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Todd Gitlin

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The Age of Entertainment Overload

Cover Page Footnote

Todd Gitlin is Professor of Culture, Journalism, and Sociology at New York University. This paper was presented at Sacred Heart University on March 15, 1998, as part of the fourth annual Media Studies Symposium.

TODD GITLIN

The Age of Entertainment Overload

Advertisers, when they talk about strategy, talk about "breaking through the clutter." The clutter is, of course, made up of all the efforts of all other advertisers to "break through the clutter." This ironic effort by advertisers defines the central feature of our entertainment world, a world in which Americans spend more on leisure time pursuits than on food.

The clutter of images — the disorderly imagescape — is an essential feature of contemporary life, and nowhere more than in America, where so much social energy has been freed to make and circulate images. Strange: a society once suspicious of images as the devil's work has evolved into a society of 57 channels and 56.6 baud. The clutter of images, the brilliant and the not-so-brilliant, the arresting and the arrested, is a distinguishing, and sometimes distinguished, feature of the so-called information society, where software is the third-largest industry and entertainment the second-largest export, a society of flux and buzzing, sweetness and flight, signal and static. This clutter dares every image, the good, the bad, and the ugly, to strain to fight its way through and make a mark. As with advertising, the sum of all these strains and strivings — in a wonderful paradox — becomes the clutter of images itself, posing a threat to the lucidity, the decodability, and the weight of every single image. Images are the steady bombardment which produces thrills and vertigo, the radical juxtapositions of surrealism, the depthless glitter of post-modernism — all the electronic manna that never ceases to fall.

It's a golden age that we're supposed to be living in — or a silicon age of information, when silicon is worth a good deal more than its weight in gold. The computer in every classroom is touted as the means to general enlightenment. Introducing the *New York*

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and summing up its spirit, John Tierney writes: "Today's technologies offer a better deal for everyone" — which means that you're a chump or the Unabomber if you decline the offer. Students arrive in the university already wired and hyperlinked to distance-bridging, globally connected networks which afford almost instantaneous access to more "information" — please hear the quotation marks — in one hour than Aristotle or Rembrandt could access in his lifetime. Allow for frustration time in the downloading and the point remains. The culture is swamped by a digital tsunami, and we flatter ourselves that at least we will not die of thirst. In the so-called advanced world, we benefit, or is it suffer, from the exceedingly bearable — indeed, enjoyable — lightness of plenty.

"Information" in textual form fuses image with pictorial form, and the two forces accelerate in tandem. The nineteenth century gave us photography and the moving image, and the twentieth moves them into private space, first into newspapers and magazines, then onto television and computer screens. Motion and images are not new; America was fertile soil for an entertainment overload. It's the sheer volume and velocity of the images that's new. The flux of information and image takes on an eerie presence surrounding and penetrating everyday life. Exhortation and celebration, replicas and representations, are incessant accompaniments to living. The sum amounts to the daily curriculum, purporting to tell how things go, have gone, and will go with human life. The amalgam of images and bits, stories and sequels, most of them evanescent, adds up a sort of second-hand shared life where an amazingly disparate society discovers that what it has to talk about in common is *The X-Files*, *Baywatch*, and *Dawson's Creek*. Not Leonardo da Vinci but the other Leonardo, what's-his-name. Not Homer, but Homer Simpson. Not Madonna with Child but the other Madonna with the other child.

Nowhere is this more true than among the young, who grow up in hot pursuit of the new and the fun. To those reared on TV, video games, computers, and multimedia, a great deal of everyday life feels like a flash-dance and a carnival of mass-manufactured stories, or snippets of stories bobbing around among other snippets. Day in, day out, we are awash in images, actors, and dramas. If a phenomenon persists from the past, the culture consigns it to the dead realm of "history," which is what we call information that the cutting edge has

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sliced off. We put it behind us." Amid the clutter of images, stimulus and — to use the buzzword — "identity" come from shared fantasies of self-transformation, villainy, and rescue. Occasionally, the characters are real — these we call celebrities. They are what we know and who we have in common. Occasionally the images line up into a collective fixation — as with the "people's princess," the projective screen for a culture whose appetite for obsession is seemingly boundless. Mainly, however, these images come and go, cool off or turn over to make way for the next season, the next style, the next buzz, the next hot thing.

The glut of images is, in many respects, unprecedented, and so is the challenge to art and education. Americans on average watch television, or are in its presence, for more than four hours a day, half the waking hours that are not taken up with work (and sometimes even then). For the sake of argument, let us suppose that during those hours the representative American tunes in on six fictional programs, making allowances for half-hour comedies, hour-long dramas, and longer-than-one-hour movies, though taking no account of shows that, thanks to remote control devices, are seen more than one at a time. (More than two-thirds of cable subscribers surf channels, and the younger they are, the more they surf.) For simplicity's sake, assume sixteen minutes of commercial per hour on commercial channels, say forty distinct commercials, of which half, say, are narrative. This yields roughly 160 more little units of mass-mediated message per day. This figure does not, of course, take into account the stories that pass through a single news show. Throw in a conservative 30 news items a day, and assume that in the course of the day, our statistical soul is paying attention to the small shining screen half the time. Divide by half and round off. We get 100 little sequences at the minimum.

Add movies, and the trailers that tell stories about stories, and the trivia quizzes that proceed them. Add sports events. Add video-cassettes. Add billboards along the highway, on street corners, on buses and bus stops, in newspapers and magazines. Add newspaper and magazine stories. Add video and computer games. Add books, especially popular fictions. Add the photo-studded displays of wiggling, potentially meaningful units of information and disinformation that flood into millions of households and offices through the Internet. Read me! Notice me! Click on me! Thus are we exposed to thousands of mass-produced stories a month, not counting thousands more

free-standing images and labels that flash into the corners of consciousness — the billboards, the Internet flashes, the logos flashing out of TV screens and ID cards.

These stories and images do not arrive one at a time. They amalgamate, they interpenetrate. Images leak down the margins of the page, they pulsate out of the screen. Sometimes they extend and deepen one another. More often they chew at each other like hamsters, spinning a luminous wheel in a cramped cage. Whether they attract or irritate, they take up space in consciousness — and unconsciousness. Energy is devoted to ward them off, to repel $n-1$ or $n-3$ of them so that one or three can register at a time. Hour after hour, day after day, the mind and body are immersed, churned in this unending white water — or perhaps we might better say, subjected to a veritable Jacuzzi of stimulus. And a craving for more.

Note, too, that this imagescape has a sound track — the vast quantities of performed music and other auditory stimuli in the form of songs, sound effects, squeaks, honks, Walkman productions, CDs, voice-mail filler, all the currents and ejaculations of organized sound that add up to the background of our lives.

Now it is probably true that no one but impressionable psychotics is held in thrall for long by the bulk of the minuscule dramas and depictions of popular culture. Most are experienced as lightweight, limited-liability productions, minimalist sensations of the moment, spurts of clamor for attention that may demand much but mostly command precious little commitment. If they demanded more, they would step on each others' lines even more than they do now. But the whole of the imagescape is more than the sum of the parts, posing the question of whether, as we are caught in the cross-hairs of what Larry Gelbart recently called "weapons of mass distraction," we shall know deeply who we are and what the world is. How shall we find still points in a turning world?

What does it mean, this "information" for which we are to steadily upgrade our facilities and our gratitude? By definition, information consists of signals that distinguish themselves from absence, not from untruth. Information is what breaks the silence. When a neo-Nazi puts up a Web site maintaining that Auschwitz was not a death camp, he is adding as much "information" to the gross informational product as when someone posts an analysis of the

Declaration of Independence. Garbage in, garbage sloshing around. When people "chat" about the weather in Phoenix or Paris, they are circulating information, but this does not mean they are either deepening their sensibilities or improving their democratic capacity to govern themselves. When information piles up higgledy-piggledy and we are steadily bombarded, when information becomes the noise of the culture, then — that is, now — the real arts are urgent. But they are not only difficult to make, they are difficult to see.

The means of the so-called information age are new but the end is not. A culture of technological progress is where America has been living longer than any living human. The culture of sound bites and hyperlinks is deeply American. Long before Hollywood, long before NBC and Fox, long before, God help us, *USA Today*, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of America: "what is generally sought in the productions of mind is easy pleasure and information without labor." The genius of the consumer market is to produce the Walkman, the remote control device, the computer mouse, toward ends — acceleration and simultaneity — that are preordained. Let me read to you from this most perceptive of all books about America — and remember that he is writing more than 150 years ago:

Democratic nations cultivate the arts that serve to render life easy in preference to those whose object is to adorn it. . . . [T]he democratic principle not only tends to direct the human mind to the useful arts, but it induces the artisan to produce with great rapidity many imperfect commodities, and the consumer to content himself with these commodities. . . . [These works] substitute the representation of motion and sensation for that of sentiment and thought. . . . Style will frequently be fantastic, incorrect, overburdened, and loose, almost always vehement and bold. Authors will aim at rapidity of execution more than at perfection of detail. . . . There will be more wit than erudition, more imagination than profundity; and literary performances will bear marks of an untutored and rude vigor of thought, frequently of great variety and singular fecundity. The object of

authors will be to astonish rather than to please, and to stir the passions more than to charm the taste.

What follows, relentlessly, is a society afflicted with attention deficit disorder, surely a syndrome as inevitable in the society of Mortal Kombat as black lung disease in a community of coal miners. The popular attention span has been sequenced to fall out of sequence — with implications that are not yet clear (and may never be clear) but are unlikely to add up to a tidal wave of peaceful comtemplativeness.

One thing we tend toward, in fact, is a culture of gossip. Gossip is the life-blood of a far-flung society with precious little in common. It is the membership card of people who feel displaced, uprooted, lost in the swirl of modernity. It is a great leveler: It turns outsiders into insiders. It channels curiosity, envy, resentment. It cements a fragmented society. Stardust rubs off on the rest of us who want to feel in the know.

Gossip is fine as far as it goes. Scratch a prude and you will find prurience. The problem is that gossip has become our substitute for news. Gossip metastasizes. Our knowledge of and interest in affairs of state is crowded out by fascination with the state of affairs. Our public life is now a national soap opera. We lurch from all O.J., all the time, to all Diana, all the time, to all Marv Albert, all the time, to all Monica, all the time. You give us 22 minutes, we'll give you the dish. Much of the so-called information that pours through the channels of a media-soaked society is a pretext for prurient interest, for the tidbits do not directly bear on the crimes alleged. They satisfy a hunger to know what the demigods do in their suites and their closets.

The muck rises to the top partly because the competition is fierce. The gastrointestinal tract of the all-news channels is insatiable. The outlets are available at the flick of a finger — you don't even have to go to the supermarket. All those hours to fill! Chat shows scrounge to relay gossip about the gossip. Local news finds local angles. Any scrap of hypothetically relevant rumor zooms around the world. CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC lifted their ratings by 50 to 60 percent when the Clinton-Lewinsky story broke. ABC's *Nightline* was up 31 percent. The hunger for scandal even rubbed off on the audience for the State of the Union speech, raising the audience by 36 percent, according to Nielsen, over last year's performance. Newspapers and newsmagazines

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are selling as well. What works, works.

So the gossips are doing fine business and the rest of the news media leap after them. Matt Drudge, the self-proclaimed merchant of undocumented tips (including the phony claim that White House advisor Sidney Blumenthal beat his wife), has his Web site linked to the *New York Times* on-line, and becomes an honored guest on NBC's august *Meet the Press*. When he holds up Mr. Murdoch's tabloid sleaze paper, the *New York Post*, as ostensible proof for an outlandish claim, no one dares interrupt to say, "This is garbage." The sizzling national news gets piped directly from the *Globe* (Gennifer Flowers) or the *National Enquirer* (the Simpson case) or the *Star* (Dick Morris) into ABC or the *Times*. Then what goes around comes around. Tony Frost, editor of the *Globe*, has said: "The mainstream press has set it up for the tabloids to come in and dig deeply under the dirty bed sheets." News has been annexed by the entertainment business.

In the process, he who draws lines between comes in late. The apparent rule is, Broadcast first and ask questions afterwards. Competition replaces ethics. (The CBS official who didn't stop everything for Princess Diana's accident when his competitors went to Paris live was promptly demoted.) Last week, the *Dallas Morning News* rushed on-line to claim that a Secret Service agent was ready to testify that he saw President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky performing an unseemly act. Their source? "A longtime Washington lawyer familiar with the case." ABC News ran the same tidbit, crediting unnamed "sources." The *New York Post* and *Daily News* ran identical front-page headlines the next day: "Caught in the Act." On January 27, the Dallas paper retracted. In the meantime, wire services had carried the story around the world. Does anyone expect a tabloid headline that reads "Not Caught in the Act"?

It's not easy to say what are the consequences of the entertainment glut. It's easier to mistake them for something else. Consider the issue of violence, for example. Television violence is mainly redundant, stupid, and ugly. But the deepest problem with TV violence is not that it causes violence — the evident for this is very thin. Japan, with much more vile media violence, and more widely available violent pornography, has far less violence, and far less sexual violence in particular, than the U.S. America's reckless gun culture and social

rootlessness are by far the most formidable causes of murderous violence. TV versions of violence are egregious, coarsening, and produce a social fear and anesthesia which damage our capacity to face reality, but I think many liberals have gone overboard in thinking that if they clean up television, they have accomplished a great deal to rub out violence in the real world. To make television more discriminating, intelligent, and various would be an achievement worthy in its own right, but let's not kid ourselves: the deepest sources of murderous American violence are stupefying inequality, terrible poverty, a nihilistic drug-saturated culture, and an easy recourse to guns. TV's contribution is a target of convenience for a political culture that makes it difficult to grow up with a sense of belonging to a decent society.

I'm not against the V-chip as such, since any device that enables parents to redress the imbalance of power they suffer under the invasion of television is all to the good. Given the power of nihilistic corporations over TV programs, any reasonable off-switch is defensible. But again, let's not kid ourselves about just how easy it will be to address the problem of TV violence all by itself. The Hollywood mania for dumb-bunny action is driven by the export imperative. Entertainment is America's second largest export in dollar value. The industry is not going to go quietly.

None of what I have said means that television is healthy for American society. To the contrary. George Gerbner may well be right about TV watchers: the more violence they watch, the more dangerous they think the world is. They may therefore support heavy-handed, authoritarian responses to crime. The profiteers of television — the networks, the program suppliers, and the advertisers — ought not to be subsidized (e.g., via tax write-offs) to program their merry way as they please. And the public ought to provide alternatives. There ought to be a greater range of publicly subsidized programs dedicated to something other than mindless, transitory entertainment. We could tax television sets, as in Great Britain, or subsidize public broadcasting through taxes, as in Canada, or, in a more American mode, charge fees to networks, who now avail themselves of the public airwaves, buy and sell licenses, and amass immense profits, all without charge.

But the problem of TV goes far beyond violence. The speed-up of imagery undermines the capacity to pay attention. Flashy sensation clogs up the synapses. The cheapening of violence — not so much the

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number of incidents as their emptiness and light-weight gruesomeness — leads to both paranoia and anesthesia. The coarsening of TV inhibits seriousness. The glut of entertainment cheers consumers on primitive levels. Whiz-bang new technologies like high-definition TV will offer sharper images of banality.

And yet. And yet. Amid and against the jumbled sequences, the jagged juxtapositions which define our cultural moment, there persists a certain hunger for sequence. Amid the little narratives is the longing for the big story: the end-time melodrama, the millennial myth, the tale of black helicopters stealing American out from under our noses, or "the greatest story ever told." Amid the tiny ecstasies, the interruptus of the imagescape, there is, albeit repressed, the desire for the big story of continuing love. In the world at large, the people of the clashing symbols confront the people of the Holy Book, the fundamentalists of all stripes. Sometimes they are the same people: two forms of consciousness at odd angles to each other, coexisting uneasily. America's chaotic fundamentalists are as hungry for transcendent myths as they are distracted by weapons of mass distraction. And so the culture of slogans and glut is also haunted by a sort of Cheshire hope — a hope for The Word.

I do not think that this longing will disappear. It is, in part, a moment in the long revolt against the Enlightenment — a revolt as old as the Enlightenment. I do not think it is hard-wired in the biological sense: we are, as McLuhan rightly said, a linear civilization, thinking from alpha to omega, A to Z, not cyclically. But I think the desire for sequence, for beginnings, middles, and ends, is soft-wired (if there is such a word) into Western cosmology. That is why, in my view, we are not done with the book, that master and mistress container for sequence.

All of which poses an interesting challenge to the arts — as it does to liberal education, not to mention the prospects for democracy and the citizenly life. I am not here to bewail the prospects, but to wonder aloud: Now that we have so many means, what will we do for ends?