoring attention—and, of course, in the South, had her carriage been surrounded, it would not have been for the purpose of escorting her home—but her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold 305,000 copies in its first year, the equivalent of four million in today's America.

Alexis de Tocqueville was not the only foreign visitor to be impressed by the Americans' immersion in printed matter. During the nineteenth century, scores of Englishmen came to America to see for themselves what had become of the Colonies. All were impressed with the high level of literacy and in particular its extension to all classes.³³

In addition, they were astounded by the near universality of lecture halls in which stylized oral performance provided a continuous reinforcement of the print tradition. Many of these lec-

ture halls originated as a result of the Lyceum Movement, a form of adult education. Usually associated with the efforts of Josiah Holbrook, a New England farmer, the Lyceum Movement had as its purpose the diffusion of knowledge, the promotion of common schools, the creation of libraries and, especially, the establishment of lecture halls. By 1835, there were more than three thousand Lyceums in fifteen states.³⁴ Most of these were located east of the Alleghenies, but by 1840, they were to be found at the edges of the frontier, as far west as Iowa and Minnesota. Alfred Bunn, an Englishman on an extensive tour through America, reported in 1853 that "practically every village had its lecture hall."³⁵ He added: "It is a matter of wonderment . . . to witness the youthful workmen, the overtired artisan, the worn-out factory girl . . . rushing . . . after the toil of the day is over, into the hot atmosphere of a crowded lecture room."³⁶ Bunn's countryman J. F. W. Johnston attended lectures at this time at the Smithsonian Institution and "found the lecture halls jammed with capacity audiences of 1200 and 1500 people."³⁷ Among the lecturers these audiences could hear were the leading intellectuals, writers and humorists (who were also writers) of their time, including Henry Ward Beecher, Horace Greeley, Louis Agassiz and Ralph Waldo Emerson (whose fee for a lecture was fifty dollars).³⁸ In his autobiography, Mark Twain devotes two chapters to his experiences as a lecturer on the Lyceum circuit. "I began as a lecturer in 1866 in California and Nevada," he wrote. "[I] lectured in New York once and in the Mississippi Valley a few times; in 1868 [I] made the whole Western circuit; and in the two or three following seasons added the Eastern circuit to my route."³⁹ Apparently, Emerson was underpaid since Twain remarks that some lecturers charged as much as \$250 when they spoke in towns and \$400 when they spoke in cities (which is almost as much, in today's terms, as the going price for a lecture by a retired television newscaster).

The point all this is leading to is that from its beginning until

well into the nineteenth century, America was as dominated by the printed word and an oratory based on the printed word as any society we know of. This situation was only in part a legacy of the Protestant tradition. As Richard Hofstadter reminds us, America was founded by intellectuals, a rare occurrence in the history of modern nations. "The Founding Fathers," he writes, "were sages, scientists, men of broad cultivation, many of them apt in classical learning, who used their wide reading in history, politics, and law to solve the exigent problems of their time."⁴⁰ A society shaped by such men does not easily move in contrary directions. We might even say that America was founded by intellectuals, from which it has taken us two centuries and a communications revolution to recover. Hofstadter has written convincingly of our efforts to "recover," that is to say, of the anti-intellectual strain in American public life, but he concedes that his focus distorts the general picture. It is akin to writing a history of American business by concentrating on the history of bankruptcies.⁴¹

The influence of the printed word in every arena of public discourse was insistent and powerful not merely because of the quantity of printed matter but because of its *monopoly*. This point cannot be stressed enough, especially for those who are reluctant to acknowledge profound differences in the media environments of then and now. One sometimes hears it said, for example, that there is more printed matter available today than ever before, which is undoubtedly true. But from the seventeenth century to the late nineteenth century, printed matter was virtually *all* that was available. There were no movies to see, radio to hear, photographic displays to look at, records to play. There was no television. Public business was channeled into and expressed through print, which became the model, the metaphor and the measure of all discourse. The resonances of the lineal, analytical structure of print, and in particular, of expository prose, could be felt everywhere. For example, in how people talked. Tocqueville remarks on this in *Democracy in*

America. "An American," he wrote, "cannot converse, but he can discuss, and his talk falls into a dissertation. He speaks to you as if he was addressing a meeting; and if he should chance to become warm in the discussion, he will say 'Gentlemen' to the person with whom he is conversing."⁴² This odd practice is less a reflection of an American's obstinacy than of his modeling his conversational style on the structure of the printed word. Since the printed word is impersonal and is addressed to an invisible audience, what Tocqueville is describing here is a kind of printed orality, which was observable in diverse forms of oral discourse. On the pulpit, for example, sermons were usually written speeches delivered in a stately, impersonal tone consisting "largely of an impassioned, coldly analytical cataloguing of the attributes of the Deity as revealed to man through Nature and Nature's Laws."⁴³ And even when The Great Awakening came—a revivalist movement that challenged the analytical, dispassionate spirit of Deism—its highly emotional preachers used an oratory that could be transformed easily to the printed page. The most charismatic of these men was the Reverend George Whitefield, who beginning in 1739 preached all over America to large crowds. In Philadelphia, he addressed an audience of ten thousand people, whom he deeply stirred and alarmed by assuring them of eternal hellfire if they refused to accept Christ. Benjamin Franklin witnessed one of Whitefield's performances and responded by offering to become his publisher. In due time, Whitefield's journals and sermons were published by B. Franklin of Philadelphia.⁴⁴

But obviously I do not mean to say that print merely influenced the form of public discourse. That does not say much unless one connects it to the more important idea that form will determine the nature of content. For those readers who may believe that this idea is too "McLuhanesque" for their taste, I offer Karl Marx from *The German Ideology*. "Is the *Iliad* possible," he asks rhetorically, "when the printing press and even printing machines exist? Is it not inevitable that with the emer-

gence of the press, the singing and the telling and the muse cease; that is, the conditions necessary for epic poetry disappear?"⁴⁵ Marx understood well that the press was not merely a machine but a structure for discourse, which both rules out and insists upon certain kinds of content and, inevitably, a certain kind of audience. He did not, himself, fully explore the matter, and others have taken up the task. I too must try my hand at it—to explore how the press worked as a metaphor and an epistemology to create a serious and rational public conversation, from which we have now been so dramatically separated.

4.

The Typographic Mind

The first of the seven famous debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas took place on August 21, 1858, in Ottawa, Illinois. Their arrangement provided that Douglas would speak first, for one hour; Lincoln would take an hour and a half to reply; Douglas, a half hour to rebut Lincoln's reply. This debate was considerably shorter than those to which the two men were accustomed. In fact, they had tangled several times before, and all of their encounters had been much lengthier and more exhausting. For example, on October 16, 1854, in Peoria, Illinois, Douglas delivered a three-hour address to which Lincoln, by agreement, was to respond. When Lincoln's turn came, he reminded the audience that it was already 5 p.m., that he would probably require as much time as Douglas and that Douglas was still scheduled for a rebuttal. He proposed, therefore, that the audience go home, have dinner, and return refreshed for four more hours of talk.¹ The audience amiably agreed, and matters proceeded as Lincoln had outlined.

What kind of audience was this? Who were these people who could so cheerfully accommodate themselves to seven hours of oratory? It should be noted, by the way, that Lincoln and Douglas were not presidential candidates; at the time of their encounter in Peoria they were not even candidates for the United States Senate. But their audiences were not especially concerned with their official status. These were people who regarded such events as essential to their political education, who took them to be an integral part of their social lives, and who