

Book Reviews



If television encouraged a "cult of sensory stimulation" that brought with it a self-centered Me Generation, what can we expect to result from the social acceptance of interactive media? William J. Donnelly, who formerly managed new media investments as a senior vice president for advertising giant Young & Rubicam, believes communications technologies determine our social character. Know the dominant medium, he says, and you'll understand how people conceive of themselves and how they interrelate with others.

If Donnelly is correct and interactive media become widely available, he thinks we could be in for some very rough sledding. He speculates that a new fascism could develop—one built not on the breakdown of social and political systems, but on the decomposition of our own internal systems of screening and synthesizing information and making sense of the stimuli that confront us. Not only will interactive media overwhelm our capacities to deal with stimuli, but in our effort to make sense of it all, we'll

grasp for whatever social harmony is offered us, even if it is authoritarian.

"It was possible to understand television's role in our society at the time it was advancing," according to Donnelly, "and it could have been possible to establish a corresponding set of social objectives and personal behavior to direct that advance." Instead, "without a conceptualization of television value and expectation—what is worth doing and watching in the first place—and its importance in society, we, the people, just watched television—which became responsible to no one."

Donnelly writes that as a society we "failed to articulate our hopes for television based on its objective functions and as a result failed to translate our hopes into workable expectations." In doing so, "we gave up practical control over a medium that changed our personal lives and personalities" without any "moderating self-consciousness about how the technology and the culture would come to terms with one another." Our inability to determine a social function for television was both "a failure in imagination and a failure of will," the author claims.

Donnelly believes we're in the midst of making the same mistake with interactive media. His hypothesis is that "if you can understand the culture and social character of a particular time and place, and if you can understand the intrinsic characteristics of new communications technology, you can reasonably predict what will happen when technology and its users/consumers come together in substantial numbers." With television the cultural effects were evident long before it was pervasive. So, he believes, it will be for interactive media.

Liberty or slavery?

By "new communications technologies" Donnelly means a highly capable random access information system and a high capacity storage medium—basically the combination of interactive compact discs with a broadband pipe into the home. He forecasts

continued expansion for the storage side of the equation, putting VCR rentals in that category, and he is equally bullish about videotex. He predicts that "dialogic" media will serve 10 percent of all homes by 1990 and sees penetration reaching 40 to 50 percent of all homes by 2000—an extremely optimistic outlook given recent corporate decisions to withdraw from consumer-level products.

To Donnelly, the present moment in time, as the ramp-up period for interactive media, is the period when the social uses of the medium will be established—before the medium is broadly accessible.

This new medium is "inevitable." But will it liberate us or enslave us? The outlook isn't too bright. We ought to be able to avoid the more direct forms of social control, according to Donnelly. The image of Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World* identify for us what could happen if the medium becomes exclusively a mechanism for social control. But Donnelly thinks, rightly I believe, that "it represents a failure of our own imaginations to reach for Orwell too often."

That kind of overt control is not likely. "Our fear of these projected futures," as Donnelly puts it, "are our best defense against them."

Confetti in a storm

What is more likely, according to Donnelly, is information overload not only in quantity, but in "the unconnected, excited nature of the images that package and distribute information, whether it be news of the world or stories of human interest. The ultimate result will be communications images that blow around in our homes like confetti in a storm, and just as randomly."

We won't develop new ways to control the organizations we belong to, rather, "instead of becoming participatory we will become peripheral." We will get the "demassification" of society that Alvin Toffler has promised, but with it will come fragmentation and atomization.

The generation now being raised with computers as part of their environments will be isolated, remote, segmented, and fragmented—the Confetti Generation. To Donnelly this result is determined by the very nature of the medium. Its strength is that it delivers to each individual what he or she wishes to know. That is also the medium's great weakness.

First there will be a "period of frenetic enthusiasm for the new technologies." But then the Confetti Generation will develop "a deep psychological depression bred of inner confusion and weightlessness. Burdened by speed, intensity, and remoteness in our communications, we may well yearn for the tyranny of minimal order—any order. Out of desperation, we may produce an insistent interior fascism that insists on its opinion beyond persuasion."

Donnelly writes that this will be "an

interior response to chaos, paralleling the conditions and demands that produce social and political fascism." We are bound by our culture to accept an open-ended "laissez-faire social contract," under which "no one will have responsibility for what becomes of us."

Sounds pretty grim, doesn't it? The only hope, according to Donnelly, is a rebirth of the non-rational, intuitive, imaginative side of human thought. Imagination—"where motivation and behavior meet"—has the power to lift us out of the isolation and depression of the Confetti Generation and create genuine community. Only if we develop our cognitive abilities can we "control and derive meaning from the speed and inundation of images made possible by the new electronics."

Who's in control?

The problem, as he correctly identifies, is that the images we get now are so hopelessly disjointed and meaningless. "The news," as he says, "is nothing more than a series of disconnected events and a machine-gun chatter of data." Television is, as Edward Murrow put it, "a spotlight intermittently illuminating the landscape." It is not good at controlling the social and political agenda, but by default we have allowed it to seize that power.

Interactive media, to a degree unappreciated by Donnelly, provide an opportunity to become the technology of structured participation. Yes, they could further the information glut, but we already are overwhelmed by meaningless images through the broadcast media.

The challenge is to see whether we can use interactive media to empower people and increase the sense of personal efficacy and connectedness so necessary to a democratic polity.

The question, as Donnelly puts it, is whether "through our own activity we can control the new electronics, rather than allow them to control us." Our record with television isn't very good. But perhaps we've learned a lesson or two from the Twentieth Century. Maybe from this deluge of information we can learn to select that slender portion of it that will make us wise.

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