

In Defense of “Media”

2008

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In this statement I want to address the celebration among some in favor of print/written word while demeaning most other media, especially television. This bias frequently informs the tendency of these people to glorify their decision to spend their evenings reading rather than watching television. Often these elitists tout their superiority by either refusing to own a TV or refusing to subscribe to cable or satellite broadcast services. Ironically these same people are often devoted users of the Internet and celebrate the computer and the vast wealth of connections it brings to them through the worldwide web with its spectacular search engines. Somehow in the minds of these people the computer screen and the Internet service provider are regarded as totally different from the television screen and cable/satellite service. Certainly, to the extent that television viewing or computer gaming is thought to detract from individuals becoming skilled readers, this result is to be mourned. But excessive involvement in any media can have a negative effect. Children can bury themselves in books to the extent they impair their vision, fail to exercise and become obese, or lack development in appropriate social skills; just as these same children can loose themselves in 24/7 computer based gaming; just as adults can become addicted to internet poker or online stock market trading. Any media tool can be pursued to excess and the point of addiction, but that fact does not justify bias against the tool or media form itself.

Print is simply the first mass media, replacing the scribe and the handwritten process of reproducing texts. At one time reading and writing were skills restricted to the upper classes and as such these abilities and the possession of books were a “sign” of superior social status. This status association seems to linger even to the present among reading elitists, in spite of the democratization of reading and writing skills and the ubiquitous availability of low cost print materials. Indeed, with the computer, personal websites, and email and document attachment, everyone has the equivalent of their own printing press, publishing company, and distribution system. Ironically, again, the Internet medium [media] has emerged to promote a vastly expanded network which depends on and fosters reading and writing skills – rather than necessarily competing against them.

Now, let's look at the facts about the relative value of media alternatives to words in print.

- 1) There is at least as much “trash” in print as there is in any other form of media. Some might argue there is a great deal more garbage in print since the cost of computer and Internet production is so low and the skills so minimal as compared to creating visual based media. In all media, selection for legitimacy, authenticity, and value is equally essential. There is no fundamental or “necessary” distinction in quality of communication among the different forms of media.
- 2) Where the visual medium can be used, it is a much more efficient and holistic way to pass information than any other format. A quality one hour film or video can cover information that would take a day to communicate by words alone. We recognize this in our common statement, "A picture is worth a thousand words." The assertion in this commonplace is in fact about right, but it covers only the information in a snap shot, not the kinetic image - or "motion" picture, which makes the media image 1000% more effective as a communication tool when compared to the WORD. Indeed, most print documents, even in science, have come to rely extensively on visuals in the form of graphs, charts, illustrations, and photographs to provide a visual complement to the text. Even in technical print, the inclusion of this visual component is recognized as key in achieving effective and efficient communication. Indeed, it is known that some “readers” rely primarily on these visuals, and move to the written text only secondarily, if at all! From the time of woodcut images in very early printing, the significant value of visuals in print has been understood.
- 3) Humans are first and foremost visual creatures, rely secondarily on auditory cues [of which word dependent language is a specialized set], and reference tactile and olfactory information tertiary. This is clear in the proportion of human brains assigned to the different senses. We dwell under a modern illusion that gives words, and especially written words, great prominence and importance. We have only about 4,000 years of the written word, but a million year history as hominids. And it is understood that even speech may not have developed beyond rudimentary use until the last 30-50,000 years. So a focus on verbiage and words, and especially writing, is off the mark as contributing much to the history of communication in human development – until very recently.
- 4) The broadcast medium has matured greatly in the last 25 years and now offers a whole range of very fine products, many now on channels devoted to science, technology, nature, medicine, history, culture, and serious social, economic and political investigative journalism and commentary - worldwide and from the perspectives of different groups. It would take thousands of magazine subscriptions to match this coverage in the print media. And the range of entertainment offerings in film, music, theater, dance, and sports is vast and can easily be sifted for quality. The

stereotype of the broadcast media as consisting of sitcoms and game shows and news sound bites is no longer accurate, if it ever was.

- 5) In the modern context, many people spend their days reading and writing – often at computers. Most of these people do not feel the need to devote their nights to more of the same when there are ways to broaden their exposure to challenging and educational programming while often being entertained at the same time.

There will always be people who choose to read for information and entertainment. That is their choice; but the time is long past since there has been any justification for the elitist prejudice in favor of the limited media of the printed word. As media has evolved, print no longer implies serious communication that is worthy of respect any more than broadcast/cable/satellite means superficial communication that is deserving of disdain. All media contains the same range of offerings from very high to very low quality. The only important consideration in judging media involvement is whether the participants are first selecting for quality products and then making the effort to independently evaluate the messages they receive.