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Political Ignorance in an Information-Soaked World

Cover Page Footnote

Todd Gitlin is Professor of Journalism and Sociology at Columbia University. This is a lightly-edited version of a talk delivered on February 18, 2004, at Sacred Heart University as part of the College of Arts and Sciences Lecture Series on Media and Society.

TODD GITLIN

*Political Ignorance in
an Information-Soaked World*

The title of this talk is meant to be paradoxical. On the face of it, it seems extremely odd that we should be ignorant in a society so saturated by information. Information society: I'm sure that you've heard this expression. It is omnipresent. It does seem, on the face of it, sort of odd that people so bombarded by information should be as ignorant as we are. So what I want to do is first of all talk about the part played by information in the theory of democracy. Secondly, I'm going to try to lay out some of the dimensions that can be measured of just how ignorant we are. And third, I'm going to try to explain why we are as ignorant as we are.

First, the theory of democracy and its relation to information. There are many variants of the theory of democracy, going back to the Greeks, who in general weren't very pleased with it. But all theories of democracy have a special place in them for knowledge, and the premise of all democratic theories that I can think of is that the people are capable of ruling themselves, which is what democracy means, insofar as they are capable of understanding the situation they are in. After all, only when they're capable of recognizing the situation are they capable of putting their heads together and governing themselves. It's a no-brainer that knowledge is essential. Those who were skeptical about democracy and its prospects were skeptical about it because they didn't believe that knowledge _____

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was possible for more than a narrow and self-perpetuating elite. Plato, for example, begins the great history of anti-democratic reasoning by arguing in the *Republic* that only a self-selected body, a body of people educated in a special fashion, could amalgamate their knowledge of the world in such a way as to train themselves to exempt themselves from the ordinary run of human existence so that they could pay attention to the affairs of the republic, of the government as a whole. And more recently, over the last three centuries, more or less, those who've been more welcoming to the prospect of democracy were welcoming because they believed that when citizens put their minds together they can actually adequately and accurately appraise the situation they live in and arrive at the knowledge of what is in their collective interest, and therefore that they are capable of government as Lincoln said memorably, of, by, and for the people.

So knowledge occupies a special place in the theory of democracy, and therefore those who have been critical of tyranny – in recent times probably nobody more compellingly than George Orwell, though there have been many others who have warned against tyranny – have been skeptical of tyranny in part because they saw tyrants as people who monopolized information and lied. So those who've been opposed to tyranny in the name of democracy have been opposed to it in the name of the ideal of sharing information, and they have hated the fact that one thing that tyrants do is seal off information to protect themselves from public knowledge, and hide from the consequences of people's thirst for knowledge. They have regarded knowledge as a weapon of those who believe in themselves against those who would wrongfully deprive them of knowledge. So it is not surprising that in an age of vastly improved means of communication, many people have argued that the means of communication are the means of enlightenment.

If you go to New York and walk over to Rockefeller Center to what used to be the RCA Building – it is now the GE building, the building that is the headquarters of the National Broadcasting Corporation – if you walk over to the Sixth Avenue side, you will see a mural. It's a mosaic actually. It was put up during the Great Depression, and it means to be an allegory about the triumph of radio in that day; that was the primary, the most advanced form of communication. You'll see that the imagery in this model is very

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straightforward: it has to do with angels and devils. The angels are the forces of communication, and they emit signals adorned with labels like ``Truth," ``Poetry," ``Theater," ``Science," and other forms of the humanities and of knowledge. And the devils are ``Poverty," ``Ignorance," ``Oppression." And these devils have been smitten, have been struck by beams emanating from the angels, and therefore the devils are falling out of the sky. That utopian ideal about the power of communication is sort of the standard utopia that is affirmed by all those who value the means of communication — and nowhere more than in the so-called Information Society, in which it is conventionally assumed, as it was said biblically, that you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. The way the truth arrives is in bundles of information. The more information, the better. The more sources of information, the better. And when people have access to information, they're capable of distilling information into knowledge, and on the basis of that knowledge, arriving at an understanding of the world which permits them to govern themselves.

Now, by the same token it would follow that insofar as people are ignorant of their true circumstances, they are not capable of governing themselves. They may not even be capable of protecting themselves. Why have we been in such a collective uproar for years now about the adequacy of our intelligence services? This isn't a debate about whether we are served. The debate about intelligence, the debate about the adequacy of our security knowledge, is finally a debate about whether we are capable of protecting ourselves. I don't have to convince you that this is extremely important. And it is also taken for granted, and I think rightly so, that a people who are ignorant are not capable of protecting themselves, and part of our ongoing debate about our capacity to protect ourselves is a debate as to whether those of us who need information are able to get access to it.

So the question whether we are adequately informed to form a picture of the world is not just idle curiosity about the history of democratic theory. It is an essential element in a very practical and material debate about the future of our civilization. If we can comprehend the world, then we can manage our place in it. If we cannot comprehend the world, we are in effect helpless. And it is, I think, evident, whether we look at military dangers, ecological dangers, or economic dangers, that in a world interconnected with the

profundity that ours is, that a people who are unable to appraise the reality of the world have been disarmed, have proved themselves incapable of managing their place in the world. So ignorance, which is certainly an unending challenge to democratic life, becomes an even more urgent challenge in a time when what we don't know can hurt us, and in fact is essentially guaranteed to hurt us.

So how well off are we? How knowledgeable are Americans? How, therefore, capable or not are we of managing our own affairs? I'm speaking here of our ability to understand the world, to understand our place in it, understand what we need to know in order to govern ourselves. But understanding is very hard to appraise. Once upon a time, I was a mathematician, so I still have a respect for hard fact, and in order to talk about the kind of knowledge that is circulating, I'm going to use a sort of surrogate for understanding. I'm going to use information, facts, people's ability to know facts. I'm not somebody who believes that facts are the same as knowledge, by the way. I think you can know a lot of facts and be deeply ignorant about how the world works. We have a whole industry that regales us with information, the sum of which I don't think contributes very deeply to our ability to understand what really matters. I am referring here to the trivia industry. If you go to a movie and wait for the movie to start, you will be bombarded by facts, but this is hardly the sort of fact that I think enables you to grasp your place in the world, your place in the country, the country's place in the world, let alone your place in the universe. I hope I'm not mistaking trivial knowledge for deep knowledge. But one of the virtues of appraising our knowledge of fact is that at least we have a lot of evidence. We have a lot of evidence about what people know. And let me give you a few examples from recent surveys about what Americans know about some important matters in the world, some urgent matters.

Consider, for example, a poll taken by one of the best of our media polling institutions, the *Washington Post*, last August. From this poll we learn that 69% of Americans said that they thought it was at least likely — either likely or extremely likely in terms of the questionnaire — that Saddam Hussein was involved in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Sixty-nine percent of Americans said that they thought it was at least likely. This past January, just before the second Gulf War began,

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another reputable poll asked people ``To the best of your knowledge, how many of the September 11 hijackers were Iraqi citizens?" Seventeen percent, one in six, knew the right answer, which is none. Forty-four percent believed that most or some of the hijackers were Iraqi. Another 6% believed that the correct answer was one. So in other words, a full 50% were mistaken, three times as many as were right.

Here's another poll. Since June of last year, another good polling agency has been asking a sample of Americans whether it is their impression that the United States has or has not found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the Al Qaeda terrorist organization. In a poll of last August and September, 49% said that they believed the United States had found such evidence, 45% said that they believed the U.S. had not found such evidence, and 6% did not know. Twenty-four percent said they believed that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction have been found. Of course, there is no evidence that has been found that Saddam Hussein is working closely with the Al Qaeda organization, and no Iraqi weapons of mass destruction have been found.

So those are some of the dimensions of the problem that I want to address. How does it happen that so many Americans have such a wrong idea about such essential matters, matters that were held to be so urgent as to justify a war of choice? The first thing one should do when one is asking this sort of question is to ask it historically, to ask whether there is a rising, a falling, or more or less an even level of ignorance of foreign matters at least. Americans have long been a people graced by geography, isolated from the rest of the world spatially, and therefore with a certain luxury of ignorance. So it's not surprising, for example, that according to a poll taken in 1986, a majority of Americans couldn't name the leader of the Soviet Union. It's hard to compare how many Americans, let's say, in 1966 or 1956 knew the name of Gorbachev's equivalent. But I think the evidence that I've been able to collect — and there's not a lot of evidence of this sort — says that if you believe that Americans have become more knowledgeable in the last decade, let's say, as against fifty years ago, you would be mistaken. There's no evidence of that, and in fact there's considerable evidence that it isn't true.

I'm not going to impose a lot of numbers on you, but just a few by

way of some comparisons that are of interest. For example, when people are polled about their knowledge of foreign leaders, we see that in 1964 when people were asked if they could identify de Gaulle, 73% could. In 1990, when they were asked to identify Gorbachev, just about the same number, 71%, could. De Gaulle and Gorbachev are not exactly equivalent, but knowledge of the name of such a foreign leader at least doesn't show any great meteoric increase in public knowledge. A couple of other comparisons, not of knowledge of foreign leaders but of foreign questions in general, might be of interest. In 1948, for example, a poll asked whether people were aware that the Soviet Union was communist. Seventy-eight percent were. In 1985, thirty-seven years later, they were asked if they knew that mainland China was communist, and the percentage was 77, almost identical. No increase there. In 1954, asked whether East Germany was communist, 55% knew that it was. In 1989, when asked whether people knew that West Germany was a member of NATO, 50%, roughly the same number, said yes.

I have more numbers of this sort, and you'd be hard-pressed to look at these numbers and say that there's been an improvement in public information about these rather crude but nonetheless rather substantial questions. Here's another way in which we might look at these numbers. It's of interest to ask whether Americans are more or less knowledgeable about the world than people in other countries. After all, we don't exist in some sort of pure domain. It's important to understand whether Americans are more or less knowledgeable than others. We don't have very many surveys of this, but we do have some. In 1994, for example, the same five questions about various world figures and so on, were asked of people in the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Of the people in those countries, the Americans surpassed only the Spaniards in their knowledge of the answers to these questions. Thirty-seven percent of Americans couldn't answer any of the questions correctly. And only 15% could answer at least four of the five. By the way, in case you're curious, the questions were: are: Who is the president of Russia? Which country is threatening to withdraw from the non-proliferation treaty? Who is Boutros Boutros Ghali? Which ethnic group has conquered much of Bosnia? And with which group have the Israelis recently reached a peace accord? The United States

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was next to last in that ranking, and in a survey of ten countries conducted by *National Geographic*, America's knowledge of world geography ranked near the bottom.

So at the very least I think it can be pretty well established that since the 1950s, the first period about which we have significant data, the factual knowledge of foreign affairs has failed to increase. Now here's what's really interesting: something else has changed in American's presumed ability to comprehend the world since then. If we compare the educational statistics between the present and the 1950s, we discover that Americans are a far better educated people than was true fifty years ago. The percentages of Americans with high-school degrees, with college degrees, with some college, or with post-graduate degrees, all have grown. And yet in spite of these changes, Americans are not better informed about the world than they were fifty years ago.

Let me give you an example of how much and how little difference education makes in terms of people's knowledge about some of these urgent foreign matters. We have a poll from last August, also done by the *Washington Post*, in which people were asked whether it was likely or not that Saddam Hussein had a link to the September attacks: "Is it likely that Hussein was involved in the September attacks?" was the question. If you are a high-school graduate, or had less of an education than that, 76% of you thought that it was likely that there was that connection. Seventy-six percent of those with a high-school degree or less, as opposed to those with a post-graduate degree, of whom 45% thought it was likely that Saddam Hussein had a link with the September 11th hijackers. There was a positive correlation between information and college or post-graduate education, but a majority of college graduates were still remarkably ignorant of some essential information on what was at the time, what has been for the last two and a half years, probably the most urgent questions about America's relation to the rest of the world. Of those who were college graduates in this survey, 62% thought that it was either very likely or somewhat likely that Saddam Hussein was connected to the September 11 hijackers. So the benign assumption that education is destined to wipe out ignorance is profoundly simplistic. There is no evidence for it, and there is the kind of evidence that I've just cited against it.

Here's something else I find troubling. In surveys that were taken from the 1940s, 1950s, and the 1960s, young people were about as knowledgeable as older people on questions about political issues and public figures. But in the mid-1970s, a gulf opened up between these generational groups, the gulf of political knowledge, and that gulf has not diminished. That is, now there is a strong correlation between age and political knowledge, and it doesn't tilt toward the young: it tilts toward the old. Roughly speaking, the old are more knowledgeable than the young. So we have to speak of what I come to think of as a sort of ambient ignorance. Ignorance has become the normal condition of American knowledge. Now, why should that be? What has changed in the last thirty, forty, fifty years? Why can we speak of ignorance as the standard condition, to which there are of course exceptions? I don't think this can be attributed, by the way, to the policies of a particular government, because the sort of tendency that I am talking about is the sort of tendency that began before the current administration, and it will, I have no doubt, outlast it.

I think there are many reasons why Americans have become more ignorant of the world, as well as reasons why it's more dangerous for us to be more ignorant. But I want to focus on one particular question. It is the question that I dwell on in my book, *Media Unlimited*, and the more I think about this question, the more I am persuaded that the most significant force in creating ambient ignorance is a force that is not generally given its due in public conversation. So I am going to dwell on this by way of counter-balancing the rather superficial way in which I think this subject is generally discussed. I want to argue, briefly, that there is a condition in the life experience of the young in particular which has become the normal experience in American society, and which is not conducive to political knowledge. In fact it is detrimental to political knowledge: our immersion in a virtually non-stop environment of media saturation, so that our normal experience of everyday life is one that filters through the images, sounds, and stories which come to us through a vast host of channels. This non-stop, wrap-around, 24/7 media environment is something that we now take for granted as an everyday experience. It is, in fact, the everyday experience of the American young – not just the American young, by the way, but this process is more advanced in the United States than virtually elsewhere else.

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Let me just mention a few statistics which might give you some sense of the magnitude of this media immersion. Consider the life that an American child has at home. For a moment, leave aside what happens when you leave home. We have a very good survey, done in 1999, of the media experience of American children. Here are some of the findings. If we take all American children, from age two to eighteen, and average that, this average child is in the presence of at least one of the media for about six and three-quarter hours a day. Of this six and three-quarter hours, a little less than three-quarter hours consists of time spent reading. The rest is spent with television, with recorded music, with the Internet, video games, and the like. About two-thirds of American children, as of 1999, have in their bedrooms a television set, a radio, a tape player, and a video game console. What is also striking is that the experience of these children in their bedrooms is pretty well invariant across a whole lot of categories. It doesn't seem to matter much whether you are white or black or Hispanic or another race or ethnicity, whether you live in a rich neighborhood or a poor neighborhood, whether you are a boy or a girl. This is pretty much a uniform experience.

And so far I've just been talking about the bedroom. Let's add in not only the rest of the stuff that's in the house but the experience that one has when one leaves the house, whether it's the experience of billboards, of the screens that are the accompaniment of shops in the mall, the screens that are the accompaniments of a trip on the bus or on a plane, all the stuff that comes through cell phones and the Walkmen and the GameBoys and the rest of these devices. The life that has come to be considered a normal life is a sound-track life, it's an iPod life, it's life in the company of orchestrated mood-setting emotion-inducing images, sounds, and stories. Now it's not new at all, by any means, in human history that people are attracted by and find some value in replicas of life, whether visual artifacts, sculptures, paintings, stain-glass, what have you, or theatrical spectacles. It's not by any means new. There's no society that I can imagine, certainly none I've ever read or heard about, in which there is not an organized artistic experience, although often it is an experience that's not separated from religious experience. There's no society we know of in which there are not icons and representations of mythologies of the tribe or of the clan or of the people. There is no society that we know of in which there is

not a collection of legends about how things are in the world and what the ultimate sources of power and meaning are.

So it's by no means new that we have access to theater, to ballads, to various renditions of human life, human and animal and divine life. But what is remarkable is that in this society, so much of our attention is given to these images, sounds, and stories, that attention to them is the major thing that we do as a civilization. It is the major thing that we do as a civilization when we are not asleep, and when we are not at work. And given the way in which we work, I think it's also true that much of the time that people are at work they are also in contact with the world of images, sounds, and stories that are piped in. And this is unprecedented: the amount of attention. The amount of attention that is spent is of such a magnitude that I think it's fair to say that if you were a visiting Martian and you wanted to know what are the essential features of our civilization, you would pay attention not to what people profess to be their values or their commitments: you would pay attention to what they do with their time. And the answer would be: this is what they do, this is what we do with our time. We are immersed in this kind of experience with images, sounds, and stories.

Now what does that have to do with our knowledge of the political world? Again, let me offer a few facts that have loomed large in the most sophisticated people's attempts to come to grips with the meaning of our trajectory as a democracy in a time of media saturation. You may have heard the debates a few years ago attached to a book with the marvelous title, *Bowling Alone*, a book by a political scientist, Robert Putnam. He chose that title because he observed that while Americans seem to be spending more money and time bowling, that bowling leagues were dwindling, and so he deduced that insofar as people were still bowling, they were bowling alone. He looked at data about how people spent their time and what kinds of connections they had to organizations of all kinds, not just bowling leagues: other kinds of sports leagues, PTAs, church groups, and civic associations of all sorts. He looked at their participation in political parties, whether they vote or not, and so on. He found that whatever fields of organizational connection, whatever fields of social life you looked at, Americans were doing less of it today than they were doing thirty or forty years ago. Americans were belonging less and they were also voting less, which is the issue that I want to focus on. Putnam got hold of the best

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data he could get for what might correlate with people voting or not, and he discovered something extremely interesting: people who read newspapers were more likely to be voters; people who watched television were less likely to vote, less likely to attend public meetings, less likely to serve in organizations, less likely to sign petitions than people who were otherwise identical to them in terms of education, age, race, and so on, but were spending less time with television. The more television people say they watch, the less likely they are to be registered to vote.

What's even more striking is that people who watch television generally can be said to watch television in one of two quite different ways: people in the television business refer to one kind as ``appointment viewing." I'm going to watch the news at 6:30, I'm going to watch *Friends* at whatever time, I'm going to watch the basketball game at such and such a time. Then there are other people who when they watch television, they say that they turn on the TV and they watch whatever's on. The percentage of people who say they watch whatever's on has skyrocketed in the last twenty-five years. It is now about half the people who watch television. It was considerably less than that: it was about a third in the mid-1970s.

You can see how all these factors are lining up. People who are attached to television in particular, whose life involves substantially immersing themselves in the spectacle of unending television, are the people who have unplugged from social life, including their lives as political citizens. It's too early to know if this same thing applies to people who are big Internet users. It's also too early to say whether this increased voter turnout in 2004 is the beginning of a major countertrend.

Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*, looked at a whole range of factors that might be the cause or part of the cause of the withdrawal from political life, the withdrawal from social organization, and so on, and found that of all the factors that one might consider — and believe me, he is extremely thorough about this — the single most influential factor is television. And it's really not spectacularly complicated, at least part of the explanation is not spectacularly complicated; insofar as you're spending an additional hour a day watching television, which is roughly the case for Americans, you have that much less time, that much less energy, that much less attention to

spare for the rest of what one might otherwise be doing. People – and this is not only true in the United States – who watch a great deal of television know less about politics, less about the world, feel less able to effect government, and are less interested in politics. When I say politics, I mean political knowledge.

What is it about the experience of television – and, I should add, other media, but we have more evidence about television – that harmonizes with the ambient ignorance that I have described? I don't want to dwell on this at great length, but I think it's evident if we inspect our own experience with the medium – this is certainly true for me – that what we expect from television is a state of mind that has an emotional verve, a sensational capacity that entices our interest and keeps our attention, but at the same time doesn't demand so much of us that we feel engulfed by the emotions and sensations that result. In other words, television and media in general, I would argue, work best by enticing us to experience what I think of as disposable emotion: emotions that don't demand very much of us, limited liability emotions, emotions and sensations that satisfy us that some life is taking place within us, some connections are being made.

If you deplore this sort of experience, you might call it distracting. But if you are neutral about it, you might simply observe – our visiting Martian would observe – that people are compelled sufficiently, by media experience, to feel that there is value in that experience. After all, they are not being dragooned into watching television or listening to music or listening to the radio or any other kind of media experience at the point of a gun. This is, in fact, a choice that people are making, to have a certain kind of experience, and that kind of experience is not the experience of knowledge. It's not the experience of mastery of the world. It is experience of a kind of surfing the worlds, of a kind of pleasure in the movement of the world, a kind of satisfaction in the charges and challenges, the electricity of the world. That is the kind of experience that people have made central to their way of life.

This, I think, helps me understand how it could be that a population better educated than ever before, and in fact better educated than any people have ever been in recorded history, could still be no more knowledgeable about the world and about political figures than they were when they were less educated. To compress it, I would say that the experience people have in school is the experience

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of a formal curriculum that is engulfed by an informal curriculum. And the informal curriculum is the media, it's the experience of the media. This is what people deeply know. This is the kind of experience that people deeply rely on. This is the user-friendly environment which is ours, and it is a useable environment which, as I'm sure you know from your courses, inspires the creation and the perfection of what I think of as an attention-getting industry that, recognizing our desires for media experience, has cultivated extremely sophisticated ways of getting us to pay attention, which they are extremely good at. It's not that some drug has been administered to us unknowingly, but rather because we cherish that experience, and they know it.

So, the media, with their emotional payoffs and their sensational everyday experience, do become the soundtrack of life, and that soundtrack of life is not conducive to the amalgamation and the perfection of information that is capable of being converted into useable knowledge. This is not the education of citizens, this is the education of consumers. And again, it's not a plot that's been done to us: it is the collective creation of collective desire. And this is why it is deeply difficult to imagine repealing it. This is who we have become, and there's not a substantial number who wish to be anything else but that.

In his introduction, Sid Gottlieb promised that I would have something inspiring to say, and I don't think that I've succeeded. And I don't think that I want to succeed if inspiration is neglect of reality. I think we have altogether too much neglect of reality, and as I think about the quality of ambient ignorance which I have described, and which I think is our collective condition, and as I have looked for the depth of the causes that might be accountable for it, I haven't been able to come up with a happy ending.

I don't want to contribute any more illusions to the collective fascination. But I do want to end on at least a grace note of possibility, and it is the following: While there's no question but that the process I've described is capable of enticing people and satisfying them with the private satisfactions of everyday life that are becoming routine, it's also true, at least to date, that when the world as it appears to be intrudes in their private life, when the world explodes on you, when the building down the way is obliterated, when the environment that you inhabit becomes physically dangerous, that people are then struck — belatedly,

but nonetheless struck – by the discrepancy between what they thought the world was like and what they then discover it is. And it is under those circumstances that people are aroused and that Americans – among others – ask themselves how it could be that they have misunderstood their real situation. Then they transform their circumstances. This doesn't happen very often, but Lincoln was right: you can fool some of the people all of the time, and you can fool all of the people some of the time. But at least there's no evidence that you can fool all of the people all of the time, and on that note, I will stake my hope.