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Coercion and Countermeasures

The Information Arms Race

In any Information War, we human beings lose by definition. For the moment communication becomes information, it is no longer alive. As living beings, when we accept a role in the InfoWar, we also lose the home field advantage–the defensive capability offered any indigenous population.

When we are fooled into believing the battle over information is, in fact, a battle over our reality, we have already lost the war.

Communication only occurs between equals

Television broadcasting is not communication. Neither are radio news, magazines, or even this little essay. These are all one-way distribution of content. However vital, realistic, or engaging a movie or book, it is not interactive or participatory in any real sense. Unless we can have just as much of an effect on the director, writer, producer, or journalist as he has on us, we are not involved in a communication. We are merely the recipients of programming. Even the so-called "interactive" media, like computer games and most web sites, simply allow for the user to experience a simulation of free choice. The creator of the simulation is no longer present. If a player creates a sequence of moves that have never been played before, or reader moves through an interactive story along a path that has never been followed before, this still does not count as communication. It is merely a unique and personalized experience of essentially dead data. Multimedia CD Roms are not interactive, because the user is not interacting with anyone.

This is not so terrible in itself. Stories, movies, and video games are all great storage media. The enduring values of many indigenous cultures are passed down from generation to generation through myths and stories. The artist, philosopher, and scientist alike have published their findings in one form or another for the consumption of others. For centuries, we have willingly submitted to the performances and writings of great thinkers, and have been enriched as result. They are what allow for a cumulative human experience over time, greater than any single life span.

But we should not confuse such experiences with communication. However lifelike it may feel, unless we are in a position to influence the presenter as much as he can influence us, we are not involved in a living exchange. In other words, to be aroused by pornographic tape is not to make love.

For like lovemaking, communication is a living exchange between equal partners. No matter how much our world's nihilists might like to deny it, there is an energy inherent in such exchanges: a living space of interaction. And this is the zone where change–and all its inherent dangers–can occur.

Just as lovemaking presents the possibility of new genetic combinations, communication initiates the process of cultural mutation. When equals are communicating, nothing is fixed. Honest participation means everything is up for grabs.

Information wants to be preserved

The so-called "Communications Departments" of most major universities would have us believe otherwise. The study of Mass Media has little to do with mass participation in the design of cultural values. Students do not learn how to foster the living interaction between a society's members. There are no courses in promoting media literacy, or creating USENET groups to solve problems collectively.

Today, Communication is the science of influence. Mass media is the study of how governments and corporations can influence their populations and customers–the so-called "masses." The tool they employ is rhetoric, and the medium they exploit is information. But wherever real communication is occurring, there is life. Like the new buds on a tree, the places where communication takes place are the most effective leverage points in a culture from which to monitor and direct new growth. Those hoping to direct or, as is most often the case, stunt the development of cultural change, focus on these points. By imitating the qualities we associate with living communication, and then broadcasting fixed information in its place, the mass media manipulator peddles the worldview of his sponsors.

Anthropology and Religion

Most anthropology is carried out in service of a nation or corporation. The anthropologist is the research half of the "R & D" for cultural manipulation. Historically, the anthropologist is sent to a new territory ripe for commercial, religious, or political colonization. He looks for the gaps, or inconsistencies in the culture's mythology, so that these "soft spots" may be hardened with strong, imported data.

Viewed in an only slightly cynical light, the early Christian missions of the 15th and 16th century merely served as the first outposts for the European troops that would eventually invade South America. These missions were not generally sponsored by the church, but by the monarchy. As a result, the visiting missionary served the dual role of converter and intelligence gatherer. Ultimately, both functions simply prepared the target population for its inevitable co-option by force.

For example, a missionary in the Caribbean might learn about the local pantheistic belief system called Santeria, filled with rituals and a set of gods that have nothing to do with Christianity. He would then look to the particular beliefs associated with each god or performed ritual, and attempt to replace them with Christian ones. The native god for animals, the people are taught, is really just St. Francis. The drinking of chicken's blood is really just a version of the communion, and so on.

This is the two-millennium-old process by which Christianity absorbed the rituals and beliefs of the peoples it converted. The Christmas tree began as a solstice ritual practised by Germans to light the darkest night of the year. Smart missionaries of the time realized that this was the superstitious ritual developed to address the people's fear of the darkness of winter. The missionaries did a fairly advanced job of cultural analysis for the time, keying in on the local people's doubt in the rejuvenation of the coming spring season. The tannenbaum exposed their deepest fear–and most fertile ground for conversion.

By identifying the tree with the rood and the birth of Christ, the missionaries augmented the pagan ritual, and redirected the sense of hope that the ritual fostered away from pagan forces and towards their own messiah. They filled a living ritual with dead information.

Similarly, churches and cathedrals were most often placed on local pagan "power spots" and ley lines–not because the priests believed that these locations offered any magical leverage, but because the people believed they did. What better way to get people into your church than to build it on the same spot where they already did their praying? Ironically, the "black masses" that were conducted illicitly by pagans on church altars were not meant as a statement against Christianity at all. The unconverted people were merely attempting to carry out their pre-Christian ceremonies in the locations where they believed they would work.

In the years preceding World War II, anthropologists studied the cultures of the South Sea Islanders so they could more easily be turned to the "allies" cause against the Japanese once these territories became a war zone. Whether or not these well-meaning cultural researchers knew it, the governments funding them had more than pure science in mind when they chose which expeditions to fund.

After World War II, Air Force Brigadier General Edward G. Lansdale emerged as the pre-eminent "counterinsurgency" strategist for the CIA. Over a period of three decades, he developed a wide range of intelligence and propaganda theories that were employed and refined in the field. His principle strategy was first to engage in qualitative anthropological research to discover a target audience's underlying belief systems, and then exploit these beliefs mercilessly in the pursuit of military gains.

For example, in the 1950's as part of his counterinsurgency campaign against the Huk rebels of the Philippines, Lansdale began by conducting research into local superstitions. He learned that the Huk battleground was believed to be inhabited by an "asuang," or vampire figure. To capitalize on this mythology, his "psywar" units would follow Huk patrols and then quietly ambush the last man on the trail. They would kill the soldier by means of two punctures on the neck, drain him of his blood, and then leave him to be found the next morning. On encountering the victim, the Huks in the area would retreat for fear of further vampire attacks.

Such information campaigns depend on concretizing living myth with fixed data. They invariably mine the most fertile cultural soil for inherent consistencies, and then replace them with symbols that can be more easily controlled.

This is the same process by which today's target marketers research and co-opt new cultural strains. Even the language of marketing, in which new populations are called "targets" reveals the war-like precision and hostility with which these marketers attack their new prospects. When a public relations person reduces a group of human beings to a target market, he has effectively removed himself from the equation. Through feedback and user surveys we are participants in communication, but the victims of his scrutiny and eventual attack. He is the lone gunman at the top of the tower, intentionally isolated so as to get a better shot. When the gun goes off, we panic down in the plaza. Someone is out to get us.

The reticence of the Generation formerly known as "X" to belong to anything at all can be traced directly to the corrosive effects of target marketing on our society. In fact, the "slacker" ethic was little more than reaction to the segmentation of a culture based on demographic leanings. No sooner do young people find a new style of music, clothing, or attitude, than marketers seize on it as a trend to be exploited. The kids rush from style to style, but only stay until they sense the target marketer's sights closing in on them. Then they rush to find something different, and maintain their anomalous behavior until it is recognized and tagged.

When "GenX" adopted the anti-chic aesthetic of thrift-store grunge, for example, it was in an effort to find a style that could not be so easily identified and exploited. Grunge was so consciously lowbrow and depressed that it seemed, at first, impervious to the hype and glamour applied so swiftly to trends of the past. But sure enough, grunge anthems found their way onto the soundtracks of television commercials, and Dodge Neon's were hawked by kids in flannel shirts saying "whatever." The seminal grunge group Nirvana's lead singer Kurt Cobain's superstardom and eventual shotgun suicide bore witness to the futility of giving chase to the target marketers. Symbolically–at least for his fans–Cobain set his rifle's sights on himself rather than be subjected to the crosshairs of someone else's. Then the kids moved on to other genres.

Advertising as InfoWar

The development of advertising throughout this century can best be understood as the process by which marketers find ways to attack our sense of well-being. While advertising may have begun as a way to publicize a new brand or invention, the surfeit of "stuff" with little or no qualitative difference from its competition forced advertisers to find ways of distinguishing their products from their competitors'.

Advertising quickly became about creating needs rather than fulfilling them. Commercials took the form of coercive teaching stories. We are presented with a character with whom we identify. The character is put into jeopardy, and we experience vicarious tension along with him. Only the storyteller holds the key to our release.

Imagine a man in his office. The boss tells him his report is late. His wife calls to tell him their son is in trouble. His co-worker is scheming to get him fired. What is he to do? He opens his desk drawer: inside is a bottle of Brand X Aspirin. He takes the pills and we watch as a psychedelic array of color fills his body. Whether or not we really believe that the aspirin could solve his problems–or cure his headache–we must accept the sponsor's solution if we want to be relieved from tension.

This simple form of programming has been used since Aristotle's day. Create a character, put him in danger, and then choose the method by which he will be saved. The remedy can be Athena or a new brand of sport shoe. The audience must submit.

Because television is not a communicator's medium but the programmer's (why do you think they call the stuff on TV "programming" anyway?) it depends on a passive, captive audience. There is no room for interaction, or the programmer's advantage will be lost.

This is why the remote control has wreaked such havoc on traditional coercive advertising. Although it doesn't allow for feedback, it does allow for escape. A regular television viewer, feeling the rising and uncomfortable tension of a coercive story, would have to walk all the way up to his television set to change the channel. His brain makes the calculation of how many calories of effort this would cost, and instructs the man to sit and bear the momentary anxiety.

A person armed with a remote control, on the other hand, can escape the dilemma with almost no effort at all. One simple click and he's free. The less reverence he feels for the television image, the less hesitation he'll have to click away. Video games help in this regard. The television tube's pixels, which used to be the exclusive province of the programmer, can now

be manipulated by the user. Simply moving Super Mario across the screen changes our relationship to the television image forever. The tube is now a playground. It can be changed.

The viewer armed with a remote control becomes an armchair post-modernist, deconstructing images as he sees fit. The shorter his attention span, the less compelled he feels to sit through coercive or tension-inducing media. In fact, Attention Deficit Disorder–an ailment for which millions of parents are now giving their children medication–may just be a reaction to relentless programming. If everywhere you look someone is attempting to program you, you will quickly learn not to look anywhere for too long.

The most skilled viewers have become amateur media semioticians. They maintain an ironic distance from the media they watch so as not to fall under the programmer's influence. Young people watch shows like "Melrose Place" in groups, constantly talking back to the screen. They protect one another from absorption by the image.

Watching television skillfully means watching for the coercive techniques. Watching television with ironic distance means not to watch television at all, but rather to watch "the television." The new entertainment is a form of media study: what are they going to try next? The viewer remains alive and thinking by refusing to surrender to any of the stories he sees.

Unfortunately, it didn't take advertisers long to develop a new set of coercive techniques for their post-modern audience. The state of ironic detachment that young people employ to remain immune to the programming spell is now their greatest liability.

New advertising intentionally appeals to this post-modern sensibility. "Wink" advertising acknowledges its viewers' intelligence. These commercials readily admit they are manipulative, as if this nod to their own coercive intentions somehow immunizes the audience from their effects. The object of the game, for the audience, is to be "in" on the joke.

Sprite commercials satirize the values espoused by "cool" brands like Coke and Pepsi, then go on to insist that "image is nothing, thirst is everything." A brand of shoes called "Simple" ran a magazine ad with the copy: "advertisement: blah blah blah…name of company."

By letting the audience in on the inanity of the marketing process, such companies hope to be rewarded by the thankful viewer. Energizer batteries launched a television campaign where a "fake" commercial for another product would be interrupted by their famous pink Energizer bunny marching across the screen. The audience was rescued from the bad commercial by the battery company's tiny mascot. The message: The Energizer Bunny can keep on going, even in a world of relentless hype.

Of course the marketers haven't really surrendered at all. What's really going on here is a new style of marketing through exclusivity. Advertisers know that their media-wise viewership prides itself on being able to deconstruct and understand the coercive tactics of television commercials. By winking at the audience, the advertiser is acknowledging that there's someone special out there–someone smart enough not to be fooled by the traditional tricks of the influence professional. "If you're smart enough to see our wink and get the joke, then you're smart enough to know to buy our product."

Where this sort of advertising gets most dangerous is when there's really no joke at all. Diesel Jeans recently launched a billboard campaign with images designed to provoke a "wink" response, even though no amount of semiotic analysis would allow its audience to "get" the

joke. In one print ad, they showed a stylish couple, dressed in Diesel clothing, in a fake billboard advertisement for a brand of ice cream. The advertisement-within-the-advertisement was placed in a busy district of North Korea.

What does this advertisement mean, and why was it placed amongst bicycling North Koreans? Who knows? The meta-advertisement attacks the hip viewer. He must pretend that he understands what's going on if he wants to maintain his sense of ironic detachment. The moment he lies to himself in order to turn to the page, he has actually admitted defeat. He has been beaten at his own game by the advertiser, who has re-established himself as the more powerful force in the information war.

The Co-Option of Cyberspace

The Internet posed an even great threat to culture's programmers than channel zappers. For the first time, here was a mass media that no longer favored broadcasters.

A true communications medium from the start, the Internet was as much about sending as receiving. The early Internet was a text-only technology. Users would send email, join in live chats, or participate in asynchronous discussions on bulletin boards and USENET groups. For those of us lucky enough to have engaged in this style of contact, we sensed liberation.

The early Internet spurred utopian visions because it was the first time that real people had the opportunity to disseminate their ideas globally. The Internet was less about the information itself than contact. Networked together through wires and computers, the Internet community–and it really was a community–was a living cultural experiment.

To some, it was as if the human race were hardwiring its members together into a single, global brain. People talked about the Internet as if it were the realization of the Gaia Hypothesis–the notion that all living things are part of the same, big organism. Many believed that the fledgling communications infrastructure would allow for the beginning of global communication and cooperation on a scale unimagined before.

Even if these dreams were a bit more fantastic than the reality of an Internet society, they indicated the underlying experience essential to this interconnectivity. The interactive communications infrastructure was merely the housing for a collective project in mutual understanding. It was not about information at all, but relationships. We were not interacting with data, but with one another.

This is why the Internet seemed so "sexy." It was not that pornography was available online. It felt and looked sexy because people and their ideas could co-mingle and mutate. A scientist sharing his new research would be challenged and provoked. A philosopher posing a new idea would be forced to defend it. Nothing was safe, and nothing was sacred–except, perhaps, the idea that everyone shared an equal opportunity to give voice to his or her opinions.

As more people turned off their TV's and migrated online, the question for influence professionals became clear: how do we turn this communications nightmare into a traditional, dead, and controllable mass medium?

Their great trick was to replace communication with information. Futurist Alvin Toffler announced that we were on the cusp of the Information Age, forever confusing a revolution in communication with an expansion of the propaganda machine. No, the Internet was not a

medium for interpersonal exchange, but data retrieval. And it was tricky and dangerous to use. *Wired* magazine's hip graphics and buzzword-laden text convinced newcomers to the world of "hi-technology" that the Internet was a complex and imposing realm. Without proper instruction (from the likes of *Wired* editors), we would surely get lost out there.

Now that the Internet was seen as a dangerous zone of information, best traveled with the advice of experts, it wasn't long before the World Wide Web became the preferred navigational tool. Unlike bulletin boards or chat rooms, the Web is–for the most part–a read-only medium. It is flat and opaque. You can't see through it to the activities of others. We don't socialize with anyone when we visit a web site; we read text and look at pictures. This is not interactivity. It is an "interactive-style" activity. There's nothing participatory about it.

Instead of forging a whole new world, the World Wide Web gives us a new window on the same old world. The web is a repository for information. It is dead. While you and I are as free to publish our works on the web as Coke is to publish its advertising or The Gap is to sell its jeans, we have given up something much more precious once we surrender the immediacy of a living communications exchange. Only by killing its communicative function could the Web's developers turn the Internet into a shopping mall.

The current direction of Internet technology promises a further calcification of its interactive abilities. Amped up processing speed and modem baud rates do nothing for communication. They do, however, allow for the development of an increasingly TV-like Internet.

The ultimate objective of today's communication industry is to provide us with broadcast-quality television images on our computers. The only space left for interactivity will be our freedom to watch a particular movie "on demand" or, better, to use the computer mouse to click on an object or article of clothing we might like to buy.

Promoting the Fixed Reality

I object to the Information War. I will not participate. Once we have reduced the living exchanges that these new media promise to one side or other in an information war, we have given up the only advantage we really have: to evolve unpredictably.

The enemy of the coercer is change. Coercion and influence are simply the pushing of a fixed point of view. In this sense, the coercer is promoting death. The messy fertility of a living system is the information coercer's greatest obstacle. But it is also our greatest strength as a developing culture.

Finally, the conflict between "them and us" is fictional. The culture war is just a battle between those who see the need for change, and those would hope to prevent it. Those in power, obviously, seek to preserve the status quo. The only time they feel the need to make an adjustment is when they are hoping to absorb a unique new population, or when the populations already under their control have grown immune to the current styles of influence.

And, to be sure, the preservation of certain status quo values is crucial to the maintenance of organized society. Just as there are certain genes in the body with no function other than to resist mutation, there are institutions in our society that work very hard to resist change.

Since the chief agents of change are interaction and communication, these will be the activities that the enemies of evolution will want to keep in check. But when an

overwhelming proportion of our world community seeks a referendum on the human project, we must not allow our efforts to be derailed by those who would prevent such a movement by any means necessary.

More importantly, we cannot let ourselves be fooled into thinking that simply having the right to select our data with the click of a computer mouse instead of a TV remote means we have won the InfoWar.