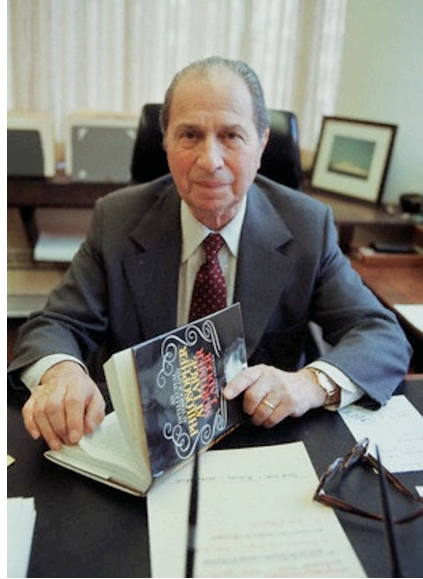


THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Apr '14

Philosophy is Everybody's Business

Nº 762



TELEVISION, THE BOOK, AND THE CLASSROOM

A Seminar Co-sponsored by the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress and the U.S. Office of Education and held at the Library of Congress on April 26-27, 1978

(Part 1 of 2)

I N T R O D U C T I O N

On April 26 and 27, 1978, the Library of Congress and the U.S. Office of Education cosponsored a national seminar on television, the book, and the classroom. This collaborative effort between two government agencies had a purpose that runs counter to much of contemporary public comment about television. Books such as *The Plug-In Drug* by Marie Winn, *Remote Control: Television and the Manipulation of American Life* by Frank Mankiewicz and Joel Swerdlow, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* by Jerry Mander, and *The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate* by Erik Barnouw have contributed to a general unhappiness about television and its effect on American society and culture.

The organizers of the seminar took a more positive view and assumed that television could, should, and eventually would be used effectively in the educational process. Seminar participants were asked to address these questions:

How can television be used imaginatively and effectively in the learning process?

What practical steps can be taken at the national level to integrate television, the book, and the printed word within the educational process?

The stated purpose of the seminar was “to stimulate fresh thinking and perhaps new partnerships” among the participants, with a special emphasis on the potential role of commercial television. Both public television and the commercial networks were represented. Other participants included educators, publishers, government officials, scholars, librarians, and parent groups.

Two pioneers in their respective fields, Mortimer J. Adler and Frank Stanton, were asked to deliver brief keynote addresses on April 26. Their effectiveness can be gauged by the many references to their talks during the meetings on April 27. On that day seminar participants also heard the views of six individuals who represented different segments of American society. These speakers were asked to look ahead and describe what needed to be done rather than to criticize what had or had not been done. They were asked to look beyond the contemporary criticism of television and toward the day when the special qualities of television and of the written word would be combined—especially for the benefit of young people.

Of course it is far too early to judge whether a seminar based on such sanguine hopes has achieved any lasting results. The Office of Education and the Library of Congress are continuing their catalytic roles. The Office of Education’s request for proposals to integrate television and books more effectively into the educational process, announced during the seminar (see pages 90-91), has produced many interesting and original plans. The Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, which cosponsored the seminar as part of its concern about the future of the printed word in relation to new technologies and other media, is cosponsoring two other conferences during the coming year that will explore different aspects of television’s impact on books and reading. In October 1978 it will join with the Book Industry Study Group, Inc. for a seminar on American reading and book-buying habits, and in May

1979 it will cosponsor, with the National Institute of Education, a conference on "The Textbook in American Education."

The new partnership reflected here grew out of a mutual concern of two thoughtful, articulate, and, in civil service terms, relatively inexperienced government officials: Ernest L. Boyer, who became U.S. Commissioner of Education on April 1, 1977, and Daniel J. Boorstin, who has been Librarian of Congress since November 12, 1975. The editor of this volume gratefully acknowledges their support, along with the help provided by Peggy Rhoades, Assistant Commissioner for Public Affairs, Office of Education, and Martin Kaplan, Executive Assistant to the Commissioner of Education. In addition, special thanks go to John Platt, Lecturer in the Departments of Anthropology and Environmental Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and Jean Johnson, Resource Director for Action for Children's Television, whose contributions appear as Appendixes 2 and 3, respectively.

John Y. Cole
Executive Director
The Center for the Book

OPENING REMARKS

Daniel J. Boorstin,
The Librarian Of Congress

Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the first national conference sponsored by the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. You have all been invited here tonight because of your special interest in this question, and I will speak for only a moment or two about the focus of our interest this evening.

We are here to help us discover or rediscover America, which we can do only by understanding the place of technology in our lives. One of the most interesting and most important questions concerning the place of technology in our civilization is the effect of one technology on another.

The relationship among innovations and inventions is one of the least understood and one of the most momentous questions in the history of humankind. It is also an area for the greatest flights of fancy, the greatest alarmists and Armageddon-mongers and the most extravagant utopians and optimists.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the relationship between television and the book. We have here, in this question of the relationship between the technology of television and the book, a melodramatic example of what I would call the displacive fallacy, the fallacy that an invention is a conqueror and makes the predecessor surrender. This is not so. As we discover in our own experience, each technology transforms the earlier one. For example, the telephone transformed the role of the telegraph, and radio and the telephone transformed the roles of all earlier technologies.

There were some prophets who said that the radio would obsolete the telephone because no one would want to communicate with a wire if he could avoid it and that the phonograph would obsolete orchestras and all forms of handmade music. But we know that the automobile has not obsoleted the bicycle. Television and the radio have not obsoleted the press. The automobile, despite some of the fears expressed, has not obsoleted the human body, although it has been observed that, if God had intended man to walk, he would have given him wheels.

This is one of the questions that we are concerned with here tonight and tomorrow. We are here to explode and to explore the displacive fallacy, to explore the complementarity of technologies. We are inclined to forget that there are many historical features which television and the book have in common.

We forget that the book was a triumph of technology and that the book was considered to be a mechanical manuscript just as television is sometimes considered to be an audiovisual book. We forget also that both these new technologies were and are highly suspect by academics and by the aristocracy of learning. There were many people who did not want to have a machine-made book and preferred the manuscript, just as there are some people today who will not have a television set in their homes "until it is perfected."

Both these technologies, the book and television, have gargantuanly multiplied our experience. Tonight and tomorrow we will see their community. We will explore their complementarity with the aid of the people who have been concerned with both of them.

I have mentioned that this is the first national seminar sponsored by the Library's new Center for the Book. We are especially pleased that it is being cosponsored with the Office of Education and that it concerns such a vital topic as that which we will be focusing on this evening.

The Center for the Book was established by act of Congress last year. Its general purpose is to enhance the appreciation of the book and its fundamental relationship to development of our civilization. It will, we hope, serve as a catalyst in the book world and the educational world and the world of television.

We will work with and through organizations. We will reach out to encourage the use of books, the study of books, the reading of books, to examine the question of what we mean by reading, to explore the cultural and technological issues related to the future of books and of reading.

It is the question of the future of books and of reading in the age of television and the future of television in the age of the book that brings us here tonight. The purpose of our seminar is to bring together several segments of our society—those who are interested in commercial and in public television, educators, the communications industry, publishers, book people, and just citizens—to explore new opportunities and to help create new opportunities. Before we are finished with our session tomorrow, I hope we will have begun to do something more to integrate television and the printed word within the educational process.

It gives me pleasure now, a special pleasure, to introduce to you a cosponsor of our sessions this evening and tomorrow, United States Commissioner of Education Ernest Boyer, who will share with me the duties of moderator of our sessions tomorrow and who will help me chair the sessions this evening.

OPENING REMARKS

Ernest L. Boyer,
U.S. Commissioner of Education

In the summer of 1937, the great essayist and novelist E. B. White sat transfixed in a darkened room and watched a big electronic box that began projecting eerie, shimmering images into the world. It was his first introduction to something called TV. E. B. White—who not only wrote *Charlotte's Web* but also co-authored that great manual of clear communication *The Elements of Style*—said in 1938: I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world, and that in this new opportunity to see beyond the range of our vision we shall discover either a new and unbearable disturbance of the general peace, or a saving radiance in the sky. We shall stand or fall by television—of that I am quite sure.

Forty years have passed and television has to a remarkable degree fulfilled both of E. B. White's predictions. It has—at once—become both “an unbearable disturbance” and “a soaring radiance in the sky.” Once we had a print-dominated culture. Ideas were built and assimilated slowly, and often with great effort. Now we inhabit a culture of images. Messages are sent and received instantaneously, and a premium is placed on the accessible. And what are we to make of all of this? How do we come to terms—educationally—with a world where messages have become more persistent and more varied?

When I was young, less than fifty years ago, there was no television in our home. I was twelve years old before we purchased our first radio. We did receive a daily newspaper and the National Geographic, which I eagerly devoured as soon as it arrived. Our Model A took us on short excursions from our Ohio home, rarely more than one hundred miles or so. As I look back on those early years, school was the central learning place. The teacher—for better or for worse—was the key source of knowledge, and the classroom was the intellectual window to the world. (It was only later that I learned just how clouded that window could sometimes be.)

For students coming to our schools today, that world I knew is ancient history. Today the first thing to captivate the infant in the cradle is probably that iridescent, inexhaustible screen. At least one study has shown that, by the age of three, children are purposeful viewers who can name their favorite programs. Young children—two to five years old—now watch television over four hours every day, nearly thirty hours a week. That's more than fifteen hundred hours every year. And by the time a youngster enters first grade he or she has had six thousand hours of television viewing. This same TV saturation continues after school begins. By the time of high school graduation, the average child will have spent thirty per cent more time watching television than in school. Today, the traditional teacher is not the only source of knowledge. The school has become almost incidental to some students. The classroom has less impact and receives less respect. To put it bluntly, a new electronic “classroom” has emerged.

Several years ago, our young son, who had just entered kindergarten, said the alphabet one night when he went to bed—rather than his prayers. At the end, I complimented him for having recited the alphabet without a hitch—even though he had been in kindergarten just one week. He replied by saying: Actually, I learned the alphabet on Sesame Street—but my kindergarten teacher thinks she

taught it to me. I was delighted. My son had not only learned the alphabet; he had learned the system, too!

My National Geographic—which gave me glimpses of the outside world—has today been smothered by an avalanche of publications—some good, some bad—which open up new worlds to students. Today, paperbacks, magazines, television, and travel compete on equal footing with the classroom and the book. Today—for better or for worse—Archie Bunker is better known than Silas Marner, Fellini is more influential than Faulkner, and the six o'clock news is more compelling than the history text.

It seems quite clear to me that the separate sources of information which educate our children must somehow be brought together. Surely this so-called standoff between the classroom and TV reflects our narrowness rather than our vision. Surely, the various sources of information need not be in competition with each other. Surely, our job as communicators as well as educators is to recognize the world has changed, to rejoice in the marvel of expanding knowledge, and to find ways to relate the classroom more closely to the networks of information beyond the classroom.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.