WHERE ARE WE GOING?

ID 499
HONORS THESIS

PRESENTED BY:
BRADLEY D. EDWARDS
APRIL 26, 1991
DR. JOE MISIEWICZ
Where are we going? Our society has changed rapidly over the past century. The invention of machines like the printing press, telegraph, telephone, and the computer has pushed our society into an almost futuristic age. No one can say where we would be without inventions like those mentioned above, but we can obviously tell that life as we know it would be dramatically different. In some shape or form, all of the inventions listed above can be grouped under telecommunications.

Without the printing press, this paper would not exist. It paved the way for written language to be disbursed quickly to many people. The invention could have been used for distribution of pictures, but instead it was the easiest way to make many copies of religious material for the masses. Along with the progress of our society, many implications have also arisen. This paper will offer no cures for these problems, only ideas and more questions about where we, as a society, are going.

The first topic that comes to mind concerns the war in the Persian Gulf. Broadcast stations, radio and television alike, carried the triumphs and tragedies into our living rooms almost constantly. This is the first war we had the chance to witness as it happened. I guess I can't honestly say that because this is the first war that I have witnessed and remembered. However, the war with Iraq is a unique news event to our
highly visual society. The reporters were in Baghdad when the first shots were fired and they were there when the bombs began exploding outside the window. I was there also as I sat in my night class with a shocked look on my face. I was also there every day until the end. I was there when I ate lunch, sat on my couch, or strolled past any functional television set.

Not having much research background concerning the coverage of the Vietnam War or World War II, I must draw from what I have learned in class and heard from the people who witnessed it. If we go back to the coverage of World War II, no footage of dead American soldiers was allowed to be published until 1943, over a year after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The armed forces carried censorship officers during the Vietnam days, a la Good Morning Vietnam. However, when the families of the United States sat down to eat dinner, they got to see death and utter destruction. Fortunately, the three networks voluntarily chose not to air the more disgusting shots and footage. No one can say if the networks were acting in the public interest or if advertising dollars needed to be saved.

The point I am trying to make is the fact that the Persian Gulf War came live into our living rooms the first night with deep coverage. After
that, we only saw what the government wanted us to see and mostly after the-fact. We didn't see body bags coming back to America and we didn't see corpses laying on the battlefield. We saw successful Patriot missile defenses and a few cases of successful Scud attacks. We also saw reporters putting on gas masks during siren alerts. We met the mayors in Israel and we talked to families of soldiers. We honestly did not see much war. I, for one, am glad that we didn't see more than we did.

Is the broadcast medium another military weapon for the United States? Did our military censors use the Cable News Network to fool Saddam Hussein into believing that it would be a long struggle? Did we use it to throw off his strategy and give him false impressions of hope for the Iraqi people? Whatever the answer to these questions is, the war was short and successful whether the American public knew what was going on or not. The network and cable reporters were not pleased with the type of coverage they were allowed to obtain, but the networks did their duty by acting in the public interest. Finally. The coverage of the first two weeks of the war reportedly cost NBC, CBS, and ABC over $30 million in lost advertising revenue. Pool this loss with other losses due to reduced network share and we see large scale reductions in show expenditure and employee numbers. Even though CNN gained its highest
rating ever, it will suffer greatly from lost advertising revenue. The extended coverage pre-empted regular programming and, thus, regularly scheduled advertising. I commend the effort by the networks and CNN.

Another topic that closely relates to telecommunications today is the impact that it has had and will have on education. Ball State University is a leader in the capability of its telecommunications facilities. The real question is, "Can people learn effectively by this method?" Ball State has spent and acquired millions of dollars to have the capability to send televised classes and other taped educational material to many different locations. This is like Sesame Street for adults. I agree with the statement that more people are now exposed to an educational experience. Can people learn effectively without the human element? Can I expect to sit down in front of my video monitor and learn anything I need from a disk or videotape?

Channel 1 is being played for my sixteen year old brother every day at his high school. He does not enjoy reading a book or newspaper in the first place. Is the monitor going to replace all written work? Maybe I should save my printed material as antiques so my grandchildren can say, "What are those?" Not to neglect the impact or respectability of Sesame Street, but does it actually help children read? Many people
believe it teaches children how to associate letters with words. I fear that the "tube" is slowly replacing the highly motivational human element and the ever-lasting printed word.

Not only has education felt an impact from the broadcasting and telecommunications interests, but political structure has been affected also. I don't see many ugly, overweight, bald politicians. I also do not see many campaigning politicians in my area. How did they know that I like unions, baseball, farming, and no tax cuts? He looks right at home in Indiana in his work overalls. I wonder what the people in Jersey think of them britches? Television has molded the general public's view of politics and politicians into what it is today. Politicians and officials alike hire people to handle their media appearances. They might as well get paid more. They sure don't get paid enough to run our country. Give them more money because they're entertainers too. They've got to look good for television. Not too fat, not too white, not too unhappy. Where did all those people come from to cheer on his speech in Mooresville, Indiana? Let me guess, a camera angle, right?

The mass audience is almost gone in American television. Cable television and videocassette players have greatly cut into the network share of the market. Satellites have brought every region of the country
to our fingertips. Along with this technology has come the necessity for our leaders to portray themselves as down home. Whether to Californians or Georgians, he's one of us. Commercials and political announcements are custom built for every region of the country. Not only does the politician look different, he must act different and make different decisions. A seldom thought about idea is the idea of the quality of the decisions that our representatives make. I don't watch C-Span but many people do. Nixon did not fall apart during Watergate until he was put in front of a jury. Our political leaders have time to think and deliberate until they are put in front of a camera. Or a crew of cameras. I hope this is not a significant pressure, but I regret to admit that I think it is.

Neil Postman, in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, says that "contradiction, in short, requires that statements and events be perceived as interrelated aspects of a continuous and coherent context." Then a person turns on the evening news. We see eighteen stories in a newscast that last approximately forty-five seconds each. The sound bytes are perfect, the story that follows has nothing to do with the previous topic, and no mention is made later. Television news is not made for thinking or reflecting and it is the source for most people's news
today. Who listens to the radio when a picture is handy? Newspaper readership is falling sharply throughout the country. How many cities and towns have a morning and an afternoon paper, still? The question still stands. Where are we going?

Religion is always a hot topic when one talks about controversial television practices. Evangelists have fallen by the wayside in recent years. Billy Graham still stands tall with his thousands of followers. Oral Roberts has his school and Pat Robertson has political aspirations. What has happened to the message? Is God involved in this somewhere? It takes money to run a church. It takes more money to run a television show. I always viewed religion as a very individual experience with much ritualistic practice and personal transcendence. Why don't you see many Catholic masses on the set and where are my Jewish counterparts? It is obvious that religious denominations with higher traditional values have realized that religion is not made for television. The mystification and personal feeling that is gained from the message is gone. God is no longer in the room. The evangelist or minister gains all of the attention and he has the power. And then I go home and I see Mrs. Jones down the hall and she can barely walk. Let alone go to church.

While we are on the subject of unethical television practices, we
should consider children's cartoons. Are they entertaining or educational? I walk through any toy store and I feel like the girl from Poltergeist who somehow entered her television set. Every toy on the shelf is shown on Saturday morning network television or sold in syndication and shown during the week in the after school slot. Programmers argue that cartoons have no effect on children's aggression or behavior. They also argue that the cartoons portray some socially responsible message. However, they don't seem to have much to say about the programs being half hour commercials or the fact that they make no money from the show itself. The money to make the show comes directly from merchandising the product. The American children are one of the biggest targets of advertisers and we let them disguise it as entertainment. Peggy Charon and her group, Action for Children's Television, has become an influential lobbying group for children's legislation. Their voice is slowly beginning to be heard and hopefully programmers will listen.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, the Three Stooges, and the A-Team are all big favorites of our younger viewing audience. These movies/television programs are also some of the most violent shows on television. Children also like Rambo, G.I. Joe, and other characters because they have big guns and get rid of the bad guys. Television violence
is a proven contributor to children's aggression. The level of aggression and type of stimuli needed have yet to be specifically determined, but there is a definite link. These characters have become role models and sources of emulation for children. Nothing is going to take these types of programs off of the air, nor should they be, but parents need to be aware that the source of influence should begin in the home.

Sex and violence in film is another hot topic in the past year with the introduction of the NC-17 rating added by the movie industry. The stigma of the X rating brought about the addition to the rating system. The X rating was never a rating that was meant to be associated with pornography by the industry, just material that was too harsh for the restricted rating. One of last year's controversial films, Henry and June, was originally given the X rating. If this rating would have stuck, most public theaters would have elected not to show the film. Even with the new NC-17 rating, many establishments unfairly decided to pull the film to avoid controversy and pressure from interest and religious groups. With this stigma of ratings and fear of outside pressure from groups, artists, recording artists, and movie makers elected to use a practice called "prior censorship." This involves the knowledge of controversy and subsequent decision to tone the work down. To very conservative
thinkers, this type of practice is what they term responsible. To artists, this type of behavior limits the work and artistic value of the finished product. With public works such as the Robert Mapplethorpe art and 2 Live Crew recordings receiving pressure, prior censorship is alive and prominent in the creative world. Art has been here since the beginning of time. Is art not allowed to evolve with the level and speed of society?

Along with the speed that society is changing, technological advancement is growing at an even quicker rate. Inventions such as fiber optics, satellites, and compression technology push our society into a very information originated society. The way to make a profit today seems to be by moving quality information faster than your competitor. The United States is an obvious leader in the information age. Our major competitor and contributor, Japan, is well aware of the prominence of information and entertainment. High definition television (HDTV) is a system already being used in Japan. It is a television broadcast system that would make our normal television picture look almost like movie theater quality. With the United States still being on the older NTSC system, Japan knows (or thinks it knows) who its major market is for export of HDTV. However, with the emergence of digital technology and other inventions, the United States may elect to pass on the HDTV technology and wait to be a major
name in the production of the next wave. These types of economical battles are going to be waged as long as the Japanese continue to be able to produce entertainment and information products cheaper than the United States.

Along with the economical aspects of advanced technology as it relates to foreign competition, economic conditions also exist well within the United States. The future of cable television, for instance, is on the verge of dramatically changing. This change will involve the emergence of cable television systems run by existing telephone companies. With the invention and technological capability of fiber optics, these telephone companies can easily handle cable systems. This could change the way we pay for, view, and appreciate cable television. No one can say if this would make cable better or cheaper, only different than we are used to. Cable systems run through already existing fiber optic cable would have far greater capability than many of the systems already existing today. This could lead to many more channels and the possibility of local news organizations run by the cable operator.

Another economic reality is the widespread dissemination of information. One technology that is on the near horizon is the caller identification telephone system. When the phone rings, the person being
called instantly knows who it is that is calling. For businesses, the possibility of automatically seeing the businesses file exists. This technology and its possible uses are being discussed in federal courts and hopefully protective legislation will pass.

Along with the telephone identification system is the emergence of automated money. Termed para-money, these systems are like credit cards or automated checking cards. These systems seem to save billing time and paperwork effort. However, these types of billing procedures and acceptance procedures are at the mercy of computers. The controversial element to the para-money system is the ease of distribution of credit and personal information. Companies are in business to earn profit from buying and selling this personal information for credit and demographic information. Companies, in turn, send advertising or product information with the information they have gained from the para-money system.

It is good that the United States government is becoming involved in cases such as those mentioned above, but is the government our friend or our enemy? This is not a political statement, only a philosophical question. Orwell believed that Big Brother was watching every move we made. Through tight government control and high demands, Big Brother was going to turn our culture into a living prison with absolute control.
Another author, Huxley, believed that we are letting Big Brother into our living rooms and into our hearts. Through laughter, he was taking control. Our society is nothing short of burlesque and we were laughing into submission. Trivia and entertainment dominate our culture. Our once intelligent public conversation would be nothing more than baby talk. Everything subject that is presented to us is presented as entertainment. Life, death, war, and crime is given to us so that we will watch it. Therefore, it is given to us in the form of entertainment.

I don't think that either author is right. I do not know where we are going as a society. Only time will tell where our society is in the next century. The only thing that is obvious is the fact that our society is nowhere near where we were in the last century. Great advancements in science, medicine, space exploration, and culture have been made in a short amount of time.

I think people have to realize that along with all of the implications of the technology that I have mentioned above, come the possibilities for great success. Not only do we have the capability to destroy and harm, but we have the ability to create and cure. We only know where we have been. Our children and our children are the future and only they will know where they end up. The only thing that is constant in our technical society is
change. Change is always present. One must also look at the other opportunities that arise with each advancement. Not only may there be a chance for profit, but there might be a hidden chance to heal. Where are we going? No one can answer that yet. We only know that we are going to grow, discover, and end up somewhere our past generations never dreamed of.