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While You Weren't Watching
Part One

. . . styles of music are never disturbed without affecting the most important political institutions. Socrates, quoted by Plato in *The Republic*, Book Four.

Let me make the songs of a nation and I care not who makes its laws. Andrew Fletcher in 1703.

For many years now, the trend toward consolidation of the major communications media into fewer and fewer huge corporations has been on a collision course with one of the most sacred tenets of the American democracy, that of freedom of expression and particularly of the press, embodied in the Bill of Rights.

In 1990, one of the most sinister of all the mergers occurred: that of *Time* and Warner Bros. It was obvious from that moment on that *Time* had been completely compromised. It would never, for example, be expected to publish an objective story about Warner Bros. Nor could anyone expect to have criticism of the movie-record-TV industries (they are gradually becoming one) presented in a book published by Warner Books. Or for that matter a book from Little Brown and Company, or in articles for *Life, People, Entertainment Weekly*, or any of approximately 25 other magazines Time Warner owns, along with Atlantic, Elektra, Warner Bros., and other record labels, Chappell and other music-publishing companies, and HBO.

Time covered the first *Batman* movie in its June 22, 1992, issue as if it were a masterpiece of symbolic art. **Battier and Better,** read the headline, and a subhead proclaimed: **Batman Returns is a funny, gorgeous improvement on the original and a lesson on how pop entertainment can soar into the realm of poetry.** Later in the issue, a three-page eulogy of Ice-T made him sound like a major social philosopher and referred to his rap records, too, as poetry. A full-page full-color photo of Ice-T (born Tracy Marrow) accompanied the article, occasioned by the furor over his record *Cop Killer. Time* writer Sally P. Connelly said with a contempt for society that suggested servile obedience to her masters, "What guardians of respectability find vile is considered compelling and clever by the hundreds of thousands of fans who have made Ice-T the world's most consistently successful hard-core rapper." This was hardly freedom of the press.

Time since then has gone on unabashedly praising the products of its collateral divisions. In the summer of 1996, both *Time* and *Entertainment Weekly* magazines ran cover stories on the movie *Twister*, which Warner Bros. produced.

In 1994, Viacom acquired Paramount Communications Inc. for $17.4 billion. In April 1995, Seagram announced acquisition of MCA for $5.7 billion. In July 1995, Disney acquired Capital Cities/ABC for $19 billion. Then in September 1995, Time Warner agreed to buy Turner Broadcasting for $7.5 billion in stock.

For months, the press reported, the merger was in "limbo," awaiting approval by the Federal Trade Commission. But given the way the broadcasting industry has been having its own way with government, there seemed little real doubt about the outcome. Indeed, in recent years federal regulatory agencies appear to have been infiltrated by the industries they were supposed to regulate, above all the broadcasting industry, whose relationship with the Federal Communications Commission seemed to have become that of a revolving door, with personnel passing back and forth between them. It has long been a practice of lobbyists to promise to regulators excellent jobs when they leave office in return for favors now on issues the lobbyists represent.

Robert Pitofsky, chairman of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and his colleagues waited nine months, no doubt to avoid the appearance of posting with *too* much dexterity to their decision, before announcing it, as if it were not a foregone conclusion. The newspapers reported that during this gestation period, which was probably just about enough for Turner and Time Warner to prepare for the change, the FTC weighed a vast body of anti-trust considerations. In reality, the anti-trust laws seem long since to have fallen into desuetude, and on July 18, the FTC announced — surprise! — the Time Warner and Turner Broadcasting merger could proceed.

The decision (shareholder approval is necessary, but no one expects it to be withheld; shareholders have little say in these things) will extend Time Warner's reach to Turner's two CNN channels, to the Cartoon Network, and to TBS and TNT.

Fascinatingly, not one of the news stories covering the FTC announcement even raised the subject of Time Warner's moral history, which has been such that the *New York Daily News* last year referred to the company as Slime Warner. Given its character of recent years, can that of the new colossus be in any doubt? And since CNN is now heard all around the planet, this takes us a long way toward establishing the mechanisms to brainwash not only the United States but the world.

Pathetically, the three leading organizations for freelance photographers, graphic artists, and writers had joined the protests against the Time Warner-Turner merger only days before the FTC proved the impuissance of such efforts. It was a joint presentation of the National Writers Union, the Graphic Artists Guild, and the American Society of Media Photographers. In a letter to the head of the FTC, they said:

"A horizontally and vertically integrated Time Warner-Turner entity would dominate the marketplace, impose unfair terms on creators, and seize every portion of the individuals' copyrights (in other words, their claim to future control and economic exploitation of their work). In our view, this is contrary to the interest of anti-trust law. It also violates the spirit, if not the letter, of the copyright law and its constitutional underpinnings." The letter said that if the FTC did permit the merger, there would be restrictions on the entity's imposition of "work for hire" contracts and other

tactics that restrict the power of independent creators of copyrightable material.

They were of course naive to think the protest would achieve anything. Politicians do not need writers and photographers and graphic artists. When it comes to getting re-elected, what they need is *Time, Life, People* and CNN.

In 1990, Steve Allen wrote to the late Steven Ross, the CEO of Time Warner, then newly formed, lamenting the violence and obscenity on TV. He was particularly perturbed by the socalled comedian Andrew Dice Clay.

Recently I stumbled on a performance by Clay on television. I listened for ten minutes, disgusted at his material — and I have a pretty strong stomach. And this man can fill Madison Square Garden. Steve Allen, who in the days when he ran the *Tonight* show with literate wit was voted in a high-school survey the most popular comedian in America, couldn't. Thus far have we come.

Channel surfing in the small hours recently, I was astonished at the quantity of nudity and specific sexual action that has crept into the programming while I wasn't watching. (By the way, why is the girl always on top in these scenes, doing the work? Is this a further example of the degradation of women, reduced in imagery to sexual servants?) And the quantity of sexual and scatological epithet to be heard is amazing, not to mention tedious.

A recent study conducted by media students at four universities found violence in most of 2,500 hours of programming they analyzed. They found that perpetrators of the violence went unpunished in 73 percent of all violent scenes, and concluded that this teaches a lesson "that violence is successful." What is more, 47 percent of the violent actions showed no harm to the victim, and 58 percent showed no pain. (This explains why police have on occasion noted that after gang incidents, a wounded boy is surprised to find that a bullet hurts.) The study indicated that 84 percent of the programs portraying violence showed no long-range negative consequences, physical, financial, or emotional.

On June 16, 1990, Dr. Benjamin Hooks, executive director of the NAACP, issued a statement:

"In the current controversy surrounding 2 Live Crew and its album, *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, we find ourselves in the position of defending their right . . . to freedom of expression, while at the same time condemning the vicious, sadistic, and demeaning nature of some of their material." And there, in one paragraph, is the dilemma. He continued:

"We are particularly offended by their efforts to wrap the mantle of the black cultural experience around their performances, by saying this is the way it is in the black community, and they are authentic purveyors of our heritage.

"Our cultural experience does not include debasing our women, the glorification of violence, the promotion of deviant sexual behavior, and the tearing into shreds of our cherished mores and standards of behavior.

"We take strong exception to the negative images projected by the 2 Live Crew and the harmful effects they have on our young people . . . "

A statement issued by the Council on Scientific Affairs of the American Medical Association, quoted here in 1992, said, "Over the past decade, the messages portrayed by certain types of rock music have deteriorated so that today they may present a real threat to the physical health and emotional well-being of especially vulnerable children and adolescents."

The report continued, "In some types of rock music, most frequently heavy metal, punk rock and rap, lyrics promoting drug and alcohol use, suicide, violence, satanic worship and demonology, sexual exploitation, bigotry, and racism are combined with rhythms and intensities that appeal to youth."

The statement said parents should monitor the concerts the children attend, look at the music videos they watch, and concern themselves with the albums they buy. How this is accomplished in a household where both parents work, sometimes each of them at two jobs, is an issue not addressed. It never is in any of the statements dumping the problem on parents.

"Physicians," the report said, "should know about potentially destructive themes in some form of rock music, and should work to increase awareness of patients and communities about these themes."

Then the AMA report makes the full leap into utter naivete: "Members of the entertainment industry, including sponsors of concerts, agents, and entertainers, should exercise greater responsibility in presenting music to young people."

No kidding.

In *One Eyed Jacks* there is a chilling sequence in which the Marlon Brando character confronts Ben Johnson for insulting the girl he loves. He stands up, kicks a chair aside when it snags his heel, and says in a voice so colored with rage that only a great, great actor could achieve it, "Get up, you scum-sucking pig. You say one more word about her and I'm gonna tear your arms out." Two good writers wrote that script, Calder Willingham and Guy Trosper, and that is a powerful bit of dialogue. Nowadays, you'd get something like, "Get up, motherfucker. I'm gonna blow your fuckin' head off."

But nothing prepared me for *Leaving Las Vegas*, the video of which I rented, having heard so much about it being a great film. There is a real disagreement about this movie; there are those who think it is excellent. I found it disgusting. It is about an alcoholic drinking himself to death in the company of a prostitute. The girl in the story tells the man that she fulfills men's fantasies. At one point, when he shares the rent with her, she tells him that this entitles him to "a complimentary blow job." At another point she tells him, "You can come on my face, but not on my hair. I just washed it." Later, as I learned — I couldn't watch the rest of the film, finding it alternately drab and repellent — there is a scene

where the girl is rectally raped by three football players, after which she sits on the floor of a shower, bleeding from the anus and weeping.

And whether you think it is a good movie or not, remember that it will soon by turning up on HBO and Showtime, where any kid can get access to it.

In the March 27, 1995 issue of *U.S. News and World Report*, John Leo in his column *On Society* wrote that at a New York dinner, someone initiated a party game, asking which corporation was doing the most "to lower standards and further degrade what's left of American culture." After a vote for Viacom and Paramount and strong support for Rupert Murdoch's Fox Network, because of its brainless sitcoms, a clear winner emerged: Time Warner.

"Here's how to reach this rather obvious conclusion on your own," Leo wrote. "Whenever a new low is reached in the culture, check for the corporate name behind it. With amazing frequency it will be Time Warner.

"The schlocky *Jenny Jones Show*, the first show on which a guest who was humiliated later was charged with murdering his humiliator, is a Time Warner product. The most degrading commercial picture book about human sexuality may be Madonna's $49.95 porn book, which, I am told, pictorially indicates that she is game to have sex with everything but babies and folding chairs. It was published by Time Warner and (surprise!) chosen as an alternate selection by Time Warner's once respectable Book of the Month Club.

"In the movies, the all-time low for cynicism and historical lies (Oliver Stone's *JFK*) and for graphic, wholesale serial killing presented as fun (Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*) were both produced by Warner. In the category of movie nihilism for children, my vote goes to Warner's *Batman Returns*, a dark and sadomasochistic film pushed hard to kids through a tie-in with McDonald's.

"But it's in the music field that Time Warner does most of its damage. C. DeLores Tucker, chair of the National Political Congress of Black Women, says Time Warner is 'one of the greatest perpetrators of this cultural garbage.' She may be understating the case, From the rise of 2 Live Crew and Metallica, through the national uproar over Ice-T's cop-killing lyrics, down to Snoop Doggy Dogg, Nine Inch Nails and Tupac Shakur, the sprawling Time Warner musical empire has been associated one way or another with most of the high-profile, high-profit acts, black and white, that are pumping nihilism into the culture.

"Like a junkie quivering toward a fix, Time Warner simply can't resist cashing in on the amoral singers who work tirelessly to tear the culture apart, glorifying brutality, violence, and the most hateful attitudes toward women the public culture has ever seen, ranging from rape to torture and murder.

"After the Ice-T fiasco, Time Warner pulled in its horns a bit and turned down a few recordings, including one about a killer stalking president Bush. But those feeble PR-oriented efforts were in areas where the pressure was coming from: police and public officials. The company did nothing about the women-hating, racism and all-round mayhem.

"In fact, Time Warner companies have worked notably to lower the already low standards in the field. When BMG and Sony balked at signing the loathsome Dr. Dre, a Time Warner affiliated company was there to sign him. When David Geffen, to his credit, refused to sign the out-of-control Geto Boys (who sing lyrically about slitting women's throats and cutting off their breasts), a Time Warner label picked them up. It helps to have a fat checkbook and no standards."

One of the Time Warner labels is Interscope, of which it had acquired a fifty percent interest. Leo wrote:

"This is the cultural equivalent of owning half the world's mustard-gas factories. One Interscope talent, Nine Inch Nails, sings about self-loathing, sexual obsession, torture, suicide and dismemberment. Another huge seller, Dr. Dre, is author of the immortal line: 'Rat-a-tat and a tat like that / Never hesitate to put a nigga on his back,' which author Nathan McCall says is 'Plain and simple . . . a boastful call for black men to kill each other . . . . '

"The company and its chairman-CEO, Gerald Levin, commonly try to wrap themselves in the flag, pointing piously to the First Amendment and Artistic Freedom . . . .

"We are living through a cultural collapse, and major corporations are presiding over that collapse and grabbing everything they can on the way down. Time Inc. was a respectable and socially responsible company only seven or eight years ago."

I would demur on that point: *Time* was never a principled and honest news source. From its founding, it existed to further the political agenda of its owner, Henry Luce, who did serious and damaging meddling in American and international politics with that magazine as his fulcrum.

But the *Time* of old was nothing like what it has become: the flackship of the Time Warner enterprises. Doug Ramsey said, "At least in the old days, it was well written and occasionally even profound. Now it is just trash."

John Leo concluded, "Now it is an anything-goes corporation that refuses to look at any of the larger social implications of what it is selling. Along the way, the company has compromised its own magazines, which are hardly in a position to report honestly on what Time Warner is doing to the culture. It's a mess, and it ought to come up in an organized way at every stockholders' meeting."

Shortly after the John Leo column, on May 22, 1995, the *New York Daily News* dubbed it *Slime Warner* in a headline on an editorial about corporate responsibility. It reported on a meeting between former education secretary William Bennett, C. Delores Tucker, chairwoman of the National Political Congress of Black Women, and some of the brass of Time Warner. Bennett and Tucker argued that corporations that promote violence and hatred of women are harming children.

The editorial said, "In this best seller, *The Book of Virtues*, (the) former Education Secretary . . . gathers inspiring moral tales that highlight core American values. Bennett now has launched a crusade to broaden that audience. All Americans concerned about their nation should join him. The thrust would expand the politically popular notion of personal responsibility to Corporate America. And Bennett has picked the right place to start: Time Warner, the megacorporation that has set new lows for culturally destructive products . . . .

"The disconnect hasn't registered with Time Warner CEO Gerald Levin, who insists that 'music is not the cause of society's ills.' True and irrelevant."

The editorial is not quite right about that, and Levin is disingenuous. It may not be *the* cause of our ills, but it is one of them, and a very major one.

The *Daily News* editorial continues: "What Bennett and Tucker are saying is that corporations that pour millions into promoting murder and rape as fun shouldn't be surprised if the message takes hold. When it does, a defensive 'who, me?' doesn't cut it.

"Time Warner is not the only corporation guilty of bad citizenship. There are people at Nike who felt that ads touting graffiti made the best pitch for sneakers. Did they think the ads would not also sell anti-social behavior?

"Cigarette companies like Philip Morris repeat the lie that nicotine is not addictive. Then there are the companies whose products kill more quickly, such as Olin Corp., maker of the Black Talon bullet, designed to shred human flesh.

"Olin took the bullets off the market, but not before some found their way into the hands of Long Island Rail Road killer Colin Ferguson and suspected Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh.

"In a better world, Time Warner would respond voluntarily to Bennett and his campaign. History, however, says most companies won't. That's why consumers must take a stand. Let your wallets do the talking. When the results hit their bottom line, the purveyors of trash will get the point."

The *Daily News* is exceptional in taking a stand on these issues. In general, print journalism is declining with a rapidity that dismays many veterans of the profession. A conspicuous example is the *New York Times*. It is a phenomenon that Nat Hentoff noticed long before anyone else did. Hentoff commented 20 or more years ago that it was not all that its reputation suggested. But the *Times* has slipped swiftly in the last two or three years. It is a subject much discussed among journalists. One top reporter at the *Times* two or three years ago told me he was thinking of taking his retirement because of the policies on which the *Times* was embarking, namely to seek readers in the X generation by whatever pandering should prove expedient.

If there was an incident that made the paper's decline obvious, it was the presentation of a story about Kitty Kelley's biography of Nancy Reagan. It was, like all of Kelley's work (her Sinatra biography contains many inaccuracies and distortions), tabloid journalism at book length. The *Times* reported on the contents of the Reagan book as if it were uncontested fact, and a story in and of itself. The *Times*, clearly, was trawling for readership even then.

It has become flabby. James T. Maher, the author, music historian, and former newspaperman said, "The *Times* went to pieces when it decided to become a magazine, not a newspaper." And Richard Sudhalter is one of many writers who simply no longer read it. "With the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Guardian*," he said, "I can live very happily without the *New York Times*, thank you."

The *Los Angeles Times* is also declining. With circulation dipping toward a million, it has cut its daily newsstand price in half to 25 cents. It might to greater effect try becoming a good newspaper again. One place it could start is in its *Calendar* weekend entertainment section, thick with ads and fetid with the paper's sycophancy to those who pay for them.

No one who has ever worked in journalism is under illusions about "freedom of the press". As A.J. Liebling long ago noted in his column in the *New Yorker*, freedom of the press belongs to whoever owns a press. All newspapers serve the purposes of their owners to greater or lesser degree. And this often means catering to their advertisers.

When I was a young reporter at the *Montreal Star*, I got the assignment of covering labor relations. This put me in an untenably delicate position. The owner of the paper, John McConnell, was a large shareholder of St. Lawrence Sugar and Brazilian Traction. Not only would no fair coverage be allowed of labor relations in these companies, it wouldn't be allowed in any situation involving McConnell's many wealthy friends. Indeed, by extension, it wouldn't be allowed in any situation whatsoever, because the public must not be allowed to think that union leaders were anything but Commie agitators and workers were anything but ingrates who refused to recognize the largesse of the companies in granting them their wages. The worst situations involved textile companies.

I would try my best to report fairly (and I covered a lot of strikes) on the events I encountered. But anything even slightly favorable to the union in question would never get past the copy desk. My stories, no matter how objective and balanced, would be cut into paeans to the generosity and fairness of the corporations. What made it sticky was that I had to have contact with the union leaders involved in these situations, and their statements never appeared in "my" stories. Most of them were sophisticated enough to understand what I was dealing with, and they treated me decently.

It has long been obvious that someday electronic communications would supplant newspapers. As far back as the mid-1940s, one of the Miami newspapers tested electronic transmission of news directly to the homes of subscribers, but television came along and shouldered that experiment aside. Today, with all sorts of us faxing clippings back and forth to each other, something like

that is becoming a reality. But it is in the computer that electronic transmission of news is making enormous advances. When I lived in New York City, I used to pick up the *Times* on Saturday night at Broadway and 87th Street, strip out the sections of no interest to me, dump them in a trash container, and take home the leaner version of the paper, lighter by pounds. On the Internet, you can pull down only the stories that interest you, read them, print them out for later reference, or simply store them on disk.

As economic pressures on newspapers continue, the smaller papers are being bought up by chains. Currently, the Gannet Company owns 82, Knight-Ridder 27, Newhouse 26, the *New York Times* 25, Dow Jones 22, and the Times Mirror Corporation 11, including the *Los Angeles Times*.

A new book by journalist Richard McCord, *The Chain Gang*, published by the University of Missouri Press, details the operations of the Gannett chain in crushing its competition. Gannett, whose papers include the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the *Des Moines Register*, and *U.S.A. Today*, has systematically destroyed opposition papers, even little weeklies, who might draw off even a few advertising dollars.

Ronald Reagan began his career in radio.

Dan E. Moldea, noted for his authoritative books on the Mafia, wrote in his 1986 book *Dark Victory: Ronald Reagan, MCA, and the Mob*: "The Chicago Mafia's . . . new liaison in the motion picture industry became attorney Sidney Korshak . . . .

"Among the guiding forces in the shaping of Reagan's political philosophy were MCA's Jules Stein and Taft Schreiber. According to law-enforcement authorities, several of Reagan's financiers were close friends and associates of Sidney Korshak.

"Stein and Schreiber — as well as Reagan's personal attorney, Los Angeles labor lawyer William French Smith — made several questionable financial transactions on Reagan's behalf, making him a multimillionaire overnight. Once governor, Reagan made executive decisions that were greatly beneficial to MCA and other corporations with motion picture studio interests."

And that's before you get out of the book's prologue.

As a has-been actor, then president of the Screen Actors Guild, Reagan sold out its membership on the issue of residuals in return for his own TV show, handing the networks a sweetheart deal, and he was on his way to his political career.

Reagan began deregulation of the broadcasting industry, a process that has continued into the administration of Bill Clinton. The Federal Communications Commission has been emasculated. Before Reagan, any one corporation or individual could own only seven AM and seven FM stations, and never two in the same market. Reagan expanded that. And now, in early 1996, under Clinton, almost all limitations on ownership have been eliminated.

Jerry M. Landry, who lectures on media-democracy at the University of Illinois, wrote recently: " . . . commercial radio stations in America churn out cash in prodigious amounts. Returns of 40 to 50 percent yearly are not uncommon."

There are 10,000 of these commercial stations in the United States. They are being bought up by big corporations at a frightening rate and, as Landry put it, "the law is not spurring competition, but monopoly. An industry that once had to base its license renewal on service to the station's community has been let off the hook by Congress and the president."

And PBS is gradually being compromised by those stealthy little "made possible by a grant from" announcements, which are getting longer and plugging the products and sounding more and more like regular TV commercials.

A respected media analyst in New York predicts that eight or ten big station groups will eventually control the entire broadcasting industry of the United States. That means that a small cabal of cronies will dictate what is heard on American "air waves" that by law are the property of the American people.

Landry wrote in the *Christian Science Monitor*:

"But radio isn't just any business. Radio is an essential part of our civic capital. It speaks over publicly licensed frequencies to millions of listeners . . . . In the past stations were more than juke boxes. They provided breaking news and weather bulletins, specialized information for farmers, investors, communication organizations, local governments, and emergency services . . . .

"The new barons of radio are absentee owners who convert their stations into cash cows for instant milking, their values ballooned for trading to the next buyer. The name of the game is to avoid being the 'last sucker' stuck with debt if recession hits.

"Radio, once the most trusted news source in America, has increasingly abandoned the role of local service-provider. Newsrooms in many stations have been cut to the bone — one or two readers . . . 'ripping and reading' news and weather supplied to all clients by a single news source, the Associated Press.

"There is a teeth-grinding sameness in the music they play, as dial-twisters who have traveled long distances in a car can testify — various shades of rock and country music."

Until recently, Westinghouse, through CBS, owned 39 stations, but now it has merged with Infinity broadcasting, which gave the world Howard Stern. This corporation will own 83 stations with $1 billion a year in ad revenues. Do you expect Dan Rather to report on *CBS Evening News* on any misdeeds of this radio empire?

The Federal Communications Commission, obedient to the attorneys of the broadcasting industry (the offices of the National Association of Broadcasters is near its own offices) — raised the number of stations an operator could own to 12 AM and 12 FM. Just three years ago, no one operator could have more than one FM and one AM station in the same market. Now a company can own up to eight in one market. SFX Broadcasting Inc. of New York operates 17 radio stations and is looking for more. The CBS-Westinghouse-Infinity colossus will have a dominating 30 percent share in such major markets as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, and eight percent nationally.

Along with Howard Stern, the new company also gets the notorious talk-show host Don Imus, who is in fact an Infinity shareholder. Martin Friedman, co-head of the new company, said that the controversial personalities will be handled in the same way that big movie studios produce films that the company's directors might find personally distasteful. And, he said, "Howard Stern will be very popular with the Westinghouse shareholders. They pay Howard a lot of money because he makes a lot of money for them."

The *Daily News* editorial excoriating Time Warner defines a problem; it does not suggest an answer, collapsing in on itself at the end with that usual substitute for a solution, shunting responsibility off on the consumer. It is thus at one with all those assertions that the answer to the violence on television is to monitor what your children see. And how do two parents working full-time, many of them at two jobs, maintain such an unflagging full-time scrutiny?

The men and women of our century are the first to be raised in and on, conditioned and largely educated by, one form or other of electronic communication, starting with the telegraph, telephone, phonograph, and primitive movies late in the nineteenth century, but not really exploding until the 1920s and '30s. Marshall McLuhan had some notion of what impact this was going to have on the world; he did not foresee how far its effects would extend.

McLuhan was not an original thinker. Almost anyone involved in communications had a lurking notion of the effect and rapidity of the changes in our intellectual ambience that were proceeding around us, and McLuhan's pronouncements, as if from some sort of academic Parnassus, seemed, to the extent that they were comprehensible, unexpeceptional, almost banal.

But McLuhan and his books were so heavily promoted by the hard-hustling San Francisco publicist Howard Gossage (who seemed to get his own name in print as much as McLuhan's) that McLuhan came to be perceived as the *guru* of this emerging electronic society, its champion, with all the murky hype about "non-linear" thinking — there is no such thing as non-linear thinking, only non-linear non-thinking — and "hot" and "cold" media. He did coin one extremely useful term: the global village. And he had one stunning insight: in this new society, the medium *is* the message. Anyone who leaves a radio on all day, awash in its mindless babble, or stretches bored in an armchair, or even in bed, channel surfing the television with a remote clicker, hoping in vain that something interesting will turn up, with or without beer can (or glass of Chardonnay) in hand, is a pixel in the endless demonstration of this one great McLuhan insight.

I met McLuhan only once, but the encounter was a mild revelation. I discovered that his books and the Gossage hype that surrounded them misrepresented him. This was his own fault. For one thing, he allowed it. For another, McLuhan, college professor or not, *wrote badly*. I became aware of the misrepresentation even before I met him through one of his associates at the University of Toronto, with whom I shared a sofa in a panel discussion on a television talk show. He said, "Marshall is in the position of being a man who is trying to warn society that it is about to be hit by a ten-ton-truck, and then is being blamed for the message."

The occasion of my single encounter with McLuhan was a visit by my friend the late Roland Gelatt, then the editor of *Saturday Review* who, coming up from New York, asked me to arrange introductions to certain prominent persons in Toronto, including Glenn Gould and McLuhan. Roland, McLuhan, and I went to lunch in a restaurant atop one of the new hotels, whose wall of windows presented a sweeping view of the city. When Roland asked him certain questions about the "new communications," he grew more than agitated. And I finally said, "Dr. McLuhan, are you saying then that you don't like it?"

And his agitation only grew. "Like it?" he said. "Like it? I'm a professor of literature." And, as his hand made a sweeping gesture to take in the city and its electrical systems and radio and TV towers and by extension those in all the rest of the world, he said, "If I could throw a switch and turn it all off, I *would*!"

The songs of America, and indeed of much of the world, through the 1920s, 30s, '40s, and '50s, functioned in praise of one thing: monogamy. And the movies contributed to this effect with their happy-ending love affairs, as did much popular-magazine fiction. A movie without a love interest was rarely produced. Occasionally a movie would come to grips with real social issue, as in the case of *The Grapes of Wrath*, but these were always seen as exceptional, variants from the norm. And though Yip Harburg would try to do something a little different with song lyrics, as in *The Eagle and Me*, the huge, huge majority of songs were about love. Even sad torch songs of that period were about the shattering effect of losing one's only true love.

By the 1940s, a thriving and not-so-small publishing business was devoted to supplying the public with the printed lyrics of the current popular songs. The fact that these were sold at the candy-milkshake-and-sundries stores located near high schools indicates the publisher's awareness of the "teen-aged" market. This presentation of lyrics in print indicates that the songs were *meant* to be memorized and repeated, which is to say internalized, as much as the catechism and the credo of the church, whose clerics have known for centuries that this process affects the thinking, emotions, and behavior of its members: a way of building moral authority into the individual's character. One of these magazines was the monthly *Song Parade*. A look at its October, 1944, issue is most instructive. The complete list of songs for that issue is:

A Love Like Ours; A Lovely Way to Spend an Evening; And Then You Kissed Me; As Long as There's Music; Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are; Cover Girl; Don't Change Horses; Featherhead; How Blue the Night; I Couldn't Sleep a Wink Last Night; If Helen Only Knew It; I'll Be Seeing You; I Love You; Lili

Marlene; Long Ago and Far Away; Look for the Silver Lining; Make Way for Tomorrow; Many a New Day; Oklahoma; Out of My Dreams; People Will Say We're in Love; Since You Went Away; Some Other Time; Speak Low; Sure Thing; Sweet and Lovely; Tell Me, Tell Me, Evening Star; The Surrey with the Fringe on Top; The Wolf Song; The Young Man with the Horn;, What Will the Future Say?; Where You Are, and *Willow in the Wind.* The composers of a number of them were Cole Porter, Kurt Weill, Jule Styne, and Jerome Kern, and while some of the songs are insignificant, several are masterpieces, gems of the songwriter's art.

It seems more than probable that all of this had a benign effect on society even if life's reality was harder than the movies made out, that this popular entertainment inculcated in the society an ideal of lifelong love that probably contributed to family stability and social coherence. It is the sheerest nonsense, irresponsible and obscene nonsense, for the entertainment industry to endlessly ululate that their "arts" do not influence society. When television operates on the fact that its advertising can induce people to buy deodorants and analgesics and automobiles and Caribbean cruises and air travel to far-off places, the contradiction is obvious (and preposterous) when its executives protest that its "entertainment" content has no influence on behavior.

Indeed their unflagging stand is more than hypocritical: it is viciously cynical, for such men as Mr. Levin know perfectly well what the entertainment "arts" are doing to society. I was predicting in print as long ago as 1965 that if rock and roll were permitted to continue in its drug advocacy, explicitly in songs and implicitly in the example of its icons, we would have a psychochemical pandemic in a very few years. It is upon us, so pervasive that with many police on the take from its profits, and swollen narcobusiness coffers being used to infiltrate "legitimate' businesses, and Congressmen telemetrically responsive to its minions, the very continuation of this society is by no means a certainty. And the degradation of women advocated early on in rock songs has now come to fulfillment in the curious acquiescence to the callous, not to say grimly unromantic, sexual expectations of young men.

We are facing a First Amendment crisis. This is a frequent topic of my conversations with Doug Ramsey. Jazz people know him as one of the best writers in the field. But he is also one of the most intelligent journalists I know, with a solid newspaper and television background. He is senior vice president of the Foundation for Americaan Communications, responsible for educating professional journalists about the issues they cover. Doug describes himself as being "close to a First Amendment absolutist," and offered in argument against any revision of the U.S. Constitution that present politicians would only make it worse. His point is indisputable: there are not many Jeffersons among the corsairs cruising the halls of Congress.

But this problem won't go away, and in shoving all responsibility for coping with a flood of pornographic violence and violent pornography off on a baffled and essentially helpless public, the *New York Daily News* eschews the issue in the way journalists traditionally do when First Amendment contradictions arise, thereby adding to a long line of headprints in the sands of time.

Dustin Hoffman, at the last Cannes Film Festival, said that he will no longer take parts in movies that graphically depict violence. The news coverage of this left the impression that he was some sort of aberration for having taken this moral stand, one which, we may be sure, will not be widely emulated in Hollywood, though John Travolta has taken a similar position.

To be sure, sometimes the violence is appropriate. The movie *Good Fellows* is one of the most graphically violent pictures in circulation; it is also an excellent film, and its violence was not gratuitous. And the violence was very much to the point in Clint Eastwood's *The Unforgiven.* as was its compassionate treatment of the abuse of women.

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, prohibiting any restriction of the freedom of speech and the press, was written when a man's speech could be heard for only a hundred or so yards, if he spoke loudly, and the only means of public communication was writing; and most people were illiterate. The amendment's primary concern was free political discourse, not the protection of pornography in various electronic media that even a man of Jefferson's imagination could not have envisioned.

In 1962, when the Somoza family's dictatorship, which had been installed by the Marine Corps and been supported by one U.S. administration after another, ruled Nicaragua, I visited that country. In its capital, Managua, I talked to a newspaper editor who came to trust me sufficiently to explain a political reality of his country to me. Naive American foreign service observers, he said, were impressed that there was indeed freedom of the press in Nicaragua. Of course there was, he said, for it reassured the foreigners. And it didn't hurt the Somozas, since much of the population was illiterate and couldn't read newspapers. What the Somosas did *not* allow was freedom of radio broadcasting, for the people did listen to radio, on little portable sets that were already becoming common. (I saw indigenous Amerindians listening to rock-and-roll on small radios in a thatch-roofed village, far up the Demerara River and deep in the jungle of what was then British Guyana.)

Hitler did not attain his power chiefly through his control of the printed media, although he seized that too. Hitler achieved his power with such awesome rapidity through the new medium of radio, with the help to be sure of massive rallies, pure theater, that were always filmed. Then Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt became skilled in the new medium of radio, and used it to rally their countries, with further assistance from voices like those of H.V. Kaltenborn, Eric Sevareid, Edward R. Murrow, and others in the new profession called newscasters. It was, in a strange sort of way, the war of disembodied voices and sudden auditory images. Murrow's voice from London with the sounds of falling

bombs behind it had an incalculable affect in homogenizing and indurating opinion in a dilatory American people. Ultimately these massed voices of the Allies won. And of course the nightly TV images from Viet Nam, as well as Walter Cronkite's final disillusioned evaluation of the war that caused Lyndon Johnson to say, "I've lost Cronkite," were huge factors in bringing an end to that war. So were the songs of Pete Seegar and Bob Dylan, which I suspect Johnson never understood till the day he died. The Ayatollah Khomeini's lieutenants circulated cassette recordings of his exhortations to inflame them to overthrow the Shah and expel the Great Satan. Ultimately his followers, seizing the U.S. Embassy in Teheran and holding hostages for a year, brought down the Carter administration. It was done with cassettes, not print.

And the entertainment-communications industry claims it is socially ineffectual? That cassettes and radio and images on a glass screen have no social consequences? Or, failing that, wants us to accept that its executives honestly believe what they are saying and therefore cannot be held culpable?

Democracy exists through an irresoluble contradiction. It survives through the violation of its own rules. You cannot have an army, navy, or air force operating on democratic principles. The result would be chaos. To be sure, many officers are stupid; many others are foolish or misguided or even lethal. But nothing but a structured command system and immediate obedience by those farther down the chain will work, even though the unqualified often rise to the top of the chain.

Business too works that way. Somebody has to be the boss. Woody Herman and Les Brown both found that co-operative orchestras don't work. André Previn tells this charming story:

A callow young conductor was rehearsing the Vienna Philharmonic. One of the players asked a question about string bowings. Intimidated by them, anxious to ingratiate himself, the conductor asked what they would like. From the string section came the acerbic, "A decision would be nice."

We live with all sorts of contradictions, balancing them by averting our thought from them. Christianity holds that there is a life after death — and something over 80 percent of Americans define themselves as Christians. Yet act as if you really believe it, and you will be almost universally treated as a nut case. Hillary Clinton found that out to her chagrin when she apparently had an imaginary conversation with Eleanor Roosevelt — not a bad exercise for someone with hands on the reins of history.

For all the rhetoric, democracy at base is a nervous and fragile standoff between tyranny and chaos, an equivocation between imposed coherence and social disintegration, and we function in it by the assiduous avoidance of the thought that our daily actions are in disobedience to its idealized tenets.

We are seeing the damage done by the irresponsible misuse of this exquisite compromise, and always the excuse is the one expressed by Gerald Levin, and always with an affectation of flag-wrapped piety — which, incidentally, was being used in 1955 by his record company to defend Elvis Presley. He was a religious boy who loved mother and country.

This incantation has been used incessantly by an entertainment industry that has relentlessly undermined America. And, for that matter, the world. And before we point a finger at American executives alone, let us remember how much of this destructiveness came out of England. The big record companies, remember, are multinational, and some are mostly foreign-owned. RCA records and subsidiary labels were sold to BMG, which is German. Capitol is owned by EMI of England. Polygram is Dutch. The headquarters of Rupert Murdoch's publishing and television empire is in Sydney, Australia.

We are at a crossroads not only of history but of our very existence. Fully as irresponsible as the communications magnates are those religious leaders who would have you believe that the world's resources are infinite, and that whatever problems arise will be solved. There is a school of thought that we are reaching the limits of the knowable. Whether or not that is so, I do remember what the Nobel laureate Denis Gabor said in a seminar I attended perhaps 25 years ago: that the public must cease expecting that science can solve every problem. The world isn't going to be overcrowded. It already is. Our seas are dying, our farm lands polluted, our orchards paved. Experiments with laboratory rats have shown that when they become too crowded they became neurotic, vicious, anti-social, and turn on each other. Consider what has happened in Chechneya, Rwanda, Burundi, Yugoslavia, what used to be called Soviet Armenia, and even the drive-by shootings and turf wars of the Inner Cities of America. We are faced with rapidly mutating diseases, including strains highly resistant to antibiotics. As one doctor put it, "If AIDS hadn't come along, genital herpes would be seen as the epidemic it is." At the start of this century, the chief causes of death were incommunicable maladies such as coronary failure and cancer. At the end of it, they are the communicable, including one that is primarily transmitted sexually, one of the most lethal known to us: AIDS.

"The bugs are faster than we are," a research biochemist I know told me recently.

We have in North America an inconceivable drug problem that is distorting our politics, corrupting business and banking and the police, draining billions into a feckless effort to control it, eroding the very foundation of the society. And it was the entertainment industry that created the appetite for psychotropic substances, deny it though it will.

Given these conditions, a communications industry that exploits violence, division, hatred, and unrestricted sexual profligacy for its own profit must be considered a major social disease in and of itself — Public Enemy Number One.

(To be continued)

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