The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory

Edited by
Andrew Herman
& Thomas Swiss

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FROM: STEVEN JONES

SUBJECT: **The Bias of the Web**

Though I have worked as a journalist, taught journalism courses, and maintained an interest in journalism's progress at the end of the twentieth century, it has been many years since I believed there was much for me to say about it. Coincidentally, I had been feeling much the same way about the Web; until recently, I had found the Web less than interesting. It was not the interactive medium that I had believed the Internet would provide us with; e-mail and Usenet were much more like the media that I hoped could bring about social change in ways I envisioned.

But I was wrong. The Web has become the most important Internet phenomenon there is. And I say that not because of its ubiquity, or its use for electronic commerce. I say that because of its rise to prominence in 1998 as a medium for news. I was wrong, and I have Web-journalist Matt Drudge to thank for showing me that I was.

Journalism and the Web share some things, and not simply in regard to their content. Newspapers today are still largely disdained by social scientists, as are journalists and journalism by the public. In some cases those who study newspapers and journalism are marginalized, or worse; journalism programs have, for example, been discontinued at a number of colleges and universities in the past several years. The Web, too, has its detractors, and its use in academia, though on the increase, is still met with resistance. But resistance to the Web is breaking down in the middle-class American home, and, concomitantly,

public disdain for journalism has fueled use of the Web because news on the Web seems less like the journalism to which we've become accustomed. Also, our hopes for the Internet as a public forum mirror what our hopes had been for journalism. We have forgotten that newspapers created "imagined communities," to borrow from Benedict Anderson, and now believe those are made online (S. Jones, 1997). This chapter will argue that journalism and the Web are linchpins for understanding the Internet and our hopes for it as a public forum.

I.

In an essay that sets out the connections between Harold Innis's writing and North American communications theory—where James W. Carey sets the framework for his analysis of the social and economic consequences of communication technologies—there is a quote attributed to John Dewey that has haunted me for many years. Dewey is reported to have said, during a lecture at the University of Michigan, "A proper daily newspaper would be the only possible social science" (in Carey, 1989: 143). The reason this has haunted me is that I could never *directly* connect the phrase "proper daily newspaper" to anything in Dewey's writing. Of course, I might be able to make connections between it and his writing about community, public life, education, and so on. Dewey's interest in journalism is well known, as was his acquaintance with Franklin Ford and the "Thought News" (Czitrom, 1982). But those are not sufficiently *direct* connections. What *did* Dewey mean by a "proper daily newspaper"? Is there such a thing? What would it be like?

I am not about to make any claims that the Web as a technology serves some sort of journalistic purpose, or to suggest that "a proper Internet would be the only possible social science." Like media before it, the Web is put to whatever social uses people see fit, whether those people work for corporate interests, government interests, selfish interests, or without interest. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the Web and other media, insofar as Internet-based media generally permit publication without enormous capital expense and infrastructure. Hence, the Web has potential to commingle social, industrial, and commercial uses and motivations in new ways.

What I intend in this chapter is to examine the relationships between our sensibilities regarding recent debates concerning journalism's purpose and the biases of the Web from the perspective of Harold Innis's

and James Carey's contributions to our understanding of the social consequences of communication technology. I want to revive Harold Innis's work on the bias of communication in one of the contexts in which he most often spoke about it—namely that of journalism—in an era that has come to be dominated by the Internet more than any other form of communication. Much of Innis's discussion of monopolies of communication relates to the "power of the American newspaper industry to monopolize the Canadian pulp and paper trade and to force low tariffs" (Czitrom, 1982: 159; see also Innis, 1972).

Innis's great contribution to communication theory lies in his understanding and explication of the connections *among* transportation, communication, and ritual. His ideas, filtered through a subtle reading of Dewey, were taken up by American communication scholar and theorist James Carey, who in his seminal essay "A Cultural Approach to Communication" noted the tensions between the transmission and ritual views of communication. "Two alternative conceptions of communication have been alive in American culture," Carey wrote, "[and b]oth definitions derive, as with much in secular culture, from religious origins.... The transmission view of communication is the commonest in our culture—perhaps in all industrial cultures—and ... is formed from a metaphor of geography or transportation....The center of this idea of communication is the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control.... A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (1989: 14–15, 18). Carey's purpose in critiquing them was to open up new avenues for the study of communication at a time when the transmission view was one that predominated among scholars. However, it is important to note that at no time does Carey demand that the transmission view be discarded or ignored. As Innis understood clearly, the two views are in some ways inseparable. Moreover, Innis knew what the fluid nature of change brought on by communications technology meant, and scrutinized not merely the "peaks and valleys" but the points at which the wave of change in communication technology crossed the mean. Innis's understanding that *distribution* is a key element of both transportation and communication is one we should take more seriously, particularly as it connects to Nicholas Negroponte's observation that it is easier to move bits than atoms (1995).

Examination of those points is particularly critical for gaining an understanding of some of the Web's spatial and temporal biases. They are at the "verge" that James Carey has written about in recent years, the moment at which convergence or divergence occurs. Carey noted that "journalism begins at a verge between the oral and printed traditions" (1989: 333). Borrowing from both Michael Oakeshott and Stuart Adam, Carey writes, "History is the whole of the real understood under the category of the past . . . journalism is [the] whole of the real understood under the category of the present. Journalism, then, must be examined as the practices by which the real is made under the category of the present" (333).

The Internet, I believe, begins at the verge between the print and electronic traditions. The Web, particularly, is a technology that represents the development of electronic expression in a medium sufficiently removed from paper to render it apart from print. It is a medium of the screen and the link of text and connection. As a result, I believe that the Internet is the whole of the real understood under the category of the future. The Web exists in the present as a technology, but exists in the future as an infinite potentiality of connection, and it must be examined as such.

The bias of the Web is, at least for now, inextricably tied to that of the Internet. If one extends Innis's arguments concerning the biases of communication, the Web's bias in the final analysis is toward time and not space. The technology on which the Internet is based, namely, that of a "store-and-forward" mechanism, is inherently time-bound. If there is an appearance of the Internet's ability to have overcome space in some way, that appearance stems from the means by which the network itself articulates one point to the next, in a digital fashion, rather than in a linear, analog fashion. Space is not *overcome* so much as it is fragmented. Time, on the other hand, appears at the control of the user, who can choose to download data as desired. Time, though, is fragmented, divided into particular tasks (downloading images, text, files), is at the heart of bandwidth issues (since it is the time it takes to move data, and not in fact the space needed for that movement that is at stake—space exists in service of time as regards bandwidth), and its "saving" (an impossible feat) is the motivating factor behind increased use of the Web in business and education.

The activities of Web users (searching, finding, downloading) imply a future utility. What has happened is that the user has taken the place (or

at least shares the role) once held by journalists, whose task was to make *for tomorrow* the today, the *now*, that news once recorded. This is where the Web in practice makes real the category of the *future*. And, as Barnhurst (1998) points out, "the very mechanics of using the Web is best distilled in the verb await."

II.

In a letter to a friend in the U.S. Information Service, John Steinbeck wrote, "What can I say about journalism? It has the greatest virtue and the greatest evil.... It is the mother of literature and the perpetrator of crap. In many cases it is the only history we have . . . over a long period of time and because it is the product of so many men, it is perhaps the purest thing we have" (quoted in Street and Wallsten, 1975: 526).

That "thing" has been swallowed whole by the current notion of "content." There are two meanings to *content* at present. One is traditional, that it is material intended to capture and hold the attention of an audience. The other meaning is less traditional, and has as its basis the oft-repeated phrase of those in Internet media industries that "content is king." That is not simply a reference to a content provider's interest in attracting audiences to a website by having "better" or more recent content; it is an acknowledgment that the Internet, and the Web, particularly, is deliberately used for purposes of information in a way that is different from the use of media before it.

Unlike other electronic media prior to the "verge" I mentioned earlier, the Web is *not* a background medium. One cannot choose to "tune in, turn on, drop out," to borrow from Timothy Leary. We go to the Web to get the Starr Report, or the Drudge Report, or to read Salon, re-creating the shift from learning of "breaking" news by word-of-mouth or special editions of newspapers to hearing it on radio and seeing it on TV. Yet we go to the Web less for "breaking" news and more for news of what is to come—the deeper, richer, more analytic news that cannot be readily attained through use of older media. It is notable that newspapers took twenty-four hours to print the Starr Report while it appeared on the Web instantaneously. Neither radio nor television could have delivered that report to the public; it was the first clear instance of the Web's identity as a news medium in its own right (one might cite Pierre Salinger's reports of government involvement in investigations into the crash of TWA flight

800 as the first actual instance). Converting President Clinton's videotaped testimony in the Starr report to streaming video occurred equally quickly. And it was delivered indexed: the Web has turned the connection between headline and lead and "the rest of the story" into a quite literal connection, one of the hyperlink. As Daniel Czitrom says, "very seldom did [newspapers of the colonial and early national period] seek out news.... The 'penny papers' ... brought back the element of timeliness and gave new life to the old notion that the most important news is

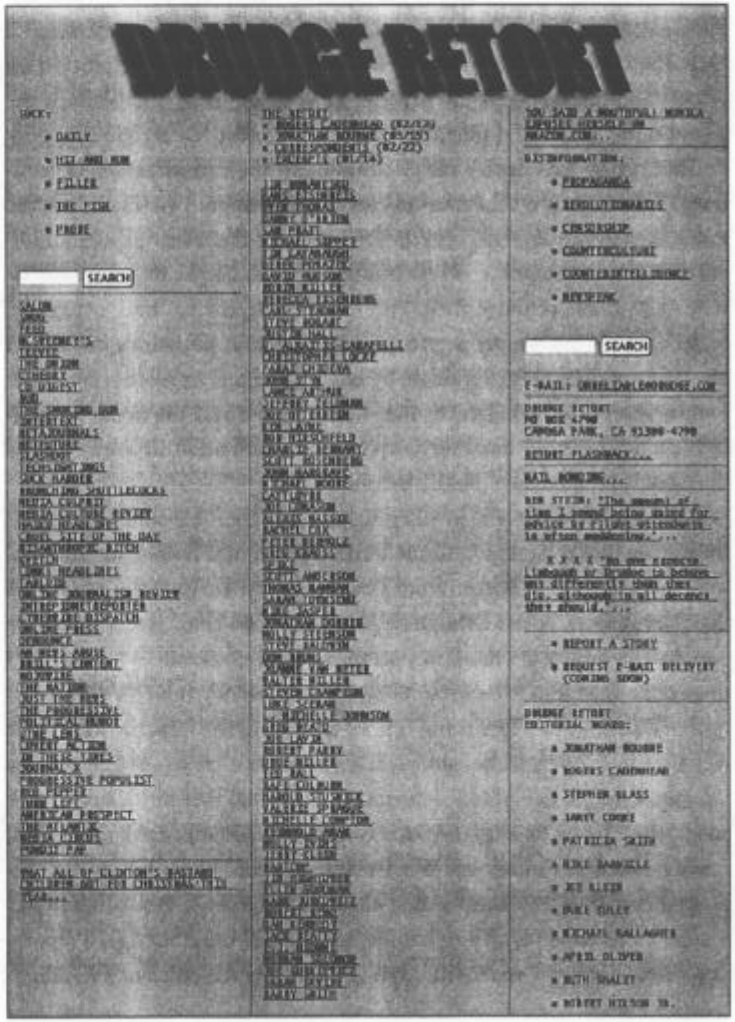

Fig. 9.1. The Web's bias in the final analysis is toward time and not space. The Drudge Report website, http://www.drudge.com/

what the public looks for" (1982: 14–15). The Web doesn't impart importance to the news; it makes news out of what the reader looks for.

Journalism on the Web is not journalism as we have known it thus far. It creates a different order of content. Speed is not so much the issue, as is the development of news that extrapolates and anticipates. It is not that the practice of journalism has changed: traditional news media are still involved in its practice in some cases, and in other cases they are not. Newsroom practice remains largely unchanged: journalism as a process is intact. The difference the Web makes to journalism is that it fully brings to bear the development of news as that which brings the future into the present. Journalism is no longer about space, about the bringing together of disparate places, peoples, and interests onto a page or screen. Nor is it any longer about time, about history and the merging of multiple pasts into a single present. As Carey wrote about the telegraph's impact on commodities trading and the futures market, the Web has had an impact on the commodification of journalism. Journalism trades in futures. It asks us less to attend to "the latest" and more to attend to what we find interesting; less to synthesize and understand a "who, what, when, where, how, and why" and more to attend to "what's next?"; less about a "them" and more about an "us" in view of its structuring to allow readers to interpolate their hopes and desires. The range of possibilities has widened: we are no longer certain of what is reported in the news, and we are much more likely to allow alternative explanations. And perhaps the widening of the range of possibilities leads to the destabilization of the present. It is not so much that we do not believe *what* we read, see, and hear in the news as it is that we are inclined to believe that there is *more than* what we read, see, and hear. As Marshall McLuhan put it, "'content' ... is always another medium. The content of the press is literary statement, as the content of the book is speech, and the content of the movie is the novel" (1964: 266). It is now more clear than ever that the content of the Web is news, though not necessarily journalism.

III.

What, then, is this form of news content? In what ways is it news? As Kevin Barnhurst and Diana Mutz point out in an article examining the decline of event-centered reporting, "Shit happens, but that is not necessarily news" (1997: 27). Tempting as it may be to say that the content of the Web is shit, it is more telling to note from their research that there

has been a fundamental shift from "the report of events and their novelty ... [that] have constituted the core meaning of denotation of news in the 20th century" toward de-emphasis of "events in favor of news analysis" (27). However, unlike the case with newspapers, the critical issue is not content, but commodity and potentiality. As Barnhurst and Mutz point out (and in line with Innis's observations concerning monopolies),

> The old journalism market had many newspapers competing for readers, whose purchases responded to particular stories hawked on the street corner. The writing needed a story line to carry the reader through to the end. The new long journalism developed as monopoly news markets became the rule in the U.S. .... Journalism then becomes a reference tool, and consumers use the paper not by reading entire narratives but by scanning and collecting bits of information. The transfixed and captivated reader changes into a captive but autonomous consumer, and the news event changes from a compelling story into one of a line of goods in a department store. The market thus produces news meant to be referred to, not read. (1997: 48)

What makes this observation particularly poignant is precisely the comment regarding referral. On the Web, referral is built-in via the hyperlink. As a result, news on the Web has less to do with creating a record of life (along the lines identified by the concept of the "newspaper of record") and more to do with anticipating what's next by accumulating information and making connections among stories, hearsay, gossip, disparate pieces of information that are sometimes coupled in the reader's imagination, and other times linked via hypertext markup language, or HTML. One can readily connect such a development to the creation of the index at the time of the print revolution by noting that the sum of connections makes a content greater than the sum of the parts (J. Burke, 1995).

It is important to note, too, that it is not only in the realm of print journalism in which these trends and issues exist. As Erik Barnouw has pointed out in his history of broadcasting, "Most sponsors did not want news programming" (1968: 17). And tensions between print media and the new medium of radio in the 1930s led the Associated Press to cease providing news to radio networks. In short order the United Press and the International News Service followed suit. Radio networks, in turn, created their own news operations. When a compromise was reached between the news services and the networks, it rested on the premise that "[r]adio commentators were to confine themselves to 'generalization and background' and avoid spot news. This was later clarified: they were forbidden to use news less than twelve hours old" (Barnouw, 1968: 21). No such explicit compromises now exist among the print and broadcast media and the Web, but it is interesting to note that print media are at the forefront of Web news, while their broadcast counterparts are eager to join them (in some cases by buying them out or merging). Perhaps print media learned a lesson during the 1930s, when, after the aforementioned compromise with radio networks, "more and more newspapers applied for radio licenses or purchased existing stations (and joined) the enemy" (Barnouw, 1968: 22). Another parallel to the past: most newspaper-owned websites consider their Internet-based operation a value-added service, much as "early newspaper-owned (radio) stations were not conceived as news media but as devices to publicize the papers. The (news) 'bulletins' were largely teasers to stimulate readership" (Barnouw, 1966: 138). The practice of putting universal resource locators (URLs) at the end of short stories and bulletins in newspapers can be seen as serving a similar purpose.

Part of the reason I was reminded to reread Barnouw's three-volume history of broadcasting was simply that I noticed the second volume's title on my shelf: *The Golden Web*. During the period about which he writes (the 1930s to the postwar ascent of television), one of the most important social developments took place in the United States (and the rest of the world quickly followed), namely, the evolution of a mass audience created by instantaneous mass communication. It was a time, as Barnouw puts it, when "transmitters in various parts of the country began broadcasting the same singer, the same speaker, the same comedian, the same drama" (1968: 3). Concomitantly, this was an important time of transformation for communication theory as well, as our conceptions of the audience (and to some extent our field) are still haunted by the numbers: of people, of the vastness of the spaces they occupy, and of the increasingly short measurements of time it takes information to reach them. That emphasis on numbers allowed us to make meaningful observations about an audience that is now, and was then, one of fragments and of individuals. Indeed, audience fragmentation is not in the least bit new; one can find it in the very history of journalism in the United States. As

Carey put it, "Everything can be found in American journalism, generally understood, but it is disconnected and incoherent.... The daily news bulletins report this spectacle of change: victories, defeats, trends, fluctuations, battles, controversies, threats. But beneath this change, the structures of society—the distribution of income and poverty, the cleavages of class and status, race and ethnicity, the gross inequalities of hardships and life chances—remain remarkably persistent" (1989). We look to technology to find what is persistent: community, communication, understanding, friendship. We look to it to help us find *connection*, as is the case not only with the Internet and hypertext but with new and interesting developments in data mining and pattern recognition that find connections, and in some cases create them, where they do not really exist. We ask of it, as Dewey asked of the media, to "help create a 'great community'" (Czitrom, 1982: 103). It is therefore important for scholars to ask questions not only about fragmentation but about connection. Though audiences have become visibly fragmented, and the media of mass communication seem less and less like they are—in fact, *mass*-oriented—it may be that our logics are fragmented, or, to borrow from Joli Jensen and John Pauly, it is how we "imagine the audience" that is at stake in our attempts to understand the social consequences of these technologies. Rather than holding fast to an understanding of mass communication that guided research for decades—an understanding that has, somehow, simultaneously encompassed and collapsed notions of consumption, production, and distribution—we should be savvy to the differences not only between those activities but within them as well.

One might go so far as to say that the phantom that is the mass audience for electronic media was born at the same time as the network. To quote Barnouw again, "What is a network? In a way it is—strangely enough—almost nothing, a phantom. It is mainly a tissue of contracts by which a number of stations are linked in operation. The linkage has been done largely through leased telephone cables which the entrepreneur—the 'network'—does not own.... Thus networks as businesses would seem to rest on the flimsiest foundations. Yet they have become a major power center—having, in an age of American hegemony, world-wide ramifications" (1968: 3). One could devise a number of ways with which to make connections between Barnouw's observation and our conceptions of "audience." It was the development of a network that enabled what Margaret Morse has noted in relation to cyberculture, namely the

"virtual" relation between sender and receiver, "the utterance in direct address of television subject to the viewer.... 'Interactivity' [as]... a kind of 'suture' between ourselves and our machines." The result, she notes, is that "the news becomes the immediate or apparent cause rather than the report of events" (1998: 15–16).

To return to my earlier remark concerning the "transportation view" of communication, another reason I believe it is important for us to reconcile it with a "ritual view" is that the business of the media is predicated on transportation, on the delivery not of messages to audiences, but of audiences to messages. Attending to such movement provides us with another means by which not to focus strictly on content, and instead to return to some of Innis's remarks about the bias of communication, particularly in relation to newspapers. Innis noted how hard it can be to separate editorial and advertising content when "the front page sell(s) the newspaper," an observation that led him to highlight Ivy C. Lee's remark that "news is that which people are willing to pay to have brought to their attention; while advertising is that which the advertiser himself must pay to get to the people's attention" (Innis 1949: 23). To do so, newspapers sold space, trading on the attention people would pay to the spatial organization of the printed—mediated—word. Electronic broadcast media, in their turn, sold time, trading on the attention people would pay to the temporal organization of radio and TV. Internet media now sell attention, without regard to space or time, regarding only connection and linking.

IV.

In time we will be more aware of the nuanced ways in which attention is embedded in the topology of the Net. And the bias of the Web and of the Internet will be more clear, when the Net, via transfer control protocol/Internet protocol (TCP/IP), becomes a more ubiquitous phenomenon, running in portable devices, appliances, cars, and so on. News and information will then again be reshaped, as, for instance, they are being changed by the addition of Global Positioning Systems technologies in automobiles that provide directions and traffic information to drivers while positioning and localizing vehicles and their occupants. Technology will be designed to accommodate TCP/IP rather than retrofitted for it, and our electronic devices will in some sense all become information devices. Our institutions, too, will be designed to accommodate the Inter-

net, to the extent that distinctions between notions of *institution* and *communication* will blur, much as those between *community* and *communication* have already done.

We might then in some manner reconcile the division between what Carey has termed the "transmission" and "ritual" views of communication. A place to start is to note that ritual, too, involves movement and passage, though not only passage but a "passing on." Ritual entails the kind of shift Martin Buber notes—throughout his work—from *I* to *Thou*. It is important that we reconcile these views, because unless we do we will not account sufficiently for the political economy of network technologies on the one hand, and on the other we will not understand the affective dimensions of information's passage and movement. When one states, "I am moved" to refer to the emotional displacement and/or grounding knowledge and understanding can bring, one invokes both views of communication. Simply put for the purposes of this essay, transmission matters. What the software and hardware engineers, venture capitalists, hackers, and designers do *matters*, just as what audiences and journalists do matters. We should not turn away from studying the practices of these groups and their own understanding of practice as we pursue knowledge of the social and political consequences of Internet technologies. What purpose has journalism served the polity throughout its history but that of a means of passing on news and information by which we, and others, may mark passage? A journal is not merely an exercise in recordkeeping, but also an exercise in slowing time and capturing space. The Web is unlike any journal heretofore in existence. The history it shall reveal will not be read in the linear, sequential unfolding of events over time, nor in the structures of space it may develop, but in the relational movements of our interest and attention as we pay it heed.

NOTE

I greatly appreciate the suggestions and comments of Kevin Barnhurst, Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago, on an earlier draft of this chapter.