INTRODUCTION
If this book has any basis in "authority," it lies in the fifteen years I worked as a public relations and advertising executive. During that time, I learned that it is possible to speak through media directly into people's heads and then, like some otherworldly magician, leave images inside that can cause people to do what they might otherwise never have thought to do.

At first I was amused by this power, then dazzled by it and fascinated with the minutiae of how it worked. Later, I tried to use mass media for what seemed worthwhile purposes, only to find it resistant and limited. I came to the conclusion that like other modern technologies which now surround our lives, advertising, television and most mass media predetermine their own ultimate use and effect. In the end, I became horrified by them, as I observed the aberrations which they inevitably create in the world.

_Adman Manqué_

In retrospect, I can see that an absurd little revolt against my family led me into advertising work. My parents wanted
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me to choose a profession or to take over my father’s business. They felt that while advertising was already a lucrative field by the time I was seeking a way into it in the late 1950s, it was still very chancy for Jewish boys. They were certainly right about that. Directly out of the Wharton School of Business and then Columbia Graduate Business School, I was denied a job in a Park Avenue ad agency because “your hair is a little kinky; you might want to try Seventh Avenue.” Seventh Avenue was what I was fleeing.

My parents carried the immigrants’ fears. Security was their primary value; all else was secondary. Both of them had escaped pogroms in Eastern Europe. My father’s career had followed the path familiar to so many New York immigrants. Lower East Side. Scant schooling. Street hustling. Hard work at anything to keep life together. Early marriage. Struggling out of poverty.

Curiously, success came to him during the Depression. He founded what later became Harry Mander and Company, a small service business to the garment industry, manufacturing pipings, waist bands, pocketing and collar canvas.

One of the reasons for my father’s success during hard times was World War II. He was beyond draft age and so was free to do a successful trade in servicing the manufacture of military uniforms. After the war, the business grew in new directions as the economy spurted forward into an era of rapid growth. Nonetheless, I decided his business wasn’t for me.

I had planned something much flashier for myself, something with greater glamour. It was snobbery, I suppose. By then, when I thought about my “career”—always a hot topic around our house—certain images would fly through my mind. Since so many of the images were from the ads of the period, the world of advertising seemed appropriate. There was something about that life-style, those big cars, the great
white yachts, the polished people on them and the life of leisure and pleasure: The Dream.

It wasn’t so much that I was especially interested in wealth or that I ached to have all the goodies that were being shown in the ads of the 1940s and 1950s. I didn’t want to own the cars and yachts so much as I wanted to be like the people who did. More, I wanted to help create those images, to be around models, artists, photographers and writers whom I imagined to be the sleek and sophisticated people.

Despite some early setbacks, such as that Park Avenue experience, by 1966 much of my dream was realized. By then I had already concluded a successful career as head of a theatrical publicity agency and joined a celebrated San Francisco ad agency, which became Freeman, Mander and Gossage.


Ours was the most elegant office in town. I was commuting coast to coast weekly, taking five-day vacations in Tahiti, eating only in French restaurants, jetting to Europe for a few days’ skiing.

At some point, not very long into this new career, I began to realize a kind of hollowness in myself. I caught myself smiling pasty smiles. I noticed that despite all this I was not having a good time.

I think I hit an emotional bottom in 1968 while cruising through the Dalmatian Straits, observing rocky cliffs, rolling seas, dazzling sky, and colors as bright as a desert.

Leaning on the deck rail, it struck me that there was a film between me and all of that. I could “see” the spectacular views. I knew they were spectacular. But the experience stopped at my eyes. I couldn’t let it inside me. I felt nothing. Something had gone wrong with me. I remembered child-
hood moments when the mere sight of the sky or grass or trees would send waves of physical pleasure through me. Yet now on this deck, I felt dead. I had the impulse to repeat a phrase that was popular among friends of mine, “Nature is boring.” What was terrifying even then was that I knew the problem was me, not nature. It wasn’t that nature was boring. It was that nature had become irrelevant to me, absent from my life. Through mere lack of exposure and practice, I’d lost the ability to feel it, tune into it, or care about it. Life moved too fast for that now.

If one seeks critical moments to explain later acts, even the writing of books, then perhaps that was one such moment for me. It was clear that I had chosen a fraudulent path toward an equally fraudulent image of a very cold sort of “happiness.” On balance, though, this Big Moment was probably less significant than a slowly evolving political awareness that it was no accident that I was feeling the way I was.

*Engulfed by the Sixties*

One of my partners in the ad agency was Howard Gossage, a genius of sorts who for years before he died in 1969 agonized about the absurdity of working in such a profession. “I’d hate to go to my grave and be remembered as the man who invented Beethoven sweatshirts or competitions for paper airplanes.”

He loved to tell the story of the retired adman who once said to him: “I got out of this business when I woke up one day and didn’t give a damn whether they sold more Quaker Oats than I sold Cream of Wheat.”

Gossage knew that there was more to the problem of advertising work than the way it emphasizes trivia. He would rage about the function itself, speaking of it as an invasion of privacy on an order far more extreme than the merely rude telephone solicitation, the door-to-door salesperson or even
the computer file on your credit. It was an invasion of the mind, which altered behavior, altered people.

Advertising expresses a power relationship, Gossage said. One person, the advertiser, invades; millions absorb. And to what end? So that people will buy something! A deep, profound and disturbing act by the few against the many for a trivial purpose.

Still thrilled by the life I was living, such considerations did not at first seem all that significant. But the period was the 1960s.

While I was showing clients through my paneled offices, a lot of people only slightly younger than I were lying about on the floors of San Francisco auto showrooms, restaurants and hotels, demanding that these places hire blacks. Across the Bay in Berkeley, students were stopping classes to insist upon participation in university policies. Thousands of others were standing in front of trains carrying war materials for Vietnam or blocking entryways to draft induction centers.

Living in the Bay Area in those years, one could scarcely avoid reflection and even involvement in these goings-on. In my own case, the involvement soon became direct.

Since I had been a publicist, I knew many reporters and had a feeling for the nuances of influencing media. Because of that, and through friendship with a number of politically inclined actors in a satirical troupe called The Committee, I began to meet many protest leaders and found myself serving as a part-time media advisor for some of the demonstrations. Like many young lawyers I was part of what was called “the liberal support group.”

I rarely went so far as actually to demonstrate, or even to visit a demonstration. Instead I hosted evening meetings in my office to discuss what was happening. The main concern was how to influence the press to carry stories emphasizing issues rather than disruptions or violence.

Here was a typical problem: A group of demonstrators
would occupy a hotel lobby, demanding that blacks be hired at front-desk jobs, rather than bussing dishes in the coffee shop. Newspapers and television would run enormous stories about the demonstrations while editorially denouncing the tactics as “counterproductive to what might be worthy aims.” The stories concentrated upon sloppy-looking demonstrators, moments of violence, and lengthy statements by officials about law and order. In an entire week’s news coverage there might be one passing reference to the fact that for forty previous years the hotel hadn’t hired a black person in a visible job.

I had no theory of media in those days, and I don’t think I was of great service as an advisor. Yet it was clear to me that these demonstrations were not counterproductive. They produced the first news stories ever on such subjects, leading slowly to reforms which might never have happened otherwise. Obviously the media needed awakening quite as much as everyone else did.

Another realization was dawning upon me. As I commuted mentally between the interests of the demonstrators I talked to in the evenings and the interests of my commercial clients, I grew more and more impressed with the effect that the mere possession of money has upon the kind of information that is dispensed through the media.

My evening clients, speaking of social issues, needed to organize hundreds of people into confrontative acts which could get them extensive, if often unfavorable, coverage. Or, if they chose less confrontative routes, they could spend weeks of time and all their hard-won nickels and dimes to organize press information programs which would, at their most successful, net them a few inches in the back of the newspaper.

Meanwhile, any of my daytime clients, speaking for commercial purposes, could and did buy advertising space and time worth tens of thousands of dollars. Then they would do it again the following week.
THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

I already knew that, in America, all advertisers spent more than $25 billion a year to disseminate their information. Now, however, I was beginning to pay attention to an obvious, yet little noticed, aspect of this situation. Virtually all of the $25 billion was being spent by people who already had a great deal of money. These were the only people who could afford to pay $30,000 for one page of advertising in *Time* ($54,000 by 1977) or $50,000 for one minute of prime television time ($125,000 by 1977). Ordinary people and small businesses, even those which are successful by most standards, can rarely afford any advertising beyond the want ads, or a small local retail display. Only the very rich buy mass national advertising. And they do this to become richer. What other motive could they possibly have?

A. J. Liebling once said, "Freedom of the press is limited to those who own one." I was learning that access to the press was similarly distorted by the possession of wealth. People with money had a 25-billion-to-nearly-zero advantage over people without money. The rich could simply buy access to the public mind while the not-rich had to seek more circuitous routes.

Twenty-five billion dollars is nearly as much as the whole country spends on higher education every year. I began to realize that a distortion was taking place in the quality and kind of information offered to the public. To a larger and larger extent, people's minds were being occupied by information of a purely commercial nature. As an advertising executive, I was instrumental in furthering this distortion.

The ecology movement pushed me over the edge. Our agency was hired first by the Sierra Club and then by Friends of the Earth and other organizations. Unlike most other do-good groups, these at least had a little money to buy an occasional one-shot ad on some critical issue. (During the early 1970s, all environmental groups together spent about
$500,000 per year in advertising in order to offset an average of about $3 billion in corporate expenditures on the same subjects. This ratio was relatively small, only 6,000 to 1, which may help explain the early success of the environmental movement.

I found myself writing ads about keeping dams out of Grand Canyon, halting the overdevelopment of cities, stopping the development of SSTs, and urging people to stop buying and wearing furs.

The ads attacked the prevailing life-style of the country, which certainly included my own. They spoke of an inevitable conflict between corporate growth and the health of the planet. They encouraged a habit of mind which could grasp the inter-relationships between all natural systems, including humans. They described a growing environmental destruction which reflected itself in individual lives as well as in economic policies.

As I wrote these ads and thought about them, it got harder and harder to separate my new perspective from an awareness that it was in conflict with our corporate work. On Tuesday, I was writing about the impact cars and other technologies had upon the environment, and on Thursday I was promoting the sale of cars.

The crunch came one day in 1969 when a young Wall Street Journal reporter named Henry Weinstein called about doing a story on our agency’s public-service work. By that time we had gained public attention for having invented a new style of advocacy advertising. Our ads were characterized by coupons urging changes in policy. The coupons could be torn out by readers and sent to corporations and government agencies. They produced enormous volumes of mail on conservation issues that until then had been considered the province of bird watchers and little old ladies in tennis shoes.

The ads had not only affected policy, they catalyzed and organized the public, because they allowed a new level of
involvement. By mailing them, people became more committed to the issue. For once they were doing something more than feeling bad. A number of senators and congressmen publicly gave the ads credit for determining the outcome of several issues, and in *The New Advertising* Robert Glatzer went so far as to credit them with "starting the whole ecology boom."

Weinstein told us that the *Journal* was interested in the way we had developed this technique. However, when the story appeared on the front page, we learned he was a cagier reporter than we'd realized. While praising our work, he went to considerable lengths to reveal our misgivings about our conflicting roles. He cited my own anxiety at doing ads for an auto account, British Leyland Motors (Rover, Land Rover, Triumph), at a time that I was making speeches that said automobiles were at the heart of so many problems.

Leyland didn't like this. Within two hours of the story's appearance we were fired. The next day's *Journal* carried the headline:

**AD MAN NEED WORRY NO MORE ABOUT AUTO ACCOUNT**

I could describe fifty less spectacular incidents similar to this one involving struggles with clients over corporate policies that I was beginning to see as antithetical to simple rules of human well-being, or justice or planetary survival. They finally added up to a single generalization: Corporations are inherently uninterested in considerations aside from the commercial.

We began to feel that our balancing act was draining us personally. At last we saw that it was doomed to fail. Maintaining commercial accounts in the hope of using the income from them to finance other projects about which we cared more deeply was not going to work out.

We soon decided to dissolve the agency, and I began to work with a number of other people to establish a foundation-
funded, non-profit advertising and public relations office. The first in the country, it was called Public Interest Communications and it was devoted solely to working for community organizations which are largely excluded from media. The project was launched in 1972 with a grant from the Stern Fund. It succeeded for a little while in performing useful services for ecologists and farm workers, consumer groups, Indian rights activists and peace groups. But keeping it alive proved difficult. The problems were much like those we had faced at Freeman, Mander and Gossage.

Whereas I had formerly spent a major part of my day keeping the agency going by caring for the needs of corporations, at Public Interest Communications we spent a majority of our time seeking grants from the few foundations interested in media reform.

Even worse, there was a feeling that everything we were doing was ineffective. A nameless juggernaut was advancing unretarded. We felt as if we were throwing snowballs at tanks. Through enormous concentrated effort, we might stop a dam on one river; meanwhile, a dozen other dams would be built. If the production of an American SST was halted, European SSTs would land at American airports. If an energy crisis developed, rather than signaling the limits of planetary resources, or the absurdity of the way we lived, it produced new drives toward nuclear power and more strip mines.

We were not the only ones with this problem. The Vietnam War was halted, but the arms race and military aid to rightwing regimes advanced. Nixon was thrown out, but government reform came down to a lame Senate ethics bill. Unemployment was growing and welfare lines with it, yet in the end economic reform measures always seemed to hurt the very segments of the population they purported to help while the rich got richer.

One young activist told me, “We seem to be running on a
treadmill; as we advance, we are always in the same place."

Every issue had to be fought as though it were the first one. People seemed unable to connect one issue to another, to find common threads in, say, a struggle against high-rise office buildings and nuclear power plants and colonial wars. Specific victories were possible, but overall understanding of the forces that were moving society seemed to be diminishing.

People's minds seemed to be running in dogged, one-dimensional channels which reminded me of the freeways, office buildings and suburbs that were the physical manifestations of the same period. Could one be affecting the other? Could life within these new forms of physical confinement produce mental confinement? For the first time, I began to think this might be possible.

We were told we had the highest literacy rate in the history of the world and the best-informed population, and yet the information seemed to be less well processed. As mass media grew until it too became a kind of environment, I began to think that it might not really be contributing to any pool of useful knowledge.

I was confused by this emerging perception and at first took a traditional view of what needed to be done. It meant we all had to work harder to reach more people with every message. Since in any specific struggle we might be outspent by several hundred times, we needed to be more clever, more creative.

That led me to think that the problem was too much information. The population was being inundated with conflicting versions of increasingly complex events. People were giving up on understanding anything. The glut of information was dulling awareness, not aiding it. Overload. It encouraged passivity, not involvement.

Then I began seeing some amazing statistics about television.
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The Replacement of Experience

The first really shocking burst of figures appeared in newspapers in the early 1970s.

It was reported that in the generation since 1945, 99 percent of the homes in the country had acquired at least one television set. On an average evening, more than 80 million people would be watching television. Thirty million of these would be watching the same program. In special instances, 100 million people would be watching the same program at the same time.

The average household had the set going more than six hours a day. If there was a child, the average was more than eight hours. The average person was watching for nearly four hours daily. And so, allowing eight hours for sleep and eight hours for work, roughly half of the adult nonsleeping, nonworking time was spent watching television. Considering that these were average figures, they meant that half of the people in this country were watching television even more than that.

As these numbers sank in, I realized that there had been a strange change in the way people received information, and even more in the way they were experiencing and understanding the world. In one generation, out of hundreds of thousands in human evolution, America had become the first culture to have substituted secondary, mediated versions of experience for direct experience of the world. Interpretations and representations of the world were being accepted as experience, and the difference between the two was obscure to most of us.

I heard many people say, "Television is great; there are so many things on TV that we'd never otherwise experience." People were seeing television images of Borneo forests, European ballets, varieties of family life, distant police actions, current events, or re-creations of historical crises, and they
were believing themselves to be experiencing these places, people and events. Yet the television image of the Borneo forest or the news or historical events was surely not the experience of them and not to be relied upon to the same extent. It was only the experience of sitting in a darkened room, staring at flickering light, ingesting images which had been edited, cut, rearranged, sped up, slowed down, and confined in hundreds of ways. Were people aware of the difference?

Despite my work in advertising, I had never yet made any thorough investigation of the power of images themselves. I did not know how people’s minds related to imagery, whether they could separate one kind of image—that which is directly experienced—from another kind, which has been processed and altered, and which arrives out of context. It was not clear whether people ascribed the same credibility to both, either consciously or subconsciously, and how this changed the quality of their understanding.

Nonetheless, it was obvious to me from my own work that something was going wrong with what people were understanding and what they weren’t. A new muddiness of mind was developing. People’s patterns of discernment, discrimination and understanding were taking a dive. They didn’t seem able to make distinctions between information which was preprocessed and then filtered through a machine, and that which came to them whole, by actual experience. Perhaps seeing was believing in a way that overrode the conscious mind. At the same time, no one was even writing about how the machine changed the information. Very few people understood it. Only advertisers studied the way the machine altered data, because it was the basic work of advertising to alter and confine information in advance so that it would have the desired effect. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent discovering how to do this.

Slowly I began to see how the ubiquitousness of television, combined with a general failure to understand what it did to
information, might affect the political work we were doing. If people were believing that an image of nature was equal to or even similar to the experience of nature, and were therefore satisfied enough with the image that they did not seek out the real experience, then nature was in a lot bigger trouble than anyone realized. Or, if people believed that images of historical events or news events were equal to the events or were even close approximations of them, then historical reality was in big trouble. As television became the major mental and physical experiential field for most of the people in the country, as it began to merge with environment, the confusion of television information with a wider, direct mode of experience was advancing rapidly.

**The Unification of Experience**

Because so many of us were confusing television experience with direct experience of the world, we were not noticing that experience itself was being unified to the single behavior of watching television. Switching from channel to channel, believing that a sports program was a significantly different experience from a police program or news of an African war, all 80 million viewers were sitting separately in dark rooms engaged in exactly the same activity at the same time: watching television.

It was as if the whole nation had gathered at a gigantic three-ring circus. Those who watched the bicycle act believed their experience was different from that of those who watched the gorillas or the flame eater, but everyone was at the circus. Worse, as we all watched from our separate living rooms, it was as if we sat in isolation booths, unable to exchange any responses about what we were all going through together. Everybody was engaged in the same act at the same time, but we were doing it alone.

What a bizarre situation!
It was suddenly possible for an entire nation of 200 million people to be spoken to as individuals, one to one, the television set to the person or family, all at once. I was chilled at the thought, realizing that these conditions of television viewing—confusion, unification, isolation, especially when combined with passivity and what I later learned of the effects of implanted imagery—were ideal preconditions for the imposition of autocracy.

At that time, however, my own definitions of the nature of autocracy were confined, like those of most Americans, to the model of single, charismatic leaders. Hitler. Stalin. Chiang. Franco. Mao. Differences among these were submerged in the model of the powerful leader, enforcing his will, ruling absolutely. That was autocracy. Television seemed to be the perfect instrument to help bring on that kind of control.

My fears were encouraged one day in 1971, as I sat around my office reading the morning New York Times and noted a small item. It concerned a Pentagon proposal to President Nixon that an electronic gadget be attached to every television set in the country. Capable of being activated directly by the president, it would switch on every set in the country at once. It was to be used, of course, only in case of extreme national emergency. My mind flew into a paranoid pattern:

It’s 4:00 A.M. Two hundred million people are awakened by the national anthem. Where is it coming from? What’s that light over there? It’s the TV set. There’s the President!

“My fellow Americans, it is with extreme regret that I awaken you from your well-earned rest. Yet we are all met with a crisis so grave as to require it.

“An exhaustive investigation by your law enforcement agencies has uncovered a massive conspiracy to destroy our democracy, a conspiracy which enjoys at least the tacit support of thousands of students, journalists, attorneys and even certain judges and elected officials.
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"As your Commander in Chief, I have ordered the immediate arrest of the terrorists and the individuals in their support groups, whatever their official rank or prestige.

"I have also invoked the implied powers of the President to govern in such times of grave crises, free of the usual encumbrances.

"I am hopeful and confident that these emergency measures, taken to safeguard our democracy, will be short-lived.

"Thank you, Gods speed and good night."

The set switches off by itself. Was that a dream? Back to sleep.

A few months later I saw a follow-up story in the Times that said the Pentagon proposal had been scrapped. Apparently the administration felt people might "misinterpret the intentions" of such a project.

In retrospect, I know that my scenario was fantastic and unsophisticated, deriving from my simpleminded notion that autocratic interventions can take place only through a single leader or a coup. But whatever the intentions of the Pentagon and President Nixon, who has since asserted that presidents may create their own laws, it was clear that the existence of the technology itself had created a new potential.

We can all be spoken to at the same time, night or day, from a centralized information source. In fact, we are. Every day, a handful of people speak, the rest listen. Brutal and heavy-handed means of confining awareness, experience and behavior may actually be a thing of the past. In many ways, television makes the military coup and mass arrests of my imagination unnecessary. We can begin to grasp the irrelevance of such acts now that a more subtle coup is underway.

It takes place directly inside the minds, perceptions and living patterns of individual people. A technology makes it possible, and perhaps inevitable, while dulling all awareness that it is happening.
WAR TO CONTROL THE UNITY MACHINE

MARSHALL McLuhan did not help us very much in our early efforts to understand television. By the time he was popular in the mid-1960’s we had already been through the Army-McCarthy hearings, the Kennedy-Nixon debates and then the Kennedy funeral which had plugged eighty million people into the same experience at the same time.

None of these events had caused the slightest ripple of alarm, but rather produced a rush to praise our new electronic unity. The mass viewing of the funeral, particularly, was hailed in religious terms, like some kind of breakthrough in the evolution of consciousness: everybody unified in grief, transcending the conditions of their individual lives. Human ingenuity had now advanced to the point where technology could produce a nationwide, one-mind experience, previously thought to reside only in the realm of the mystic.

McLuhan, who saw so much, could have helped us see through that crap. Instead, because of his celebration of our electronic connection, our planetary-tribal village, he effec-
tively encouraged support for the techno-mystical-unification theme.

His words entered the arena of talk show patter and word-play. "Hot and cool." "The medium is the message." People struggled to find concrete meaning in these phrases. They became the basis of hundreds of conferences and thousands of cocktail party debates. Most people were satisfied that they understood something if they grasped that, because of television, we were now vibrating together to the same electronic drumbeat. Joyful at what looked like a new and positive unity, we failed to perceive, nor did McLuhan help us become conscious of three critical facts, 1) it was only one drumbeat, 2) this drum could be played only by a handful of players, 3) the identity of the players was determined by the technology itself.

McLuhan is not a person who presents his arguments in political terms, so perhaps he can be forgiven for failing to drop the other shoe, to tell us what should have been the most urgent meaning of the medium. Perhaps he was as dazzled as the rest of us mortals, suffering the same reaction to this new technology as the deer staring at the headlights of the oncoming car. Like the religious one-minders before him, he drew no distinctions between one sort of unification and another, leaving the rest of us to sort it out. But we didn’t.

At that moment, anyone interested in social, psychological, educational or political processes should have dropped everything and begun intensive study of the effects of this new phenomenon which was capable of unifying everyone within a new, reconstructed experience. Instead, all factions saw it opportunistically.

Everyone with a message to deliver—government, corporations, the military, community groups, gurus, teachers and psychologists—began drooling at the possibility of gaining access to this incredible machine that could put pictures into millions of people’s heads at once. It was clear that as life
increasingly moved away from the streets, community centers and marketplaces, one message on television—thirty seconds on the Cronkite news—was worth more than a thousand hours of organizing or whistle-stop political touring or hundreds of newspaper ads.

A war began for control of the machine and its use. All competing factions shared the idea that if they could gain access to it, television could communicate their message as well as any other, that television technology was only a neutral instrument. Intent on changing other people's minds, they did not consider that television might change those who used it. All joined in an implicit conspiracy to increase the use of television.

*Advancing from the Sixties to the Fifties*

My own feelings about the effects of television began to progress beyond the Nixon-Pentagon sort of fantasy as I observed its effects on community groups and Movement people who, believing in its neutrality, sought to use it.

I watched and participated as they changed their organizations' commitments from community organizing, legal reform processes or other forms of evolutionary change to focus upon television. Educational work was sacrificed to public relations work. The goal became less to communicate with individuals, governments or communities than to influence media. Actions began to be chosen less for their educational value or political content than for their ability to attract television cameras. Dealing directly with bureaucracies or corporations was frustrating and fruitless. Dealing with communities was slow. Everyone spoke of *immediate* victory.

A hierarchy of press-oriented actions developed. Press conferences got coverage once. Rallies brought more attention than press conferences. Marches more than rallies. Sit-ins more than marches. Violence more than sit-ins.
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A theory evolved: Accelerate the drama of each successive action to maintain the same level of coverage. Television somehow demanded that. As the stakes rose, the pressure mounted to create ever more outrageous actions.

The movements of the 1960s had become totally media based by the 1970s. The most radical elements were up to the challenges of the theory of accelerated action. They "advanced" to kidnappings, hijackings, bombings. The sole purpose of these actions was often no more than media exposure.

Sensing that television was now the country's main transmitter of reality, individuals began to take personal action to affect it.

A young Chicano man hijacked a plane to obtain a five-minute TV interview about the ill treatment of his people.

A young man in Sacramento took some bank employees hostage so that a TV news team would report that neither he nor his father could get a job.

Lynette Fromme shot at President Ford, she said, so the media would warn big business to cease destroying the planet.

The SLA kidnapping of a newspaper heiress signaled the final stage of abstraction. It exhibited a warped genius in that it allowed the SLA to demand successfully that their communiqués would be published unedited.

However, because it owed its whole life to the media, existing nowhere else, the SLA was subject to cancellation at any time, and it was cancelled most thoroughly, like a series with slipping ratings getting the ax.

Less radical elements did not suffer the SLA's dramatic demise, but the cycle of fast rise/fast fall was similar for many. Ralph Nader bloomed in the media and then became tiresome. The ecology movement, fitting the holocaust model of TV news, burst upon the scene and then declined. Watergate excited expectations of government reform, but then it was old news.

Once the U.S. was out of Vietnam, the once hot antiwar
movement was off the tube. A few years later Jimmy Carter was able to appoint some of the architects of the war to high positions in government. It was as though the war hadn’t happened, or was merely another action-packed drama, replaced by next season’s schedule, with the same actors playing new, equally believable, roles.

Meanwhile, those seriously committed Movement people of the 1960s who were not willing to go on to terrorism began dropping out, moving to farms in Vermont and Oregon. Or, and I know many who have done this, they got jobs writing television serials. They justified this with the explanation that they were still reaching “the people” with an occasional revolutionary message, fitted ingeniously into the dialogue.

“The people,” however, were as they had been for years, sitting home in their living rooms, staring at blue light, their minds filled with TV images. One movement became the same as the next one; one media action merged with the fictional program that followed; one revolutionary line was erased by the next commercial, leading to a new level of withdrawal, unconcern and stasis. In the end, the sixties were revealed as the flash of light before the bulb goes out. The seventies became an advanced version of the fifties. And as we shall see in Chapter Seven, it was all made inevitable by the thirties.

**Style Supersedes Content**

The changes wrought upon movements by the emergence of television were similar to the changes in traditional political process.

Richard Nixon, probably the first major public figure to understand television deeply, realized that four hours of TV debate with Kennedy had turned probable victory into slim defeat. He understood that TV appearances were more im-
important than personal ones. By the time he ran again, he had revised his image. He became the “new Nixon.”

Even though many people understood that his change was only cosmetic, he won. This confirmed for me the idea that something in the nature of television imagery allows form to supersede content. Once elected, Nixon made his first appointments—Ziegler and Haldeman—from advertising, the field that pioneered conveying pseudocontent in place of substance.

By his third campaign, Nixon appeared only on television; never in public. McGovern, meanwhile, made the mistake of trying to deliver “content” through a medium predisposed to resist it.

Having used the media so well, Nixon developed a fatal arrogance about it. He and Agnew may have been right in claiming that their various transgressions were nothing special in American political history. But like the SLA, they forgot that they themselves were media illusions. The gravest mistake that can be made by a media creature is to assault the machine. The machine doesn’t care about its fantasies. A new one will do. Bringing Nixon down was just as good for ratings as supporting him. Better. More action. The only goals of the machine are to continue to be the real power behind the throne, no matter who is king, and to remain the primary factor in all public perception. Television has the power to create presidents, and it has the power to destroy them.

Lyndon Johnson apparently also understood this power. So fiercely did he desire to dominate television that he kept three sets going in his offices at all times. He never succeeded in controlling mass media, but he did have a few dazzling moments. For example, the Gulf of Tonkin incident never happened, but it was carried as legitimate by every news outlet. That convinced both Congress and the public and gave Johnson the approval he needed to escalate the Vietnam War.
WAR TO CONTROL THE UNITY MACHINE

This event was later exposed as only one of the many non-events pushed through the media to sell us that war. It occurred to me that the very fact that this could be done at all—fictional news about fictional military events expanding faraway wars that no one watching the images could observe firsthand—was cause for serious alarm about the power of the media to pursue fictitious realities.

Johnson was finally done in by his personal style. It turned out to be better television to caricature his way of speaking and his bawdy behavior, to make him a cartoon or folk character than to present him in a favorable light.

By the 1976 campaign, politicians had to become successful media artists or fail politically. That campaign was unique in that it displayed no content at all, only form. It was a contest between images and advertising stereotypes.

We were offered the charismatic Western hero, charming and brave though an underdog: Reagan. The truth-saying revivalist in corporate packaging: Carter. The guru, speaking aphorisms, standing for a new, albeit aggressive, consciousness like David Carradine's Kung Fu hero: Brown. The old reliable, trusted, venerable warrior in the image of Cronkite: Humphrey. And the President, a television image merely by virtue of being president, investing himself with an apparent authority based solely on that image: Ford.

All of the candidates found their vote-getting power in their images and left content out as confusing and irrelevant. They were correct to do this. As we shall see, a campaign run on content could not possibly work on television.

Carter learned the lesson well. In May 1977, The New York Times released an entertaining Carter memo which showed that his organization consciously formalized his re-election plans to emphasize style over content. Carter already uses television as it has never been used before, delivering his homespun appeals directly to the people at home in their
living rooms before dealing with Congress or journalists. His talents for leadership, already sharpened from the evangelist model he started with, are growing with his knowledge of technology.

During the years that television was coming into its own as the central factor in American personal and political life, its basic nature and the effects it had on human beings and their institutions were rarely examined. The problems that people did discuss were concentrated in three main areas: commercialism, access and programming.

Thinking that television could be reformed so that its potential for good would be realized, media reformers sought new laws, government control and regulatory policies. I was among the media workers who fought to limit the domination of advertisers and the effect of advertising on network policies. We worked to offset the emphasis on ratings, an emphasis detrimental to the needs of the public. Many of us fought for access channels so community groups could offer an occasional alternative to the consumer society. We hoped that in this way all segments of society, and all points of view, would gain access to the public mind, fulfilling what looked like a democratic potential of the medium.

Others fought on other fronts. Psychologists, parents' groups and educators lobbied against the dominance of sensational, superficial, irrelevant and violent programs. They sought programs with "prosocial values." They especially wanted new emphasis on humanistic and educational shows for children. These groups saw no reason why such values as cooperation, loving and caring could not be as appropriate for television programming as violence and competition.

It went on and on. Historians lobbied for more documentaries, believing that television had no greater inherent limits
to its ability to present historical truth than the media that had preceded it. They succeeded in getting legislation requiring that TV networks permanently store their news and documentary footage. Now we can look to a future in which the present era will be understood in terms of the television treatment of it.

Ecologists assumed television could be a potentially useful tool in expanding knowledge of how our species interacts with natural forces.

Political radicals believed television could stimulate deeper understanding of complex issues.

Indian groups believed it was possible to build sensitivity to their culture and philosophy through TV. They shared this belief with other groups that sought civil rights—blacks, homosexuals, women's groups and so on.

At some point in the early 1970s, I began to be at odds with the assumption that television was the ideal medium for all these groups. I noticed that, unlike commercial advertising messages, many of these alternative views somehow didn't work on television. They lost body, became "flat." Aside from this, it was clear that while the organizations were focusing all their communications efforts through television, they themselves were being negatively affected.

One day in 1971, I raised the point with two different groups. One was seeking the educational reform of colleges, and the other was lobbying for new neighborhood zoning laws.

I told them that I felt their intense desire to attract television coverage was damaging their organizations and that they were failing to get their message through anyway. They were losing their roots, their grounding. I wondered aloud if more wasn't being lost than gained.

The answer was, "Listen, everybody's watching television. We can reach everyone if we handle things the right way."

I pointed out that when a message is squeezed through a
twenty-second news spot, so much can be lost that what is left will fail to move anyone enough to make them turn off the set and actually do something. Meanwhile, the viewers will believe that they have learned everything they need to know on that subject and will be bored the next time they hear it.

Each group responded the same way. They brought up the civil rights and antiwar movements. These surely “worked” on television, so what was I trying to say? This stopped the discussion both times.

Only later did I understand that both the civil rights and antiwar movements were exceptions which proved the point. Adopting confrontational tactics in an escalating cycle of action and reaction, they got extensive coverage and became the model for all movements seeking rapid success.

But should all movements use such tactics to get their time on the tube? Were the street demonstrations and violent clashes that produced television coverage for some movements appropriate for neighborhood or educational reformers? For ecologists? For consumer groups? The handicapped? Perhaps so. They certainly brought the cameras out. But what became of their messages when groups did this? What became of the organizations? Finally, what did this suggest about the so-called neutral, or even benign, nature of the medium? Did this not mean that television, in effect, was determining the style and content (or lack thereof) of all political action, that movements were becoming derivative of the needs of the technology?

I didn’t know the answer to these questions, and I realized that no one else seemed to be even addressing them.

But what really drove me onward to investigate television was an experience I had while working with the Hopi Indians. I think it will be worth describing this experience in its full detail because its complexity is part of its point.
Television at Black Mesa

It was during the summer of 1972, just as I was closing down Freeman, Mander and Gossage, that I was asked to help some traditional Hopi elders who were fighting a strip mine on their reservation at Black Mesa, Arizona.

Black Mesa was sacred ground to the traditional Hopis. To rip it open and remove its contents was a violation of their most ancient religious tenets.

The problem at Black Mesa was typical of what has happened on many Indian reservations. The traditional Hopi Indians had always refused to deal with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which functions as overlord on all reservations, and so they had been pushed aside. In their stead, the Bureau had created a tribal council composed mainly of Indians who no longer lived on the reservation. The tribal council members were not really even Hopis anymore; they were Mormons. Most had moved to Salt Lake City, had businesses there, and returned to the reservation only for their council meetings. They agreed with the BIA that their job was to sell off Indian resources and land at the best possible price, thereby helping Indian people turn into Americans more quickly. The sale of strip mine rights to a coal company was simply part of the logic of this process.

The traditional “government” which had preceded the tribal council was not really a government at all. It was a kind of informal grouping of religious leaders from the dozens of independent clans which together formed the Hopis. They did not sit in a hierarchical arrangement over the rest of the Hopis; they functioned more as teachers or as guides to the religious conceptions.

The religion itself was based on what we would now think of as ecological laws of balance. The land was alive, the
source of life. To rip it up and ship away its contents was so outrageous as to be unthinkable. To the Mormon-American Hopis, however, strip mines were indeed thinkable.

Eventually the traditionalists realized that while they were ignoring the BIA and the tribal council, the land was being destroyed and the religion with it. The elders decided to fight. To fight they needed to learn white legal systems, white tactics, and white means of manipulating media. To learn these, they had to restructure their minds and conceptions. And so to fight the enemy, the traditional Hopis began the process of self-destroying what remained of their own Indian-ness.

At some point television news discovered the struggle. Network crews were flown out from Hollywood. They shot images of the deserts, images of the fifty-foot cranes, images of the older men and women standing picturesquely near their kivas. Following the network news guidelines for "good television" they sought a "balanced report." They interviewed members of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, members of the tribal council, and representatives of the coal company, all of whom discussed the issues in terms of contracts, rights, jobs and energy.

These opinions were juxtaposed with shots of some of the elderly Hopis, standing in the desert, speaking of the Great Spirit being represented in all things.

The newsmen added some footage of Hopi sacred dances and some images of the Hopi's most spiritual place, the kiva. The elders limited how far the reporters could go into their religion. It is against the Hopi religion, for example, to allow ceremonies and "power objects" to be photographed. The elders felt that to photograph these things "steals their aura." (As we will see in Chapter Fourteen, this may not be a silly notion.) They also felt that exposing their ceremonies to people who have not been trained to understand them—a
process that takes Hopi apprentices many years—would undermine the meaning of the ceremonies.

A week later, I watched the report on television. It got four minutes on the evening news. It was an earnest report. The reporters revealed that their sympathies lay with the traditionalists, but they had created—as they had no choice but to do—a formula story: Progress vs. Tradition. Forty million Americans obtained their first, and perhaps only, views of the Hopi people in the form of images of cranes juxtaposed with Indians in suits and ties, responsible government officials concerned about jobs, and a lot of old savage-looking types in funny clothes, talking about a religion which says that to dig up the land is dangerous for the survival of every creature on the planet. These forty million viewers also saw a white, modishly dressed TV newsmen explain the crosscurrents in the struggle, and plaintively ask whether something of an earlier culture couldn’t be permitted to remain. “From Black Mesa, Arizona, this is John Doe reporting.” This was followed by a commercial for Pacific Gas and Electric on the growing energy crisis and the need to tap all energy resources. The next story on the news was about a bank robbery.

I turned off the television set and wondered what effect this story had had on viewers. Did it help the Hopis? Would any good come from it?

It was certain that the old people had not come through as well as the businessmen, the government officials and the reporter’s objective, practical analysis. The old people just seemed tragic, and a little silly, if poignant. They were attempting to convey something subtle, complex, foreign and ancient through a medium which didn’t seem able to handle any of that and which is better suited to objective data, conflict and fast, packaged information.

I wondered, had I been shooting that story myself for the evening news, if I could have done a better job of it. Could I
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have been able to explain to white America that to care about what was going on down there they would have to have cared about the Hopi perception of reality; the Hopi mind and its integration with natural forces? Viewers would have had to care about the landscape, the spaces, the time, the wind, the color, the feel of the land and the sacred places and things. How could I have conveyed something through the medium so that anyone would have cared, when everyone was sitting at home in darkened living rooms, watching television? It was time travel that needed to be conveyed. How could I have carried a viewer from home through time and space to another reality which can only make sense if experienced directly? I decided that my report would have been no better than this Hollywood crew's had been. In fact, theirs was probably as good as could have been done within the limits of the medium. But in the end, the Hopis were hurt, not helped. Their struggle was revealed, perhaps, but they themselves were further fixed into the model of artifact. The medium could not be stretched to encompass their message.

On the other hand, what if I had four minutes, or even one minute, to convey the essence of a product? A car? A stereo set? A toy? Could I accomplish that efficiently?

I certainly could. It suddenly became obvious to me that a product is a lot easier to get across on television than a desert or a cultural mind-set.

Understanding Indian ways enough to care about them requires understanding a variety of dimensions of nuance and philosophy. You don't need any of that to understand a product, you do not have problems of subtlety, detail, time and space, historical context or organic form. Products are inherently communicable on television because of their static quality, sharp, clear, highly visible lines, and because they carry no informational meaning beyond what they themselves are. They contain no life at all and are therefore not capable of
dimension. Nothing works better as telecommunication than images of products.

Might television itself have no higher purpose?

*The Illusion of Neutral Technology*

Most Americans, whether on the political left, center, or right, will argue that technology is neutral, that any technology is merely a benign instrument, a tool, and depending upon the hands into which it falls, it may be used one way or another. There is nothing that prevents a technology from being used well or badly; nothing intrinsic in the technology itself or the circumstances of its emergence which can predetermine its use, its control or its effects upon individual human lives or the social and political forms around us.

The argument goes that television is merely a window or a conduit through which any perception, any argument or reality may pass. It therefore has the potential to be enlightening to people who watch it and is potentially useful to democratic processes.

It will be the central point of this book that these assumptions about television, as about other technologies, are totally wrong.

If you once accept the principle of an army—a collection of military technologies and people to run them—all gathered together for the purpose of fighting, overpowering, killing and winning, then it is obvious that the supervisors of armies will be the sort of people who desire to fight, overpower, kill and win, and who are also good at these assignments: generals. The fact of generals, then, is predictable by the creation of armies. The kinds of generals are also predetermined. Humanistic, loving, pacifistic generals, though they may exist from time to time, are extremely rare in armies. It is useless to advocate that we have more of them.
If you accept the existence of automobiles, you also accept the existence of roads laid upon the landscape, oil to run the cars, and huge institutions to find the oil, pump it and distribute it. In addition you accept a sped-up style of life and the movement of humans through the terrain at speeds that make it impossible to pay attention to whatever is growing there. Humans who use cars sit in fixed positions for long hours following a narrow strip of gray pavement, with eyes fixed forward, engaged in the task of driving. As long as they are driving, they are living within what we might call "roadform." Slowly they evolve into car-people. McLuhan told us that cars "extended" the human feet, but he put it the wrong way. Cars replaced human feet.

If you accept nuclear power plants, you also accept a techno-scientific-industrial-military elite. Without these people in charge, you could not have nuclear power. You and I getting together with a few friends could not make use of nuclear power. We could not build such a plant, nor could we make personal use of its output, nor handle or store the radioactive waste products which remain dangerous to life for thousands of years. The wastes, in turn, determine that future societies will have to maintain a technological capacity to deal with the problem, and the military capability to protect the wastes. So the existence of the technology determines many aspects of the society.

If you accept mass production, you accept that a small number of people will supervise the daily existence of a much larger number of people. You accept that human beings will spend long hours, every day, engaged in repetitive work, while suppressing any desires for experience or activity beyond this work. The workers’ behavior becomes subject to the machine. With mass production, you also accept that huge numbers of identical items will need to be efficiently distributed to huge numbers of people and that institutions such as advertising will arise to do this. One technological process cannot exist with-
out the other, creating symbiotic relationships among technologies themselves.

If you accept the existence of advertising, you accept a system designed to persuade and to dominate minds by interfering in people's thinking patterns. You also accept that the system will be used by the sorts of people who like to influence people and are good at it. No person who did not wish to dominate others would choose to use advertising, or choosing it, succeed in it. So the basic nature of advertising and all technologies created to serve it will be consistent with this purpose, will encourage this behavior in society, and will tend to push social evolution in this direction.

In all of these instances, the basic form of the institution and the technology determines its interaction with the world, the way it will be used, the kind of people who use it, and to what ends.

And so it is with television.

Far from being "neutral," television itself predetermines who shall use it, how they will use it, what effects it will have on individual lives, and, if it continues to be widely used, what sorts of political forms will inevitably emerge. These will be the subjects taken up in the main body of this book.

**Before the Arguments: A Comment on Style**

Before going on with the four arguments, I think it will be useful to remark that they involve a deliberate change in pace from what you have read till now. This introduction was written to move along the surface from point to point fairly quickly, à la television-time, as it were. Its purpose was to give you a rapid summary of my own changing perspectives on the medium, up to the moment I began to feel that there was much more to the problem than I understood, leading me temporarily to quit all other activities and delve further into television.
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It was only after a long while and many half-steps of change in viewpoint that I finally faced the fact that television is not reformable, that it must be gotten rid of totally if our society is to return to something like sane and democratic functioning. So, to argue that case, especially considering that it involves a technology accepted as readily and utterly as electric light itself, is not something that ought to be done rapidly or lightly. Nor can such a case be confined to the technology itself, as if it existed aside from a context.

What follows, therefore, proceeds in what might be called book-time through four dimensions of television's role and impact. Each of them can be observed separately from the others, but they also intertwine and overlap each other.

The first argument is theoretical and environmental. It attempts to set the framework by which we can understand television's place in modern society. Yet, this argument is not about television itself. In fact, television will be mentioned only occasionally. It is about a process, already long underway, which has successfully redirected and confined human experience and therefore knowledge and perceived reality. We have all been moved into such a narrow and deprived channel of experience that a dangerous instrument like television can come along and seem useful, interesting, sane and worthwhile at the same time it further boxes people into a physical and mental condition appropriate for the emergence of autocratic control.

The second argument concerns the emergence of the controllers. That television would be used and expanded by the present powers-that-be was inevitable, and should have been predictable at the outset. The technology permits of no other controllers.

The third argument concerns the effects of television upon individual human bodies and minds, effects which fit the purposes of the people who control the medium.

The fourth argument demonstrates that television has no
democratic potential. The technology itself places absolute limits on what may pass through it. The medium, in effect, chooses its own content from a very narrow field of possibilities. The effect is to drastically confine all human understanding within a rigid channel.

What binds the four arguments together is that they deal with aspects of television that are not reformable.

What is revealed in the end is that there is ideology in the technology itself. To speak of television as "neutral" and therefore subject to change is as absurd as speaking of the reform of a technology such as guns.