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The Great Stereopticon Revisited

G. Daniel Harden

In 1948 Richard Weaver, a somewhat reclusive professor of literature at the University of Chicago, produced what came to be the widely acclaimed and quoted book, *Ideas Have Consequences*. The work received critical commentary at the time from both enthusiasts and detractors. Although much of the book relates to what Weaver sees as the general civilizational decline of the West since William of Occam introduced philosophical nominalism to the table in the Thirteenth Century, the most widely reprinted chapter deals with the affect that various forms of communication technology have on our perceptions of reality and of Truth.

In Weaver's *Ideas*, the University of Chicago scholar lists three types of modern media as constituting The Great Stereopticon: newspapers, movies, and radio. There are, claimed Weaver, certain innate and predictable perceptual tendencies associated with each of these venues, which affect the perceptions of the natural world and reality to those who partake of them on a regular basis and thereby subject themselves to their influences.

If his thesis is correct, it follows that those who control the Stereopticon have a powerful tool with which to manipulate popular culture and bring about specific social, political and even philosophical ends. Because these affects are only partially the result of a process of cognition and are at least equally dependent on extra rational reactions to the technology itself, the degree to which a person desires to submit himself and family to their effects takes on a pivotal importance.

In the 1950s the Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan reflected on the same topic. Although McLuhan was often obscure and difficult to follow, his famous line about the "Medium is the Message" caught on with many who were trying to make some sense out of how communication was being effected by the new technologies. McLuhan made a basic dichotomy between hot and cool media.

"Basically, a hot medium excludes and a cool medium includes; hot media are low in participation, or completion, by the audience and cool media are high in participation. A photograph, for example, is high definition or hot, whereas a cartoon is low definition or cool... the telephone, which gives the ear relatively little data is thus cool, as is speech... The... overwhelming majority of our technologies and entertainments since the introduction of print technology have been hot, fragmented and exclusive, but in the age of television we see a return to cool values and the inclusive in-depth involvement and participation they engender. TV is revolutionizing every political system in the Western world.

For one thing, it's creating a totally new type of national leader, a man who is much more of a tribal chieftain than a politician. Castro is a good example of the new tribal chieftain who rules his country by a mass-participational TV dialog and feedback; he governs his country on camera, by giving the Cuban people the experience of being directly and intimately involved in the process of collective decision making."

When reflecting on the affect that some current types of television programming has on young people, it is easy to connect McLuhan's analysis with current television fare. Virtually no one would credit MTV with influencing the cognitional direction of those who view it regularly. At the same time there is no question but that those who have prolonged exposure to that television channel, together with other reinforcing non-cognitive stimuli, have integrated and absorbed certain approaches to life and culture as a result of such exposure.

It should also be realized that to the extent that educational organizations, especially the public schools, integrate new communications technology into their instructional programs, the more powerful will be their influence relative to non-cognitive aspects of student perceptions and understandings. Weaver succinctly makes the point,

"It is the function of this machine [The Great Stereopticon] to project selected pictures of life in the hope that what is seen will be imitated. All of us in the West who are within the long reach of technology are sitting in the audience. We are told the time to laugh and the time to cry, and signs are not wanting that the audience grows ever more responsive to its cues."

The issue with which parents and educators must now grapple is who is in control of The Stereopticon and what responses are going to be elicited. The laugh track only goes back to the 1940s, and was a first, and clumsy, effort at priming the extra rational pump so that predictable and desired responses would be forthcoming. With the current communications technology available to the teacher to create everything from attractive posters with supposedly appropriate messages, to the production of films presenting fictional historical dramas from politically correct perspectives, to the development of seductive alternative virtual realities, the school now has the power to influence and mold children and young people far more completely than it had but a few decades ago.

The seductive qualities associated with technology in its many forms pose new and alarming threats to the traditionally primary roles of the family and church relative to the transmission of culture. Through the replacement of traditional experience with ersatz virtual experience, the perceptive mechanism of an entire aspect of life has been forever altered. A few years ago a candidate for an educational technology position at my institution demonstrated a computer program that allowed the user to create a landscape, a castle, and full marching armies. You could view the interior the castle, buzz the entire area from the air, and see what was going on from almost any vantage point that you desired. It was amazing indeed. After the candidate finished his presentation, of which the demonstration of this software was only a part, I made my way to from of the room and quietly asked him whether, after having worked with this very impressive program, young people would ever again take great joy in the town parade or in an autumn walk through the wood lot and hear the crunch of drying

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leaves under each footfall. He looked at me quizzically and without much thought dismissed that concern as being without much merit. He didn't get the job, but I am sure that he is teaching somewhere and very effectively proclaiming his message of the wonders of virtual reality.

Even more frightening perhaps is technology in the hands of those who use it to promote their politically correct social agenda. Peter Augustine Lawler observes in a recent article in *The Intercollegiate Review*, that many professors of a particularly "progressive" perspective know virtually no limit to their agenda. Is there any reason to believe that those who represent the same social and political agenda on the K-12 level would be any less zealous to achieve their ends?

"The[y]... believe they can use almost any means necessary to create a classless society— one which does not recognize the distinctions between men and women and gay and straight, and which has no place for the soul or conscience or unapproved personal association at all... Religion, for example, must be judged not by its truth or its adequacy in addressing ineradicable and transpolitical human longings, but for its contribution to inculcating devotion to a rights-based understanding of justice. The family must be judged according to the same principal, and so according to its egalitarian socialization of children. The danger of a child being raised well by two heterosexual parents is believing that his or her form of family is better than others, and so the school must correct the historical and anthropological narrowness of that opinion." (Lawler, 1999)

Materials used in many schools no longer offer merely objective accounts of content but rather also emphasize a specific and authorized perspective of analysis. Students are regularly subjected to books which present only an approved view of the world, its history, and its cultures. There is a dominant orthodoxy which is given priority status in most schools and is now reinforced by the extra cognitive character of the employed technology. The following observation was made by Richard Weaver 50 years ago and could well be made of many teaching materials in common use today:

"The newspaper is a man-made cosmos of the world of events around us at the time. For the average reader it is a construct with a set of significance which he no more thinks of examining than did his pious forebearer of the thirteenth century— whom he pities for sitting in medieval darkness— thing of questioning the cosmology. This modern man, too, lives under a dome, whose theoretical aspect has been made to harmonize with a materialistic conception of the world."

If, as a parent or as a member of a non-dominant cultural minority, the cultural icons and perspectives that you intend to transmit to your progeny differs root and branch from that of the prevailing paradigms, it is a more uneven battle than ever for the transmission of the particularity of your wee platoon, to use Edmund Burke's phrase. The wee platoons, those small subsidiary social units in society, the families, lodges, churches, councils, sports teams, political clubs, are under attack from those who control the technological levers of power that direct *The Great Stereopticon*.

Even Thomas Jefferson at 70 wrote his frequent correspondent, John Adams, "I have given up newspapers in exchange for Tacitus and

Thucydides, for Newton and Euclid, and I find myself much the happier." Of course Jefferson was not saying that he had become disinterested in what was happening in Virginia during his final years. What he was saying was that the news of the passing moment had to be mellowed with something more reflective, more profound, than the favored fictions of the moment; that the popular newspapers had a certain sleazy quality about them that they could not shed. What conclusions can we today make about the 24-hour-per-day *Stereopticon*, the cable television with its nonstop buzz of cheap high-interest news, cheap high-interest sports, cheap high-interest history, and cheap high-interest religion? Is there not something innately inferior about the entertainment product produced by this sort of machine that consumes all events with an eye toward turning them into profit making spectacles that will attract the lowest common denominator among its viewers and keep its attention indefinitely? Weaver's observation rings even more clearly today as we are bombarded by television stations without number. What is wrong with them has little to do with the specific episode or entertainment segment, but rather with entire process and product.

"The thing that needs to be censored is not the length of the kisses but the egotistic, selfish, and self-flaunting here; not the relative proportion of undraped breast but the flippant vacuous-minded, and also egotistic heroine. Let us not worry about the jokes of dubious propriety; let us rather object to the whole story, with its complacent assertion of the virtues of materialist society... The entire globe is becoming imbued with the notion that there is something normative about the insane sort of life lived in New York and Hollywood— even after that life has been exaggerated to suit the morbid appetite of the thrill-seeker." (Weaver, 1948)

So, *The Great Stereopticon* and its new tentacles result in, at best, a dumbed down culture in which the majority of people are unable to reflectively consider any issue independently of what the popular columnist Robert Tyrell refers to as the *kultursmog* of the established and approved communications outlets, or at worse, a culture manipulated by these same forces for their own advantage.

The Technological Boomerang Effect

The writer is of two minds as to the effect of technology, and modernity itself. Weaver's is a reasonable explanation for the social and intellectual fragmentation that we have long associated with the modern condition. It has been a tool in the hands of the central planners and social engineers to break down the cultural particularities of those few remaining organic communities which play such a prominent role in Weaver's thinking. Technology, the human victory over time and space, as Neil Postman described it, was to have created the famed *Global Village* of Marshall McLuhan. And in some ways it has. But there have been other developments as well, some hopeful and others worrisome.

While technology, in school and out, tends to have the effect of standardization, it also can be an instrument in the hands of particularists. Everyone is aware of the *global village* metaphor that has been used in many cases to justify state intervention into what were earlier personal or family or community issues. Frequently it has been a justification for extending state authority. By pooling the data available in a number of data banks the state can come perilously close to establishing an informational *panopticon*, along almost

Benthamite lines. But for many who resist this expansion of political power and correctness, technology provides an alternative direction. The communication opportunity afforded by technology has opened more venues for unauthorized communities of like minded individuals. Small groups with particularist tendencies can now easily publish their own newsletters, magazines, and print journals with increased efficiency. With little more than a basic understanding of Adobe PageMaker and the shortest route to the local Kinko franchise, everyone with an idea has the opportunity to attempt the creation his own organic community and publicize his own Gnostic utopian vision. In two weeks the group has its own history, its unique perspective on reality, and its own tradition. What previously took generations to create can now, through the wonders of technology, be boiled down and prepared for general distribution in an amazingly short period of time.

And schools may be in the middle of this battle between the standardization desired by the politically correct social engineers with all of their acceptable and respectable assumptions, and those who resist the imposition of modernity's new social/political/religious template. The educational establishment is in high dudgeon over the growing home school phenomenon. New and ever more preposterous theories are being forwarded by the embattled public school establishment as to why parents are increasingly taking advantage of the home school option. One minute they will be largely religious kooks and gun stockpilers, and the next they will be left over hippies.

Because of the potentially creative use of technology these small organic communities may yet escape the endangered species list. Even the educational establishment cannot stifle unauthorized technological developments. One school district in Kansas has a virtual classroom that serves some of the instructional needs of home school students quite well. Students are enrolled in this school from all parts of the state. Although the state curriculum guidelines are followed, they are seen as guidelines rather than directives. The technology is now present for an untold number of groups to devise their own system of education, independent of space and largely independent of great corporate (or state) resources. Technology may be a revolutionary tool or it may be the salvation of the counterrevolution. It can cut both ways. Thus we see the government periodically floating ideas on how the Internet and electronic communications may be controlled, and then opposition develops largely because of the political and communications clout of those who would likely be affected by such an extension of federal power.

The final judgment on the role of technology in modern society and in the educational process is not yet in. Even were I a betting man I do believe that I would sit this one out.

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