Do New Communications Media - Like the Internet - Hurt Individuals and Society?

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For decades, social scientists have been looking for damaging effects from particular media forms, especially those enabled by new communication technologies. Does television make us stupid? Is the Internet undermining social ties? Despite many research efforts, there is very little uncontested empirical evidence of generally damaging media effects.

If social scientific methods have not shown that the media are doing us harm, why do so many of us still believe that one sort of communications media or another causes serious damage to individuals or society? My research on media criticism and its history has convinced me that our mistrust of communications media tells us more about ambivalence about modern life than it does about any actual ill effects from new modes of communication.

Each New Technology Brings More of the Same Worries

Media criticism proceeds as if we already have (or will soon find) proof of damaging media influences. Many critics make sweeping but unsubstantiated claims about what must be happening to this generation, thanks to the latest media form. The Internet is our most recent source of worry. But we should not forget that critics once bemoaned the irreversible damage allegedly being wrought by predecessors like the radio, comic books, and the Sony Walkman.

With the arrival of each new media technology, commentators replay surprisingly similar themes of hope and dread. People hope that the new form will offer a more democratized access to knowledge, education, and uplift. But then critics are dismayed to discover that, instead, the new technology is often deployed for entertainment, escape and pleasure. This recurrence of themes and arguments is telling. Just like the Internet, earlier new forms of mass communication – like magazines, radio, films, and television – were first hailed as having unprecedented potential to educate the masses by spreading enlightenment and higher forms of culture – only to soon be decried as entertaining diversions spreading trash instead of art, classics, or other forms of alleged cultural uplift.

Media criticism tells us a lot about our recurrent hopes and fears for modern life – that is, new media technologies provide a mirror for social anxieties. My review of previous generations of media prognostications and commentary reveals several recurring claims:

- When a new communications technology makes its debut, we worry most about children, seeing them as particularly vulnerable and in need of protection. Don't let them watch too much television or play too many videogames.

- Better education is supposed to set up a protective shield for children and other vulnerable groups like the less educated or immigrants, preventing bad effects from exposure to the new media.

- Each new communications modality brings another round of agonizing about "popular taste," with social critics baffled and dismayed by the choices of their fellow citizens. How could they like that junk? The specter of an imaginary "lowest common denominator" makes its appearance, as we blame the media for dumbing everyone down.

- Prior golden days are invoked – such as an imagined pre-media world of logical arguments and children playing for hours out of doors. If only the latest media breakthrough were not polluting society we'd still be "back then" leading more wholesome and meaningful lives.

A Fresh Perspective on Media in Our Lives

Instead of once again replaying the same fears and fantasies, we could reexamine our premises. Innovations in mass media, including the Internet, do not really drop from the sky to pollute a once-pure world. The Internet is only the most recent version of a communication technology that was humanly created to further deeply human purposes – including, above all, storytelling. Communications media are technologies for creating and spreading narratives, the very sorts of stories we have been telling among ourselves for a long time, using the spoken word, the written word, printed newspapers, magazines, and books, and now a succession of electronic forms for conveying sounds and pictures.

Yes, for some the Internet's stories may seem to be far too much "trash" and not enough "information" or "art." That's no different from how many reacted to radio, movies and television. But every era has plenty of trash. And often one era's trash becomes another era's treasure. One generation's inexpensive, dreadful, degenerate music or cheap thrill can and has evolved into another generation's classic genre.

People and their various choices and tastes cannot and should not mirror a unified world of highly educated aesthetes. Maybe the repeated contrasts we draw between "art" and "trash," between "information" and "entertainment," or between "emotion" and "reason" are really shifting interactions between dimensions that all of us experience and practice. Perhaps the media just amplify who we already are, by giving us additional ways to define ourselves, connect with one another, and share and experience a range of human emotions and perspectives.

Some of today's most insightful media scholars study how people, individually and in groups, actually use various kinds of communication media in everyday life. These ethnographic studies are not obsessed with finding damaging media effects; they instead report what is happening as people deploy various new ways to communicate. The increased access, range and creativity of what they are making, choosing, sharing and enjoying is heartening. This research on how people use new media to make sense of their lives shows how fruitful it can be to let go of unsubstantiated fears about media damage. Instead, we need to find out more about what real people are doing, often very creatively, with actual media forms, as these forms change over time.