

# Seduced by Information

The move from print to the Internet is not as radical as it seems

**I** STILL REMEMBER the feeling of anxious anticipation when I first spread open *The New York Times*. I was 26 years old. I had been raised in rural Pennsylvania in a family of tradition-minded conservatives with little good to say about cities or their newspapers. Not until after I graduated from college in rural Virginia did I read *The Washington Post*, and it took a few more years to gin up the confidence to confront the *Times*.

More than any one story, the seriousness of mood struck me forcefully. "They'll never get away with it now!" I remember thinking to myself while reading exposés of malfeasance and corruption. Since then, having discovered the necessity of untruth in party politics and the impossibility of finding rational grounds for value judgments, I have learned to distrust my assumption that truth trumps lies.

If reading the newspaper was not what it appeared to a rural naïf in the mid-1990s, already it was giving way to another kind of anticipation. Even before I left college, I heard bold predictions that the Internet would make newspapers obsolete. Today those predictions form a consensus that, if realized, promises to make us witness to a profound transformation. But the most striking feature of that development is not the radical break between old and new media; it is the underlying continuity.

Only a sudden interruption of daily newspaper reading could expose its ritualistic quality. Thus the significance of the New York newspaper strike of June and July 1945, during which eight major dailies were not delivered for 17 days. In a famous essay on readers' reactions to the strike, "What 'Missing the Newspaper' Means," the behavioral scientist Bernard Berelson reported a diffuse panic in the public. Almost everyone he and his team interviewed claimed to miss the "serious information" contained in the newspaper, yet very few of the respondents could recall any specific stories or events they had been following prior to the strike. Berelson concluded that what they really missed was "the ritualistic and near-compulsive character of newspaper reading." The longer the strike went on, the more people missed that feeling. That acute psychological dependency, so often noticed by critics of mass media, was intrinsic to the enterprise from the beginning.

**T**HE NEWSPAPER emerged with the anomie of modern society. To the displaced and disorganized, it offered an illusion of solidarity, a chance to participate vicariously in social knowledge. By the middle of the 20th century, newspapers presented themselves both as guides to the management of self (offering weather and financial forecasts, advertisements for commodities, records of births, deaths, marriages, and events) and as vehicles of escape from the banality of self-management (providing sports, comics, scandals, crises, human-interest stories). In truth the newspaper offered another routine for a society of estranged individuals afraid to be alone with their thoughts and feelings.

The news never stopped. Every issue introduced a new crisis or scandal into the same eternal present of repetitive triviality. Journalists annihilated the meaning of privacy altogether. The critic Dwight Macdonald noted the self-aggrandizing quality of

the information cult, whose real subject was attention: "For those who, as readers or as writers, would get a little under the surface, the real problem of our day is how to escape being 'well informed,' how to resist the temptation to acquire too much information (never more seductive than when it appears in the chaste garb of duty), and how in general to elude the voracious demands on one's attention enough to think a little."

The migration of the public from print to the Internet carries the same ritual psychology of slavish dependence. On April 17, 2007, millions of BlackBerrys in North America suddenly stopped working. Cut off from their wireless e-mail system for a few hours, users reported feeling phantom vibrations and compared the effect to a forced drug withdrawal.

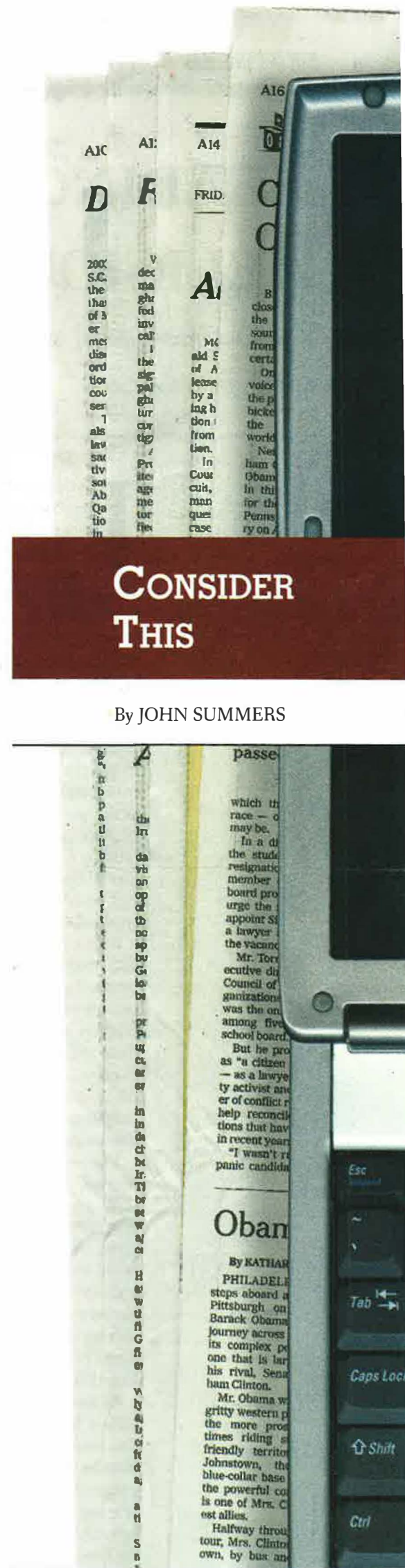
Berelson would have understood, just as Macdonald would have recognized how the rhetoric of information and citizenship that accompanies the Internet hides the fact that it often discourages the very qualities of mind and character needed to think clearly and independently.

The Internet is completing the newspapers' project of seizing mass attention. In the absence of real solidarity, it multiplies the technological functions of the psyche. Often the results are felt as a minor irony: While machines make communicating more efficient, they drastically increase the volume of communication.

The feeling of technical power generates no equivalent political or moral resources. Terrorists create manuals that instruct fanatics how to use the Internet for recruitment, strategy, and propaganda. In China and elsewhere, technology is easily adapted to the needs of authoritarian regimes—and corporations that provide it are eager to comply. Does the Internet bring friends together? Yes. It also brings together spammers, spies, and misanthropes who find and exploit new tools of seduction and surveillance. The mob mentality, always a part of democracy, is no longer organized around the newspaper; now it finds itself online.

Not only public and private, but the distinctions of home and away, past and present, here and there are abolished in the bleary cries of more and now. Once civilized man regarded the machine as an extension of his power. Then man worried that he had become a slave to the machinery of civilization that he had created. Now man becomes the machine's facsimile: disciplined, regular, undivided. Gone or going is the image of the person as an organic being, emerging, growing, decaying, returning. In the virtual world, as in the world of the print newspaper, the difference between communing and communication goes unrecognized. Convenience is an unmixed good; solitude the stigmata of eccentrics and loners.

As all spheres of practical life go online—with or without the consent of the connected—and as possibilities turn into necessities, vicarious participation in society grows more burdensome as it grows more. The romantic idea of the Internet as the summation of individual wills united in voluntary association has been replaced by a crippling paradox. Freedom of choice does not acknowledge the most important choice of all: the freedom to sign off. ■



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