

IO.

Teaching as an Amusing Activity

There could not have been a safer bet when it began in 1969 than that "Sesame Street" would be embraced by children, parents and educators. Children loved it because they were raised on television commercials, which they intuitively knew were the most carefully crafted entertainments on television. To those who had not yet been to school, even to those who had just started, the idea of being *taught* by a series of commercials did not seem peculiar. And that television should entertain them was taken as a matter of course.

Parents embraced "Sesame Street" for several reasons, among them that it assuaged their guilt over the fact that they could not or would not restrict their children's access to television. "Sesame Street" appeared to justify allowing a four- or five-year-old to sit transfixed in front of a television screen for unnatural periods of time. Parents were eager to hope that television could teach their children something other than which breakfast cereal has the most crackle. At the same time, "Sesame Street" relieved them of the responsibility of teaching their pre-school children how to read—no small matter in a culture where children are apt to be considered a nuisance. They could also plainly see that in spite of its faults, "Sesame Street" was entirely consonant with the prevailing spirit of America. Its use of cute puppets, celebrities, catchy tunes, and rapid-fire editing was certain to give pleasure to the children and would therefore serve as adequate preparation for their entry into a fun-loving culture.

As for educators, they generally approved of "Sesame Street," too. Contrary to common opinion, they are apt to find new methods congenial, especially if they are told that education can be accomplished more efficiently by means of the new techniques. (That is why such ideas as "teacher-proof" textbooks, standardized tests, and, now, micro-computers have been welcomed into the classroom.) "Sesame Street" appeared to be an imaginative aid in solving the growing problem of teaching Americans how to read, while, at the same time, encouraging children to love school.

We now know that "Sesame Street" encourages children to love school only if school is like "Sesame Street." Which is to say, we now know that "Sesame Street" undermines what the traditional idea of schooling represents. Whereas a classroom is a place of social interaction, the space in front of a television set is a private preserve. Whereas in a classroom, one may ask a teacher questions, one can ask nothing of a television screen. Whereas school is centered on the development of language, television demands attention to images. Whereas attending school is a legal requirement, watching television is an act of choice. Whereas in school, one fails to attend to the teacher at the risk of punishment, no penalties exist for failing to attend to the television screen. Whereas to behave oneself in school means to observe rules of public decorum, television watching requires no such observances, has no concept of public decorum. Whereas in a classroom, fun is never more than a means to an end, on television it is the end in itself.

Yet "Sesame Street" and its progeny, "The Electric Company," are not to be blamed for laughing the traditional classroom out of existence. If the classroom now begins to seem a stale and flat environment for learning, the inventors of television itself are to blame, not the Children's Television Workshop. We can hardly expect those who want to make good television shows to concern themselves with what the classroom is for. They are concerned with what television is for. This

does not mean that "Sesame Street" is not educational. It is, in fact, nothing but educational—in the sense that every television show is educational. Just as reading a book—any kind of book—promotes a particular orientation toward learning, watching a television show does the same. "The Little House on the Prairie," "Cheers" and "The Tonight Show" are as effective as "Sesame Street" in promoting what might be called the television style of learning. And this style of learning is, by its nature, hostile to what has been called book-learning or its handmaiden, school-learning. If we are to blame "Sesame Street" for anything, it is for the pretense that it is any ally of the classroom. That, after all, has been its chief claim on foundation and public money. As a television show, and a good one, "Sesame Street" does not encourage children to love school or anything about school. It encourages them to love television.

Moreover, it is important to add that whether or not "Sesame Street" teaches children their letters and numbers is entirely irrelevant. We may take as our guide here John Dewey's observation that the content of a lesson is the least important thing about learning. As he wrote in *Experience and Education*: "Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only what he is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes . . . may be and often is more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history. . . . For these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future."¹ In other words, the most important thing one learns is always something about *how* one learns. As Dewey wrote in another place, we learn what we do. Television educates by teaching children to do what television-viewing requires of them. And that is as precisely remote from what a classroom requires of them as reading a book is from watching a stage show.

Although one would not know it from consulting various recent proposals on how to mend the educational system, this point—that reading books and watching television differ en-

tirely in what they imply about learning—is the primary educational issue in America today. America is, in fact, the leading case in point of what may be thought of as the third great crisis in Western education. The first occurred in the fifth century B.C., when Athens underwent a change from an oral culture to an alphabet-writing culture. To understand what this meant, we must read Plato. The second occurred in the sixteenth century, when Europe underwent a radical transformation as a result of the printing press. To understand what this meant, we must read John Locke. The third is happening now, in America, as a result of the electronic revolution, particularly the invention of television. To understand what this means, we must read Marshall McLuhan.

We face the rapid dissolution of the assumptions of an education organized around the slow-moving printed word, and the equally rapid emergence of a new education based on the speed-of-light electronic image. The classroom is, at the moment, still tied to the printed word, although that connection is rapidly weakening. Meanwhile, television forges ahead, making no concessions to its great technological predecessor, creating new conceptions of knowledge and how it is acquired. One is entirely justified in saying that the major educational enterprise now being undertaken in the United States is not happening in its classrooms but in the home, in front of the television set, and under the jurisdiction not of school administrators and teachers but of network executives and entertainers. I don't mean to imply that the situation is a result of a conspiracy or even that those who control television want this responsibility. I mean only to say that, like the alphabet or the printing press, television has by its power to control the time, attention and cognitive habits of our youth gained the power to control their education.

This is why I think it accurate to call television a curriculum. As I understand the word, a curriculum is a specially constructed information system whose purpose is to influence,

teach, train or cultivate the mind and character of youth. Television, of course, does exactly that, and does it relentlessly. In so doing, it competes successfully with the school curriculum. By which I mean, it damn near obliterates it.

Having devoted an earlier book, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, to a detailed examination of the antagonistic nature of the two curriculums—television and school—I will not burden the reader or myself with a repetition of that analysis. But I would like to recall two points that I feel I did not express forcefully enough in that book and that happen to be central to this one. I refer, first, to the fact that television's principal contribution to educational philosophy is the idea that teaching and entertainment are inseparable. This entirely original conception is to be found nowhere in educational discourses, from Confucius to Plato to Cicero to Locke to John Dewey. In searching the literature of education, you will find it said by some that children will learn best when they are interested in what they are learning. You will find it said—Plato and Dewey emphasized this—that reason is best cultivated when it is rooted in robust emotional ground. You will even find some who say that learning is best facilitated by a loving and benign teacher. But no one has ever said or implied that significant learning is effectively, durably and truthfully achieved when education is entertainment. Education philosophers have assumed that becoming acculturated is difficult because it necessarily involves the imposition of restraints. They have argued that there must be a sequence to learning, that perseverance and a certain measure of perspiration are indispensable, that individual pleasures must frequently be submerged in the interests of group cohesion, and that learning to be critical and to think conceptually and rigorously do not come easily to the young but are hard-fought victories. Indeed, Cicero remarked that the purpose of education is to free the student from the tyranny of the present, which cannot be pleasurable for those, like the young, who are struggling

hard to do the opposite—that is, accommodate themselves to the present.

Television offers a delicious and, as I have said, original alternative to all of this. We might say there are three commandments that form the philosophy of the education which television offers. The influence of these commandments is observable in every type of television programming—from "Sesame Street" to the documentaries of "Nova" and "The National Geographic" to "Fantasy Island" to MTV. The commandments are as follows:

Thou shalt have no prerequisites

Every television program must be a complete package in itself. No previous knowledge is to be required. There must not be even a hint that learning is hierarchical, that it is an edifice constructed on a foundation. The learner must be allowed to enter at any point without prejudice. This is why you shall never hear or see a television program begin with the caution that if the viewer has not seen the previous programs, this one will be meaningless. Television is a nongraded curriculum and excludes no viewer for any reason, at any time. In other words, in doing away with the idea of sequence and continuity in education, television undermines the idea that sequence and continuity have anything to do with thought itself.

Thou shalt induce no perplexity

In television teaching, perplexity is a superhighway to low ratings. A perplexed learner is a learner who will turn to another station. This means that there must be nothing that has to be remembered, studied, applied or, worst of all, endured. It is assumed that any information, story or idea can be made imme-

diately accessible, since the contentment, not the growth, of the learner is paramount.

Thou shalt avoid exposition like the ten plagues visited upon Egypt

Of all the enemies of television-teaching, including continuity and perplexity, none is more formidable than exposition. Arguments, hypotheses, discussions, reasons, refutations or any of the traditional instruments of reasoned discourse turn television into radio or, worse, third-rate printed matter. Thus, television-teaching always takes the form of story-telling, conducted through dynamic images and supported by music. This is as characteristic of "Star Trek" as it is of "Cosmos," of "Different Strokes" as of "Sesame Street," of commercials as of "Nova." Nothing will be taught on television that cannot be both visualized and placed in a theatrical context.

The name we may properly give to an education without prerequisites, perplexity and exposition is entertainment. And when one considers that save for sleeping there is no activity that occupies more of an American youth's time than television-viewing, we cannot avoid the conclusion that a massive reorientation toward learning is now taking place. Which leads to the second point I wish to emphasize: The consequences of this reorientation are to be observed not only in the decline of the potency of the classroom but, paradoxically, in the refashioning of the classroom into a place where both teaching and learning are intended to be vastly amusing activities.

I have already referred to the experiment in Philadelphia in which the classroom is reconstituted as a rock concert. But this is only the silliest example of an attempt to define education as a mode of entertainment. Teachers, from primary grades through college, are increasing the visual stimulation of their lessons; are reducing the amount of exposition their students must cope with; are relying less on reading and writing assign-

ments; and are reluctantly concluding that the principal means by which student interest may be engaged is entertainment. With no difficulty I could fill the remaining pages of this chapter with examples of teachers' efforts—in some instances, unconscious—to make their classrooms into second-rate television shows. But I will rest my case with "The Voyage of the Mimi," which may be taken as a synthesis, if not an apotheosis, of the New Education. "The Voyage of the Mimi" is the name of an expensive science and mathematics project that has brought together some of the most prestigious institutions in the field of education—the United States Department of Education, the Bank Street College of Education, the Public Broadcasting System, and the publishing firm Holt, Rinehart and Winston. The project was made possible by a \$3.65 million grant from the Department of Education, which is always on the alert to put its money where the future is. And the future is "The Voyage of the Mimi." To describe the project succinctly, I quote from four paragraphs in *The New York Times* of August 7, 1984:

Organized around a twenty-six-unit television series that depicts the adventures of a floating whale-research laboratory, [the project] combines television viewing with lavishly illustrated books and computer games that simulate the way scientists and navigators work. . . .

"The Voyage of the Mimi" is built around fifteen-minute television programs that depict the adventures of four young people who accompany two scientists and a crusty sea captain on a voyage to monitor the behavior of humpback whales off the coast of Maine. The crew of the converted tuna trawler navigates the ship, tracks down the whales and struggles to survive on an uninhabited island after a storm damages the ship's hull. . . .

Each dramatic episode is then followed by a fifteen-minute documentary on related themes. One such documentary involved a visit by one of the teen-age actors to Ted Taylor, a nuclear physicist in Greenport, L.I., who has devised a way of purifying sea water by freezing it.

The television programs, which teachers are free to record off the air and use at their convenience, are supplemented by a series of books and computer exercises that pick up four academic themes that emerge naturally from the story line: map and navigational skills, whales and their environment, ecological systems and computer literacy.

The television programs have been broadcast over PBS; the books and computer software have been provided by Holt, Rinehart and Winston; the educational expertise by the faculty of the Bank Street College. Thus, "The Voyage of the Mimi" is not to be taken lightly. As Frank Withrow of the Department of Education remarked, "We consider it the flagship of what we are doing. It is a model that others will begin to follow." Everyone involved in the project is enthusiastic, and extraordinary claims of its benefits come trippingly from their tongues. Janice Trebbi Richards of Holt, Rinehart and Winston asserts, "Research shows that learning increases when information is presented in a dramatic setting, and television can do this better than any other medium." Officials of the Department of Education claim that the appeal of integrating three media—television, print, and computers—lies in their potential for cultivating higher-order thinking skills. And Mr. Withrow is quoted as saying that projects like "The Voyage of the Mimi" could mean great financial savings, that in the long run "it is cheaper than anything else we do." Mr. Withrow also suggested that there are many ways of financing such projects. "With 'Sesame Street,'" he said, "it took five or six years, but eventually you can start bringing in the money with T-shirts and cookie jars."

We may start thinking about what "The Voyage of the Mimi" signifies by recalling that the idea is far from original. What is here referred to as "integrating three media" or a "multi-media presentation" was once called "audio-visual aids," used by teachers for years, usually for the modest purpose of enhancing

student interest in the curriculum. Moreover, several years ago, the Office of Education (as the Department was then called) supplied funds to WNET for a similarly designed project called "Watch Your Mouth," a series of television dramatizations in which young people inclined to misuse the English language fumbled their way through a variety of social problems. Linguists and educators prepared lessons for teachers to use in conjunction with each program. The dramatizations were compelling—although not nearly as good as "Welcome Back, Kotter," which had the unassailable advantage of John Travolta's charisma—but there exists no evidence that students who were required to view "Watch Your Mouth" increased their competence in the use of the English language. Indeed, since there is no shortage of mangled English on everyday commercial television, one wondered at the time why the United States government would have paid anyone to go to the trouble of producing additional ineptitudes as a source of classroom study. A videotape of any of David Susskind's programs would provide an English teacher with enough linguistic aberrations to fill a semester's worth of analysis.

Nonetheless, the Department of Education has forged ahead, apparently in the belief that ample evidence—to quote Ms. Richards again—"shows that learning increases when information is presented in a dramatic setting, and that television can do this better than any other medium." The most charitable response to this claim is that it is misleading. George Comstock and his associates have reviewed 2,800 studies on the general topic of television's influence on behavior, including cognitive processing, and are unable to point to persuasive evidence that "learning increases when information is presented in a dramatic setting."² Indeed, in studies conducted by Cohen and Samuelson; Meringoff; Jacoby, Hoyer and Sheluga; Stauffer, Frost and Rybolt; Stern; Wilson; Neuman; Katz, Adoni and Parnes; and Gunter, quite the opposite conclusion is justified.³ Jacoby et al. found, for example, that only 3.5 percent of viewers were

able to answer successfully twelve true/false questions concerning two thirty-second segments of commercial television programs and advertisements. Stauffer et al. found in studying students' responses to a news program transmitted via television, radio and print, that print significantly increased correct responses to questions regarding the names of people and numbers contained in the material. Stern reported that 51 percent of viewers could not recall a single item of news a few minutes after viewing a news program on television. Wilson found that the average television viewer could retain only 20 percent of the information contained in a fictional televised news story. Katz et al. found that 21 percent of television viewers could not recall any news items within one hour of broadcast. On the basis of his and other studies, Salomon has concluded that "the meanings secured from television are more likely to be segmented, concrete and less inferential, and those secured from reading have a higher likelihood of being better tied to one's stored knowledge and thus are more likely to be inferential."⁴ In other words, so far as many reputable studies are concerned, television viewing does not significantly increase learning, is inferior to and less likely than print to cultivate higher-order, inferential thinking.

But one must not make too much of the rhetoric of grantmanship. We are all inclined to transform our hopes into tenacious claims when an important project is at stake. Besides, I have no doubt that Ms. Richards can direct us to several studies that lend support to her enthusiasm. The point is that if you want money for the redundant purpose of getting children to watch even more television than they already do—and dramatizations at that—you have to escalate the rhetoric to Herculean proportions.

What is of greatest significance about "The Voyage of the Mimi" is that the content selected was obviously chosen because it is eminently *televisable*. Why are these students studying the behavior of humpback whales? How critical is it that the

"academic themes" of navigational and map-reading skills be learned? Navigational skills have never been considered an "academic theme" and in fact seem singularly inappropriate for most students in big cities. Why has it been decided that "whales and their environment" is a subject of such compelling interest that an entire year's work should be given to it?

I would suggest that "The Voyage of the Mimi" was conceived by someone's asking the question, What is television good for?, not, What is education good for? Television is good for dramatizations, shipwrecks, seafaring adventures, crusty old sea captains, and physicists being interviewed by actor-celebrities. And that, of course, is what we have got in "The Voyage of the Mimi." The fact that this adventure sit-com is accompanied by lavishly illustrated books and computer games only underscores that the television presentation controls the curriculum. The books whose pictures the students will scan and the computer games the students will play are dictated by the content of the television shows, not the other way around. Books, it would appear, have now become an audio-visual aid; the principal carrier of the content of education is the television show, and its principal claim for a preeminent place in the curriculum is that it is entertaining. Of course, a television production can be used to stimulate interest in lessons, or even as the focal point of a lesson. But what is happening here is that the content of the school curriculum is being determined by the character of television, and even worse, that character is apparently not included as part of what is studied. One would have thought that the school room is the proper place for students to inquire into the ways in which media of all kinds—including television—shape people's attitudes and perceptions. Since our students will have watched approximately sixteen thousand hours of television by high school's end, questions should have arisen, even in the minds of officials at the Department of Education, about who will teach our students how to look at television, and when not to, and with what critical equipment when

they do. "The Voyage of the Mimi" project bypasses these questions; indeed, hopes that the students will immerse themselves in the dramatizations in the same frame of mind used when watching "St. Elsewhere" or "Hill Street Blues." (One may also assume that what is called "computer literacy" does not involve raising questions about the cognitive biases and social effects of the computer, which, I would venture, are the most important questions to address about new technologies.)

"The Voyage of the Mimi," in other words, spent \$3.65 million for the purpose of using media in exactly the manner that media merchants want them to be used—mindlessly and invisibly, as if media themselves have no epistemological or political agenda. And, in the end, what will the students have learned? They will, to be sure, have learned something about whales, perhaps about navigation and map reading, most of which they could have learned just as well by other means. Mainly, they will have learned that learning is a form of entertainment or, more precisely, that anything worth learning can take the form of an entertainment, and ought to. And they will not rebel if their English teacher asks them to learn the eight parts of speech through the medium of rock music. Or if their social studies teacher sings to them the facts about the War of 1812. Or if their physics comes to them on cookies and T-shirts. Indeed, they will expect it and thus will be well prepared to receive their politics, their religion, their news and their commerce in the same delightful way.

II.

The Huxleyan Warning

There are two ways by which the spirit of a culture may be shriveled. In the first—the Orwellian—culture becomes a prison. In the second—the Huxleyan—culture becomes a burlesque.

No one needs to be reminded that our world is now marred by many prison-cultures whose structure Orwell described accurately in his parables. If one were to read both *1984* and *Animal Farm*, and then for good measure, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, one would have a fairly precise blueprint of the machinery of thought-control as it currently operates in scores of countries and on millions of people. Of course, Orwell was not the first to teach us about the spiritual devastations of tyranny. What is irreplaceable about his work is his insistence that it makes little difference if our wardens are inspired by right- or left-wing ideologies. The gates of the prison are equally impenetrable, surveillance equally rigorous, icon-worship equally pervasive.

What Huxley teaches is that in the age of advanced technology, spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face than from one whose countenance exudes suspicion and hate. In the Huxleyan prophecy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours. There is no need for wardens or gates or Ministries of Truth. When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in

short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.

In America, Orwell's prophecies are of small relevance, but Huxley's are well under way toward being realized. For America is engaged in the world's most ambitious experiment to accommodate itself to the technological distractions made possible by the electric plug. This is an experiment that began slowly and modestly in the mid-nineteenth century and has now, in the latter half of the twentieth, reached a perverse maturity in America's consuming love-affair with television. As nowhere else in the world, Americans have moved far and fast in bringing to a close the age of the slow-moving printed word, and have granted to television sovereignty over all of their institutions. By ushering in the Age of Television, America has given the world the clearest available glimpse of the Huxleyan future.

Those who speak about this matter must often raise their voices to a near-hysterical pitch, inviting the charge that they are everything from wimps to public nuisances to Jeremiahs. But they do so because what they want others to see appears benign, when it is not invisible altogether. An Orwellian world is much easier to recognize, and to oppose, than a Huxleyan. Everything in our background has prepared us to know and resist a prison when the gates begin to close around us. We are not likely, for example, to be indifferent to the voices of the Sakharovs and the Timmermans and the Walesas. We take arms against such a sea of troubles, buttressed by the spirit of Milton, Bacon, Voltaire, Goethe and Jefferson. But what if there are no cries of anguish to be heard? Who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? To whom do we complain, and when, and in what tone of voice, when serious discourse dissolves into giggles? What is the antidote to a culture's being drained by laughter?

I fear that our philosophers have given us no guidance in this

matter. Their warnings have customarily been directed against those consciously formulated ideologies that appeal to the worst tendencies in human nature. But what is happening in America is not the design of an articulated ideology. No *Mein Kampf* or *Communist Manifesto* announced its coming. It comes as the unintended consequence of a dramatic change in our modes of public conversation. But it is an ideology nonetheless, for it imposes a way of life, a set of relations among people and ideas, about which there has been no consensus, no discussion and no opposition. Only compliance. Public consciousness has not yet assimilated the point that technology is ideology. This, in spite of the fact that before our very eyes technology has altered every aspect of life in America during the past eighty years. For example, it would have been excusable in 1905 for us to be unprepared for the cultural changes the automobile would bring. Who could have suspected then that the automobile would tell us how we were to conduct our social and sexual lives? Would reorient our ideas about what to do with our forests and cities? Would create new ways of expressing our personal identity and social standing?

But it is much later in the game now, and ignorance of the score is inexcusable. To be unaware that a technology comes equipped with a program for social change, to maintain that technology is neutral, to make the assumption that technology is always a friend to culture is, at this late hour, stupidity plain and simple. Moreover, we have seen enough by now to know that technological changes in our modes of communication are even more ideology-laden than changes in our modes of transportation. Introduce the alphabet to a culture and you change its cognitive habits, its social relations, its notions of community, history and religion. Introduce the printing press with movable type, and you do the same. Introduce speed-of-light transmission of images and you make a cultural revolution. Without a vote. Without polemics. Without guerrilla resistance. Here is ideology, pure if not serene. Here is ideology without

words, and all the more powerful for their absence. All that is required to make it stick is a population that devoutly believes in the inevitability of progress. And in this sense, all Americans are Marxists, for we believe nothing if not that history is moving us toward some preordained paradise and that technology is the force behind that movement.

Thus, there are near insurmountable difficulties for anyone who has written such a book as this, and who wishes to end it with some remedies for the affliction. In the first place, not everyone believes a cure is needed, and in the second, there probably isn't any. But as a true-blue American who has imbibed the unshakable belief that where there is a problem, there must be a solution, I shall conclude with the following suggestions.

We must, as a start, not delude ourselves with preposterous notions such as the straight Luddite position as outlined, for example, in Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. Americans will not shut down any part of their technological apparatus, and to suggest that they do so is to make no suggestion at all. It is almost equally unrealistic to expect that nontrivial modifications in the availability of media will ever be made. Many civilized nations limit by law the amount of hours television may operate and thereby mitigate the role television plays in public life. But I believe that this is not a possibility in America. Once having opened the Happy Medium to full public view, we are not likely to countenance even its partial closing. Still, some Americans have been thinking along these lines. As I write, a story appears in *The New York Times* (September 27, 1984) about the plans of the Farmington, Connecticut, Library Council to sponsor a "TV Turnoff." It appears that such an effort was made the previous year, the idea being to get people to stop watching television for one month. The *Times* reports that the turnoff the previous January was widely noted by the media. Ms. Ellen Babcock, whose family participated, is quoted as saying, "It will be interesting to see if the

impact is the same this year as last year, when we had terrific media coverage." In other words, Ms. Babcock hopes that by watching television, people will learn that they ought to stop watching television. It is hard to imagine that Ms. Babcock does not see the irony in this position. It is an irony that I have confronted many times in being told that I must appear on television to promote a book that warns people against television. Such are the contradictions of a television-based culture.

In any case, of how much help is a one-month turnoff? It is a mere pittance; that is to say, a penance. How comforting it must be when the folks in Farmington are done with their punishment and can return to their true occupation. Nonetheless, one applauds their effort, as one must applaud the efforts of those who see some relief in limiting certain kinds of content on television—for example, excessive violence, commercials on children's shows, etc. I am particularly fond of John Lindsay's suggestion that political commercials be banned from television as we now ban cigarette and liquor commercials. I would gladly testify before the Federal Communications Commission as to the manifold merits of this excellent idea. To those who would oppose my testimony by claiming that such a ban is a clear violation of the First Amendment, I would offer a compromise: Require all political commercials to be preceded by a short statement to the effect that common sense has determined that watching political commercials is hazardous to the intellectual health of the community.

I am not very optimistic about anyone's taking this suggestion seriously. Neither do I put much stock in proposals to improve the quality of television programs. Television, as I have implied earlier, serves us most usefully when presenting junk-entertainment; it serves us most ill when it co-opts serious modes of discourse—news, politics, science, education, commerce, religion—and turns them into entertainment packages. We would all be better off if television got worse, not better.

"The A-Team" and "Cheers" are no threat to our public health. "60 Minutes," "Eye-Witness News" and "Sesame Street" are.

The problem, in any case, does not reside in *what* people watch. The problem is in *that* we watch. The solution must be found in *how* we watch. For I believe it may fairly be said that we have yet to learn what television is. And the reason is that there has been no worthwhile discussion, let alone widespread public understanding, of what information is and how it gives direction to a culture. There is a certain poignancy in this, since there are no people who more frequently and enthusiastically use such phrases as "the information age," "the information explosion," and "the information society." We have apparently advanced to the point where we have grasped the idea that a change in the forms, volume, speed and context of information *means* something, but we have not got any further.

What is information? Or more precisely, what *are* information? What are its various forms? What conceptions of intelligence, wisdom and learning does each form insist upon? What conceptions does each form neglect or mock? What are the main psychic effects of each form? What is the relation between information and reason? What is the kind of information that best facilitates thinking? Is there a moral bias to each information form? What does it mean to say that there is too much information? How would one know? What redefinitions of important cultural meanings do new sources, speeds, contexts and forms of information require? Does television, for example, give a new meaning to "piety," to "patriotism," to "privacy"? Does television give a new meaning to "judgment" or to "understanding"? How do different forms of information persuade? Is a newspaper's "public" different from television's "public"? How do different information forms dictate the type of content that is expressed?

These questions, and dozens more like them, are the means through which it might be possible for Americans to begin talking back to their television sets, to use Nicholas Johnson's

phrase. For no medium is excessively dangerous if its users understand what its dangers are. It is not important that those who ask the questions arrive at my answers or Marshall McLuhan's (quite different answers, by the way). This is an instance in which the asking of the questions is sufficient. To ask is to break the spell. To which I might add that questions about the psychic, political and social effects of information are as applicable to the computer as to television. Although I believe the computer to be a vastly overrated technology, I mention it here because, clearly, Americans have accorded it their customary mindless inattention; which means they will use it as they are told, without a whimper. Thus, a central thesis of computer technology—that the principal difficulty we have in solving problems stems from insufficient data—will go unexamined. Until, years from now, when it will be noticed that the massive collection and speed-of-light retrieval of data have been of great value to large-scale organizations but have solved very little of importance to most people and have created at least as many problems for them as they may have solved.

In any case, the point I am trying to make is that only through a deep and unflinching awareness of the structure and effects of information, through a demystification of media, is there any hope of our gaining some measure of control over television, or the computer, or any other medium. How is such media consciousness to be achieved? There are only two answers that come to mind, one of which is nonsense and can be dismissed almost at once; the other is desperate but it is all we have.

The nonsensical answer is to create television programs whose intent would be, not to get people to stop watching television but to demonstrate how television ought to be viewed, to show how television recreates and degrades our conception of news, political debate, religious thought, etc. I imagine such demonstrations would of necessity take the form of parodies, along the lines of "Saturday Night Live" and "Monty Python,"

cessor)? But our reach for solutions ought to exceed our present grasp, or what's our dreaming for? Besides, it is an acknowledged task of the schools to assist the young in learning how to interpret the symbols of their culture. That this task should now require that they learn how to distance themselves from their forms of information is not so bizarre an enterprise that we cannot hope for its inclusion in the curriculum; even hope that it will be placed at the center of education.

What I suggest here as a solution is what Aldous Huxley suggested, as well. And I can do no better than he. He believed with H. G. Wells that we are in a race between education and disaster, and he wrote continuously about the necessity of our understanding the politics and epistemology of media. For in the end, he was trying to tell us that what afflicted the people in *Brave New World* was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking.

the idea being to induce a nationwide horse laugh over television's control of public discourse. But, naturally, television would have the last laugh. In order to command an audience large enough to make a difference, one would have to make the programs vastly amusing, in the television style. Thus, the act of criticism itself would, in the end, be co-opted by television. The parodists would become celebrities, would star in movies, and would end up making television commercials.

The desperate answer is to rely on the only mass medium of communication that, in theory, is capable of addressing the problem: our schools. This is the conventional American solution to all dangerous social problems, and is, of course, based on a naive and mystical faith in the efficacy of education. The process rarely works. In the matter at hand, there is even less reason than usual to expect it to. Our schools have not yet even got around to examining the role of the printed word in shaping our culture. Indeed, you will not find two high school seniors in a hundred who could tell you—within a five-hundred-year margin of error—when the alphabet was invented. I suspect most do not even know that the alphabet was invented. I have found that when the question is put to them, they appear puzzled, as if one had asked, When were trees invented, or clouds? It is the very principle of myth, as Roland Barthes pointed out, that it transforms history into nature, and to ask of our schools that they engage in the task of de-mythologizing media is to ask something the schools have never done.

And yet there is reason to suppose that the situation is not hopeless. Educators are not unaware of the effects of television on their students. Stimulated by the arrival of the computer, they discuss it a great deal—which is to say, they have become somewhat "media conscious." It is true enough that much of their consciousness centers on the question, How can we use television (or the computer, or word processor) to control education? They have not yet got to the question, How can we use education to control television (or the computer, or word pro-