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 gain the confidence to confront the Times.

More than any one story, the nervousness of mood struck me forcefully. "They'd 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 the assumption that truth trumps lies.

If reading the newspaper was not what it appeared to be a rural null 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. 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. 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.

The newspaper emerged with the anomic of modern society. To the displaced and disorganized, it offered an illusion of solidarity, a chance to participate vicariously in the world of the print press. Newspapers 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 communicating and communication goes unrecognized. Convenience is an unsung good; solitude the stigma of eccentricities and loners.

At 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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