eurozine

Arthur W Hunt III, Almantas Samalavicius

Technology and consumership

A conversation with media theorist Arthur W. Hunt III

Today's media, combined with the latest portable devices, have pushed serious public discourse into the background and hauled triviality to the fore, according to media theorist Arthur W Hunt. And the Jeffersonian notion of citizenship has given way to modern consumership.

Almantas Samalavicius: In your recently published book Surviving Technopolis, you discuss a number of important and overlapping issues that threaten the future of societies. One of the central themes you explore is the rise, dominance and consequences of visual imagery in public discourse, which you say undermines a more literate culture of the past. This tendency has been outlined and questioned by a large and growing number of social thinkers (Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Jacques Ellul, Ivan Illich, Neil Postman and others). What do you see as most culturally threatening in this shift to visual imagery?
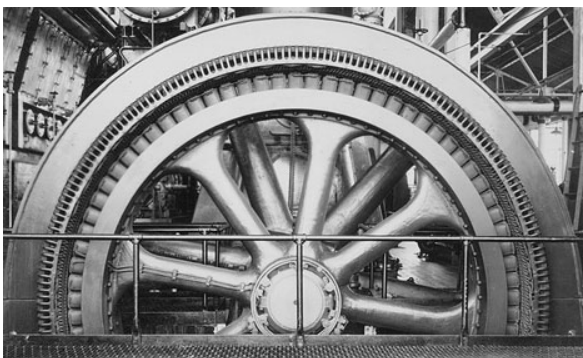
General Electric generator in Fordlandia's powerhouse, c. 1933. Photo: The Henry Ford. Source: Flickr

Arthur W. Hunt III: The shift is technological and moral. The two are related, as Ellul has pointed out. Computer−based digital images stem from an evolution of other technologies beginning with telegraphy and photography, both appearing in the middle of the nineteenth century. Telegraphy trivialized information by allowing it to come to us from anywhere and in greater volumes. Photography de−contextualized information by giving us an abundance of pictures disassociated from the objects from which they came. Cinema magnified Aristotle's notion of spectacle, which he claimed to be the least artistic element in *Poetics*. Spectacle in modern film tends to diminish all other elements of drama (plot, character, dialogue and so on) in favour of the exploding Capitol building. Radio put the voice of both the President and the

Lone Ranger into our living rooms. Television was the natural and powerful usurper of radio and quickly became the nucleus of the home, a station occupied by the hearth for thousands of years. Then the television split in two, three or four ways so that every house member had a set in his or her bedroom. What followed was the personal computer at both home and at work. Today we have portable computers in which we watch shows, play games, email each other and gaze at ourselves like we used to look at Hollywood stars. To a large extent, these technologies are simply extensions of our technological society. They act as Sirens of distraction. They push serious public discourse into the background and pull triviality to the foreground. They move us away from the Jeffersonian notion of citizenship, replacing it with modern capitalism's ethic of materialistic desire or "consumership". The great danger of all this, of course, is that we neglect the polis and, instead, waste our time with bread and circuses. Accompanying this neglect is the creation of people who spend years in school yet remain illiterate, at least by the standards we used to hold out for a literate person. The trivialization spreads out into other institutions, as Postman has argued, to schools, churches and politics. This may be an American phenomenon, but many countries look to America's institutions for guidance.

AS: Philosopher and historian Ivan Illich –– one of the most radical critics of modernity and its mythology –– has emphasized the conceptual difference between tools, on one hand, and technology on the other, implying that the dominance and overuse of technology is socially and culturally debilitating. Economist E.F. Schumacher urged us to rediscover the beauty of smallness and the use of more humane, "intermediate technologies". However, a chorus of voices seems to sink in the ocean of popular technological optimism and a stubborn self–generating belief in the power of progress. Your critique contains no call to go back to the Middle Ages. Nor do you suggest that we give anything away to technological advances. Rather, you offer a sound and balanced argument about the misuses of technology and the mindscape that sacrifices tradition and human relationships on the altar of progress. Do you see any possibility of developing a more balanced approach to the role of technology in our culture? Obviously, many are aware, even if cynically, that technological progress has its downsides, but what of its upsides?

AWH: Short of a nuclear holocaust, we will not be going back to the Middle Ages any time soon. Electricity and automobiles are here to stay. The idea is not to be anti–technology. Neil Postman once said to be anti–technology is like being anti–food. Technologies are extensions of our bodies, and therefore scale, ecological impact and human flourishing becomes the yardstick for technological wisdom. The conventional wisdom of modern progress favours bigger, faster, newer and more. Large corporations see their purpose on earth to maximize profits. Their goal is to get us addicted to their addictions. We can no longer afford this kind of wisdom, which is not wisdom at all, but foolishness. We need to bolster a conversation about the human benefits of smaller, slower, older and less. Europeans often understand this better than Americans, that is, they are more conscious of preserving living spaces that are functional, aesthetically pleasing and that foster human interaction. E.F. Schumacher gave us some useful phraseology to promote an economy of human scale: "small is beautiful," "technologies with a human face" and "homecomers." He pointed out that "labour–saving machinery" is a paradoxical term, not only because it makes us unemployed, but also because it diminishes the value of work. Our goal should be to move toward a "third–way" economic model, one of self–sufficient regions, local economies of scale, thriving community life, cooperatives, family owned farms and shops,

economic integration between the countryside and the nearby city, and a general revival of craftsmanship. Green technologies –– solar and wind power for example –– actually can help us achieve this third way, which is actually a kind of micro–capitalism.

AS: Technologies developed by humans (e.g. television) continue to shape and sustain a culture of consumerism, which has now become a global phenomenon. As you insightfully observe in one of your essays, McLuhan, who was often misinterpreted and misunderstood as a social theorist hailed by the television media he explored in a great depth, was fully aware of its ill effects on the human personality and he therefore limited his children's TV viewing. Jerry Mander has argued for the elimination of television altogether, nevertheless, this medium is alive and kicking and continues to promote an ideology of consumption and, what is perhaps most alarming, successfully conditioning children to become voracious consumers in a society where the roles of parents become more and more institutionally limited. Do you have any hopes for this situation? Can one expect that people will develop a more critical attitude toward these instruments, which shape them as consumers? Does social criticism of these trends play any role in an environment where the media and the virtual worlds of the entertainment industry have become so powerful?

AWH: Modern habits of consumption have created what Benjamin Barber calls an "ethos of infantilization", where children are psychologically manipulated into early adulthood and adults are conditioned to remain in a perpetual state of adolescence. Postman suggested essentially the same thing when he wrote *The Disappearance of Childhood*. There have been many books written that address the problems of electronic media in stunting a child's mental, physical and spiritual development. One of the better recent ones is Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods*. Another one is Anthony Esolen's *Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child*. We have plenty of books, but we don't have enough people reading them or putting them into practice. Raising a child today is a daunting business, and maybe this is why more people are refusing to do it. No wonder John Bakan, a law professor at the University of British Columbia, wrote a *New York Times* op–ed complaining, "There is reason to believe that childhood itself is now in crisis." The other day I was listening to the American television program *60 Minutes*. The reporter was interviewing the Australian actress Cate Blanchett. I almost fell out of my chair when she starkly told the reporter, "We don't outsource our children." What she meant was, she does not let someone else raise her children. I think she was on to something. In most families today, both parents work outside the home. This is a fairly recent development if you consider the entire span of human history. Industrialism brought an end to the family as an economic unit. First, the father went off to work in the factory. Then, the mother entered the workforce during the last century. Well, the children could not stay home alone, so they were outsourced to various surrogate institutions. What was once provided by the home economy (*oikos*) –– education, heath care, child rearing and care of the elderly –– came to be provided by the state. The rest of our needs –– food, clothing, shelter and entertainment –– came to be provided by the corporations. A third–way economic ordering would seek to revive the old notion of *oikos* so that the home can once again be a legitimate economic, educational and care–providing unit –– not just a place to watch TV and sleep. In other words, the home would once again become a centre for production, not just consumption. If this every happened, one or both parents would be at home and little Johnny and sister Jane would work and play alongside their parents.

AS: I was intrigued by your insight into forms of totalitarianism depicted by George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. Though most authors who discussed totalitarianism during the last half of the century were overtaken by the Orwellian vision and praised this as most enlightening, the alternative Huxleyan vision of a self–inflicted, joyful and entertaining totalitarian society was far less scrutinized. Do you think we are entering into a culture where "totalitarianism with a happy face" as you call it prevails? If so, what consequences you foresee?

AWH: It is interesting to note that Orwell thought Huxley's *Brave New World* was implausible because he maintained that hedonistic societies do not last long, and that they are too boring. However, both authors were addressing what many other intellectuals were debating during the 1930s: what would be the social implications of Darwin and Freud? What ideology would eclipse Christianity? Would the new social sciences be embraced with as much exuberance as the hard sciences? What would happen if managerial science were infused into all aspects of life? What should we make of wartime propaganda? What would be the long–term effects of modern advertising? What would happen to the traditional family? How could class divisions be resolved? How would new technologies shape the future?