

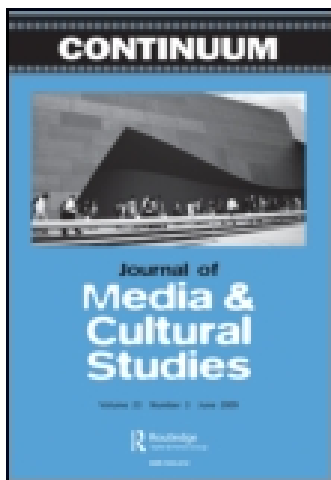
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Culture Jamming in Contemporary Times

Remarks by Kathleen Tyner on a video screening of *Spin* by Brian Springer

There are numerous examples throughout history that bolster the hypothesis that every time a major communication technology is introduced into society, it aligns with other social factors to shift, for example, the status quo of power and privilege. This was true in ancient Greece when Plato renounced writing in the dialogues with Phaedrus because he feared it would destroy an oral tradition of memory and rhetoric. Ironically, he excluded poets from his vision of Utopia and his teachings survive because of the technology of writing. Nonetheless, Plato may have been right about the decline of rhetoric. It's difficult to find modern storytellers who can recite *The Illiad* from memory (Patterson, 1982).

Shifts in power also occurred when large numbers of Europeans began to use reading and writing in commerce and law around the year 1050. The knights, with traditions steeped in oral culture and memory, were historical losers in a tug of war with the clergy and the monarchy, who possessed superior literacy technology for managing wills, charters, and commerce. The knighted class ridiculed peasants for walking around with signature seals swinging from their belts, much as people of today consider it high status to put their e-mail addresses on their business cards. Alas, chivalry and an air of superiority did not enable the knights to keep their real estate out of the hands of the clergy and the Norman Invaders armed with written deeds of ownership (Clanchy, 1979, 1993).

The shift from oral culture to reading and writing was a tremendous boon for the official church, but the printing press posed a unique threat to the medieval church because of its potential to print heresy on a mass scale. Before the printing press, the clergy's power arose from its ability to interpret the Word of God for their flocks. With the printing press and corresponding mass literacy, each person had the potential to read and interpret the Bible without benefit of clergy (Patterson).

Printers did print heresy, but many of them were more interested in the money that

could be made from pornography, much as the initial software market for modern VCRs consisted of pornography that could be viewed in the privacy of the home. It could be argued that consumers of information media won a rare victory with the development of VCRs, because they are now able to be slightly more selective in their choice of programming¹.

Continuing an historical trend, 20th Century information technologies also have people worried about who will control them. So far, telephone lines and computer have grown out of print culture into the convergence of organic anarchy known as the Internet. That divine chaos is rapidly being curtailed by powerful multinationals who can only commodify information if they exert their control of communication channels as they learned to do with broadcast media. Right now the much-touted interactivity of digital media is about as interactive as a Coke machine. However, at least there is a small opportunity for ordinary citizens to disseminate and receive a diversity of opinions to people around the world that is as yet unmanaged by a professional class of media specialists.

Those who oppose technology are often called 'Luddites', a derogatory term coined for English weavers of the early 1800s who smashed machinery as a symbolic protest against the mechanization of labor. They were some of the first to commit industrial sabotage.

Actually, the Luddites are unfairly represented in history. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the ideology of progress through technology was firmly espoused by the dominant forces in society. The Luddites were not initially idealogues who set out to counter the Industrial Revolution. Instead, they were skilled weavers who smashed the automated textile looms that threatened to automate the workplace and take away their jobs. They usually smashed equipment that was already broken and especially targeted those machines that were customized for operation by children. Contrary to their image as backward thinkers, Luddites were not against the idea of technology, *per se*. This fine point was lost as their cause became more effective. The Luddites threat to the status quo made them the targets of powerful enemies. In 1812, the British sent 24,000 troops and local militia against the Luddites — more than had gone abroad to fight Napoleon (Boal, 1995).

Let that be a lesson to modern saboteurs who hope to counter technology's influence on society. Ironically, the communication trend may be going 'back to the future' to a time when oral communication was dominant. Linguist, Walter J. Ong calls the electronic communication forms of the late 20th Century a time of 'secondary orality'. As history has demonstrated, the means to produce information gets cheaper as the technology becomes more commonplace. But in spite of lower-cost computer, camera and sound equipment, the fact that contemporary culture is based on tightly-controlled, privately-owned image and sound technologies makes it increasingly difficult for non-specialists

to send and receive information that is an alternative to the packaged codes and conventions offered up by media industries. Those who want to comment on mass media by altering, countering, or interrupting the flow of mainstream discourse invite the wrath of powerful forces. Like environmentalists who disable bulldozers in the rain forest and call it 'monkeywrenching', these social activists call the work they do, 'culture jamming'². Culture jamming is shaded with a connotation of destruction and risk-taking that ranges from the playful, to the annoying, to the dangerous.

Culture jamming activities certainly have a niche in Media Education. Jammers use mainstream codes and conventions to turn them back against mass media in order to disrupt the dominant discourse of commercial media and political power. In the process, jammers reveal the highly constructed nature of media messages and call into question the economic, ideological and social contexts that underpin media. This has been done successfully with students in tobacco prevention activities that alter the ads produced by tobacco companies and targeted to children³. One of the central goals of Media Education is to nurture citizens who can intelligently question authority. Powerful interests will try to marginalise citizens in a quest for money and power, but culture jammers demonstrate that there are always cracks and spaces in the media landscape for activist to work. Educators who use action strategies to improve the social good have lessons to learn from the work of these irascible citizens.

A Case Study of Culture Jamming: *Spin* by Brian Springer

In 1992, a graduate student named Brian Springer bought a satellite dish and some receivers collected over 500 hours of satellite feed from various channels. The satellite delivers unfiltered network feeds so that before and after the 'packaged' portion of the feed, the on-air television personalities and their guests relax into the vernacular of personal and informal conversations. Brian Springer edited the footage he had collected into a seventy-six minute videotape of these candid satellite feeds as a comment on the election process in the 1992 presidential election in the United States between George Bush and Bill Clinton. He calls his videotape *Spin*, slang for the nuances put on mediated events by media experts who handle politicians, often called 'spin doctors'.

Spin explores the way that powerful interests use technology to shape political constituencies and to consolidate power. In the process, Springer also demonstrates the ability of an active, creative and media literate citizen to counter and resist the unidirectional flow of information and to turn it back on its creators.

Springer refuses to distribute his tape, because major networks in the United States have threatened to sue him over copyright and ownership of the material. The tape quality is not the best and *Spin* poses no immediate threat to the commercial interests of the networks. The long-term threat of culture jamming tapes like *Spin* is that they erode the public confidence in the reliability of packaged media information. To the delight of a British audience, Springer distributed a tape with a similar theme called

Feed to the BBC and the networks do not want a similar occurrence with *Spin*⁴.

Following is a short transcript from the tape. It opens with an American TV talk show host named Larry King who tells Bill Clinton that if he is elected president, then Ted Turner, the owner of CNN (Cable News Network) would be 'willing to serve.'

[TRANSCRIPTION OF *SPIN* BY BRIAN SPRINGER] Time: 3:40 - 12:21

[Music Up and Out] This is the IFB Circuit from ABC News - New York

Brian Springer: (Narrates): Anyone with a home satellite TV system like the ones you see in bars or in people's yards could have picked up Bill Clinton and King chatting off air. Dish owners are able to receive two types of TV. One is the regular TV programming you normally see on cable or the broadcast networks.

King: Is that Helmstead still the next one

Springer: The other type of TV is the satellite feed — in this case the feed of George Bush and Larry King chatting during a commercial break.

King: Kind of weird being seen around the world. Technology.

[Music Up and Out]

Springer: Satellite feeds are used by the networks to transmit images of news events from around the world. An event covered by the networks is transmitted up into space by a satellite. The satellite receives and re-transmits the image of the event back down to earth to the network's headquarters where the video image is edited and contextualised as 'television'. The home satellite dish owner can watch regular tv or they can tune in the satellite feed and see the event before it has been packaged by the networks as television.

In 1992 I bought a couple of satellite dishes and spent the entire year flipping through the channels looking for feeds. I logged on to a satellite and went channel by channel through its transmission, recording the feeds. Then I'd move on to the next satellite. And the next one. And the next one. By the end of the year, I had recorded more than 500 hours of feeds.

Jerry Brown: (1992 presidential candidate and ex-Governor of California): Don't put a lot of that garbage on me — what is this? Are we on the national? Can we turn that off, I don't want to be on national television.

Springer: Some of the feed guests knew and some didn't know that their images were being broadcast unscrambled and visible to over 3.5 million dish owners across North America. Those who knew they were being watched attempted to stay out of satellite TV's wide frame. But after spending hours a day inside a television studio, television had become their home.

[We hear the sound of snorting]

[Music Up and Out]

Springer: 1991 and 1992 had been years of political extremes for George Bush. After the Gulf War in 1991, he had the highest approval rating of any president in

modern history. But as the U.S. economy fell, so did Bush's ratings and his health. He and the first lady, Barbara Bush, developed Graves Disease. As Bush's ratings fell further, he decided to appear on Larry King's show. His appearance marked the first time that a U.S. president had been on a call-in talk show in over fifteen years.

Larry King: Are you feeling well, by the way.

George Bush: Huh

Larry King: Are you feeling well.

George Bush: Pretty good. Lucky. Running still and played tennis yesterday.

Larry King: What is that disease you have

George Bush: Uh, uh. Chrohns — no, not Chrons. Just thyroid. I don't know what you call it.

Larry King: They drug treat it, right.

George Bush: They make you take the drug every single morning. Little blue things. Synthroid or something. And it wasn't heart. What the thyroid does is make your heart fibrillate, but it's been very good.

Larry King: You know, I took Halcion for a long time after my heart surgery.

George Bush: Are you off it now? I don't know that it's bad, Larry.

Larry King: It's the best sleeping pill in the world, but not daily.

George Bush: No, oh no. But now its getting such a bad rap.

[Applause]

Springer: Halcion had gotten such a bad rap that Britain banned it because of its side effects of amnesia, anxiety, delusions and hostility. Bush started the election year by visiting Japan where he fainted and threw up on the Japanese Prime Minister. Bush admitted to taking Halcion during the Japan trip and Barbara Bush told reporters that the President frequently takes Halcion on long plane rides. All traces of Bush's nauseating performance would be cleaned up by the White House Television crew. Even this mantle photo of Bush's face next to a white baby blanket may have looked too much like his face in Barbara's white napkin in Japan.

Female Voice off camera: Unfortunately, I think this picture. It looks like the one from Japan. Very similar to the Japan thing.

Male Technician on-camera: Do you want to — Anna, you got it. Do whatever you need to do.

Springer: This is the White House television studio, the satellite TV hub for Bush's re-election strategy.

Male voice: When you don't want to make a decision, you say 'we'll take it under advisement'. Advisement. Advisers and..being handled.

Springer: The person handling Bush's satellite TV campaigning was Doren Smith. According to industry publications, Smith was chosen because of his experience in handling complex satellite TV productions, experience he gained as the former

executive producer of ABC's Nightline.

Female Voice-Over Narrative: Again, the president resurrected Harry Truman (U.S. President in the post-WWII era) as the example to follow. Harry Truman said 'the buck stops here.'

Larry King: The biggest riot of all is Harry Truman. The right wing destroyed Harry Truman. Health care was his number one issue.

Springer: Harry Truman campaigned his way into the White House via 'whistle stop' train trips. He'd stop. Give a speech. Speed to the next town. Stop and give a speech and speed on. Except as a device for photo opportunities, trains had become obsolete as a tool for political campaigning. The train of the 1940s and 1950s was replaced by satellite television in the 1990s. From the White House studio, Bush would go up on a satellite, give a five minute interview with a local news anchor. Disconnect. Hook up with another local news anchor. Give an interview. Disconnect. Hook up with another one and do this again and again and again. This type of satellite whistle stop campaigning is called 'The Satellite Tour.' This is a technician at the White House hooking up with TV stations in South Carolina and Florida for a satellite tour by Barbara Bush.

White House Technician: Channel 4, do you read us in Washington? WYFF? Come in, come in...

Barbara Bush: Remember that every single man, woman and child in the state of South Carolina awakens to a freer, safer world because of George Bush.

White House Technician: WYS, do you hear us in Washington.

Barbara Bush: I would remind people that every single morning, we all awaken to a safer, freer world because of George Bush.

Barbara Bush: And Nicole, I would you and the people of Florence that all of us awaken every single day to a freer, safer world because of George Bush.

White House Technician: WCSC, do you read us in Washington.

Barbara Bush: They, themselves, awaken every single day to a freer, safer world because of George Bush.

[Music Up]

Springer: Campaigning via the satellite tour allowed the candidates to cover long distances. But there was another major benefit. They could bypass the national TV networks. There was no need to feed through the tv network center and on to the local stations. The campaign was now the center and its own television network.

Bill Clinton: This is great. I love these.

Technician Off Camera: We can do another hour if you want. We start doing Georgia tomorrow.

Bill Clinton: Can we do any more.

Technician: We are setting up as many as we can.

Bill Clinton: Can we do some Maryland? Can we do those two Marylands.

Technician: We can do Maryland if you want.

Bill Clinton: Can we do some more in Florida and Texas? Have we done all of Colorado today.

Technician: Yeah we got one more.

Bill Clinton: Today

[END OF CLIP]

The Satellite Tours bypass the national press corps. They are supplemented by video news stories produced by the candidate's campaign. These video news releases come complete with intro text for the local anchor to read. Research published by Columbia University showed that over half of the local stations which aired video news releases did not report that they had been produced by the candidates.

Springer has shown himself to be a master culture jammer. Like all great Media Education resources, his tape raises more questions than answers about the construction of media, as well as the nature of each medium. For example, how can citizens receive the kind of information it takes to make an informed choice at the ballot box? What are the journalistic ethics of reporting on the kind of 'overheard' speech available via satellite

Obviously, efforts to use media to shape constituencies have altered the face of modern democratic elections. If we believe that Media Education can strengthen democracies by ensuring an informed citizenry, then media teachers will have to correspondingly encourage much more direct citizen activism from our students so that they are encouraged to actively and creatively critique the complex world of media and ask the question: 'Whose interests are being served?'

Notes

1. These ideas are developed and presented in a lecture, 'Technology: Taking it to the streets', by Alyquera 'Sandi' Stone, Professor of Sociology, the University of Texas in Austin, Texas, U.S.A. The lecture was presented at the Visual Studies Workshop in July 1994 in Rochester, New York and in April 1995 at the Center for the Arts, Yerba Buena Center, San Francisco, California.
2. A good example of culture jamming in North America is the work of the Media Foundation in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. The organisation produces videos, contests, public events and a magazine of culture jamming ideas, 'Adbusters'. The Media Foundation, 1243 W. 7th Avenue, Vancouver BC, Canada V6H 1B7.
3. Student work on Media Education and prevention education can be seen in *AdSmarts* is a five-part video kit from the Scott Newman Center in Burbank, CA. Distributed by the Center for Media Literacy, 1962 South Shenandoah St., Los Angeles, CA 90034.
4. Feed is distributed by First Run/Icarus Films in New York City.