

Machine and Mediation:

Why Johnny can't read a Scotch UCA 30 U-Matic Video Tape.

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world,
and lose his own soul? - Mathew 16:26

For centuries, human communication was perceived, apprehended and comprehended through the use of human senses. Oral communication was heard; imagery and the written word were deciphered through the senses of sight or touch. But toward the end of the Nineteenth century and through the Twentieth century, advances in electronic technology made communication dependent on equipment of various types. While telegraphy and wireless telegraphy carried coded information faster and farther than had ever before been possible, the means of communication became estranged from human somatic interpretive ability and based instead on the mediation of an ever-changing array of machines. This situation has disenfranchised the modern consumer of media and culture, distancing humanity from direct interaction with communicative media, and locking in a pattern of dependence upon technology based translators. This paper will examine the transition from print and paper based communications technology to the electronic ephemera of radio, television and computer-based information systems. Each of these technical advances provided benefits of speed, immediacy and accessibility. But these benefits must be balanced against the costs of technological change, dehumanization and the obsolescence of the historical record.

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