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EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #110

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1968/2022: The Seeds of Our Discontents
(Part Eight)

Mediated America

American Tapestry project

WQLN

What is meant by the phrase "mediated America"?

What happened in the 1960s to make "mediation," maybe more accurately *media saturation,* American society's most prominent characteristic?

Paraphrasing Michael Wood's **Movie Made America**, it can be argued that "American society is media made."

What does that mean?

What does *media* mean?

What does *society* mean?

At its most elemental level, a society is a web of interdependent relationships created by a group of individuals to meet their basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and socialization. How are these relationships created and maintained? By interpersonal and group interaction. How do individuals and groups interact? They communicate with one another.

So, if a society is a web of relationships and relationships are created and maintained by communication, then a society is a communications web.

How do we communicate? You could spend your life answering that question. Any attempt at answering almost instantly metastasizes into a bewildering cluster of complications and nuance. Simplistically, as the diagram below illustrates, we communicate by using *media*, which is the plural of *medium*. A *medium* is a *channel* connecting the sender and the recipient of a message. Thus, *media* are channels of communication.

SHANNON-WEAVER'S MODEL OF COMMUNICATION
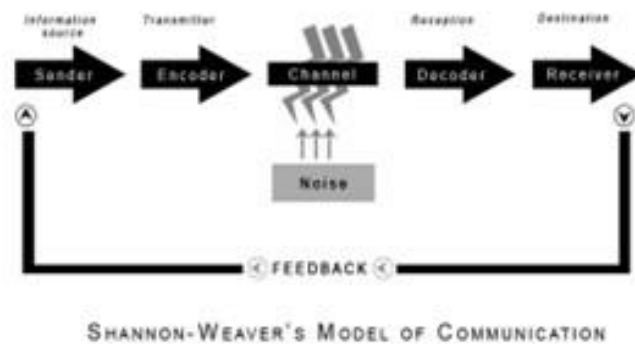
Developed in 1948 by Claude Shannon for Bell Telephone as a model for understanding telephone switching systems, the Shannon-Weaver model was one of the first attempts at "modeling" to understand information processing. It is admittedly simple, but the simple, linear Shannon-Weaver model illustrates the basics quite well for our purposes.

In any communication exchange, the originator (the sender) of the exchange seeks to send a message to a recipient. The sender must encode that message in a language (code = language) that the recipient is capable of decoding (understanding). To transmit the message, the sender chooses a channel (medium) the recipient is capable of receiving. The model includes a feedback loop so that roles can reverse (the recipient becoming the sender, etc.) and some recognition of "noise." Noise is anything in the system that inhibits the sending and receiving of the message. It can be either semantic noise (i.e. the recipient does not understand the language in which the message is encoded) or channel noise (there is some "static" or physical problem in the channel itself inhibiting transmission of the message).

Numerous failure points lurk within the model; it is a wonder we ever actually accurately communicate anything. A simple example. One summer day you and I are sitting by an open window overlooking a lawn. I decide I want to tell you how wonderful you are. For some bizarre reason I try to do it in German. I coo, "Du bist wunderbar – ich liebe dich. ..." I speak German so poorly even a German might not get it, but you don't speak German at all (although you kinda get "wunderbar"). The message fails. That's semantic noise – we're using different codes.

If at the same time outside of the window a groundskeeper goes by with a screeching lawnmower obliterating my voice, that's channel noise. The channel I am using is the air/sound waves between us that are thoroughly scrambled by the lawnmower. If, however, I close the window protecting the air/sound waves between us and speak in English, a code, a language, a symbol system we both

understand, then the message is successfully transmitted and received. Whether or not you're happy to receive it is another thing. You can use the feedback loop to express your pleasure by smiling (you are now using gestural language/code and light waves as the channel to send your message). Or you can smirk and get up and leave (you are still using gestural language and light waves as the channel). Obviously, you could also use air/sound waves to signal your pleasure or displeasure, i.e., you could speak.

At first, most attempts to understand communications focused on coding and language. They, the treacherous world of words, were thought to be the key. Words are only one of the ways in which a message might be encoded. It could be oral/aural, it could be visual, it could be tactile, but the message's meaning is not only influenced by the language in which it is encoded, it is also shaped by the medium, the channel through which it is sent. Marshall McLuhan's great contribution to "understanding media" – the title of his most important book – was to point out that the seemingly innocuous and neutral channel was anything but neutral. In fact, the channel might be the model's most important element, for channels are not neutral. They impose their own biases upon how messages are sent and received, upon how messages are communicated. In short, how you "see" and understand the world around you is a function of the channel – the medium – through which you apprehend it.

This can be heady stuff, but the gist of it is captured in McLuhan's memorable phrase "the medium is the message." For a fuller discussion of this see **Book Notes** #28 ("Who Was Marshall McLuhan and What Did He Say?"), which can be found here.

So, if communications creates society, just as stories (a very sophisticated form of communication) create culture, and not the other way around, then a society is a communications web the strands of which are the media, the channels, through which society's members interact. As a result, a society will reflect the capabilities and biases of its various communications channels. One could argue that not only is American society "mediated," it also was, if not created, made possible by shifting media. At first, the American revolutionary spirit was kindled by sermons inveighing against the British, but, limited to face-to-face contact, they were then supplemented by newspapers, such as Benjamin Edes' **Boston Gazette**, then pamphlets arguing "no taxation without representation" spread throughout the colonies by the only thing that bound them together – a *channel*: the Postal Service, which also linked Samuel Adams' committees of correspondence. In a Bible-dominated, Protestant culture, literacy rates were very high, which made the printed word a potent force. [1]

If the printed word obliterated space by enabling individuals not physically present to one another to communicate, then Samuel F. B. Morse's invention in

the 1830s and 1840s of the telegraph seemed to obliterate, or at least to very seriously modify, time. First molded in the revolutionary era, public opinion was orchestrated by the 19th century's proliferating newspapers as Horace Greely's **New York Tribune** urged "Go west, young man" and Joseph Pulitzer's **St. Louis Post-Dispatch** and **New York World** and William Randolph Hearst's **San Francisco Examiner** and **New York Journal** created the first stirrings of a national popular culture. Early mass circulation magazines, such as Sarah Josepha Hale's **Godey's Lady's Book**, fashioned domestic culture, while **The Atlantic, Harpers,** and **The North American Review** created a genuine American intellectual life. Photography enabled you to see places to which you could never go. Alexander Graham Bell's telephone did obliterate time and space as individuals not physically present could now speak to one another in real time. Thomas Edison's moving pictures and recorded music exploded provincialism. Radio created a national culture in the 1920s, as did movies that talked in the 1930s and 1940s. TV in the 1950s and 1960s brought it into individual homes, as NBC's peacock once boasted, in "living color."

Since a chronological tracing of the history of American media swamps the bounds of a simple **Book Note**, suffice it to say that the communication channels within which Americans chose to interact sculpted American society. As we discussed in Part Seven of "The Seeds of Our Discontents" examining popular music, beginning in the late 19th century, and blossoming through the early and middle 20th century, by the 1950s radio, recorded music, and movies had created the semblance of a mass, of a unified American culture. Although massive, that unified culture was always more than a bit of an illusion. While the protean story of a diverse America got some marginal attention, think World War II GI films whose barracks were filled with Dom from Brooklyn, Dick from Iowa, and Bubba from Georgia, these images were swallowed by a flood tide of other images espousing the essentialist American story depicting America as a white, Christian, and patriarchal society. Although I like the film a great deal, think of "It's a Wonderful Life."

So, what happened in the 1960s to that society, or, more accurately, to the images of that illusory society? What happened in that fractious decade to snarl, or in communications theory-speak, to add "noise" to those interwoven media-channels creating American society and culture? What happened that threatened to fragment the lacework of mediated reality so that society itself seemed in danger of unraveling?

Well, as we've seen throughout this multipart series, a lot of things happened in *"The '60s,"* but from the perspective of "mediated America" two were of supreme importance. We looked at one in Part Seven – the emergence of rock n' roll music bringing the story of a diverse, protean America back to center stage. The other, of course, was *TV, TV, TV.*

TV – television – that little box in the living room that was everyone's window on the world. For the first time in human history, one could not only hear but also see in real time what was happening down the street, across town, downstate, on either coast, on the other side of the world or even out of this world – in 1969 *TV* took us to the moon.

If the printed word enabled people not physically present to one another to communicate, if photography, both still and moving, enabled people not physically present to one another to see one another, if the telegraph then the telephone then recorded music and radio enabled people not physically present to speak to one another, then television did all of the above simultaneously in real time – "Live from coast-to-coast."

It appeared magical. Sitting in the safe space of your living room you could watch a ballgame on the other side of the country, you could be in Times Square on New Year's Eve watching the ball drop, you could be anywhere; or you could be in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963, you could be on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama on Sunday – Bloody Sunday – March 7, 1965 or you could be in the killing fields of South Vietnam on the evening news on almost any night from 1963 to the last helicopter leaving Saigon in 1975. Which, curiously enough, are the book end dates most often used to define *"The '60s."*

It is not a coincidence.

All in real time; all in living color.

This had never before in the history of the world been possible.

To anyone under 50 reading this, it's taken for granted. To those over 50, they now take it for granted, but once upon a time it seemed unreal.

And it changed everything.

How?

If channels aren't neutral and impose their own biases upon a communications exchange, what are *TV's* "biases"? First a word about the use of "biases" in this context. It is not as if *TV* – television – as a medium has a conscious tendency to favor one point-of-view over another. Bias in this context means that a given channel because of its very nature "sees" things in a way specific to it regardless of the intentions of the humans who use it. Obviously, humans can intentionally deploy different media precisely because of the medium's "perspective," but the

point is that specific channels do have perspectives unique to them. They impose their way of "seeing," their way of "knowing" on the communications exchange.

Marshall McLuhan famously said that television was a cool medium, by which he meant that in contrast to the hot medium of print, which is information rich, television was information low. It only provided a surface image of the object of its attention. The viewer had to complete the image based upon the partial information the camera presented. More importantly, television created the illusion of reality, when in fact what one sees is only a slice of the reality unfolding both inside and outside of the camera's frame. One thinks one is seeing all there is to see, but in reality, one is only seeing a fragment of that reality.

Equally important, television imposes its reality upon the viewer, because as viewers attempt to mentally complete the image, they are drawn into it. In a strange way, they become part of the image as their interaction with it creates a new reality as they and the image become one. In short, in its vividness, in its immediacy, in its sense that this is all happening now in the cocoon of one's living room television creates a new reality – a mediated reality that for some can be more intense than the banal reality of their daily existence.

To jump way ahead, why else would anyone want to watch – in this context "watch" is too weak a word – why else would anyone want to immerse themselves in "Kardashian-land"?

How did this new and powerfully intense medium – television – impact American society in the 1960s resonating down to today? It happened in four big buckets – civil rights, civil disturbances, the war in Vietnam, and in all three of the decades' presidential elections.

What happened can actually be summarized in several sentences. If television, unlike print, is immediate and intense in its viewer involvement, then television obliterated the emotional distance between the viewer of an event and the event itself. For example, if a newspaper article described for you the beating of a civil rights protester attempting to order lunch at a segregated diner, the reader – in communications' theory-speak "the auditor" – can distance themselves from the account through multiple filters, not the least of which is that reading involves processing the information through multiple decoding activities, including the fact that words on a printed page are read one at a time in sequence – for most people, slowly.

Television, on the other hand, because it is a visual image that moves and talks and even screams is right there in front of you, right now, all at once, forcing your attention as it drags you into the encounter. There is no distance, no comfortable

space between you and the event – you are right there in the metaphorical middle of it, often in living color. You can't escape it and you can't dismiss it.

In the 1950s and 1960s this was all new. People had not yet learned – perhaps they still haven't – to distance themselves.

So, in those four buckets I mentioned, television obliterated the distance between citizen auditor – viewer – and the events depicted. The civil rights movement finally found success in the 1960s when the vast majority of Americans had to confront Bull Connor, George Wallace, and other racists in the comfort of their living rooms. People being beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge for simply marching for voting rights were no longer things described in a static, black-and-white newspaper, but living, breathing, bleeding folks right there in your living room. It is not a coincidence that all three of the great 20th century civil rights acts were passed in a span of four years from 1964 to 1968. [2] By prohibiting otherwise decent folk from looking away, television made it happen.

Similarly, the George Wallace-led "law and order" blowback against civil rights gained its momentum from television's "live" coverage of civil disturbances – urban riots – in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and numerous other American cities. Once again, otherwise decent folk, who initially supported civil rights, recoiled again at images of American cities aflame. Unable to escape the emotional turbulence unfolding in their living rooms, they sought security in a candidate who pledged to make America safe again.

Similarly, the anti-Vietnam War movement gained its greatest momentum not from the protests and teach-ins opposing the war, but from television news coverage that brought actual combat scenes into the family living room every night on the Evening News "in living color." This had never before happened in the history of the world. These weren't abstract reports of battle, but battle itself with all its chaos, noise, blood, and vicarious pain. This wasn't reading in the local newspaper – again with the emotional distance print provides – about the death of the boy who lived three blocks away, but actually seeing, if not his, then his comrade's bleeding body being helicoptered out of harm's way. The impact was powerful. By the late '60s, support for the war withered, not because most Americans understood the war's aims and disagreed, but because they had become emotionally drained by the war's presence in their living room. The war in Vietnam is often called "The Living Room War." [3]

We already discussed in Part Two of "The Seeds of Our Discontents," which can be found here, how Roger Ailes in the 1968 presidential election transformed American politics. I am not going to repeat all of that, but I do want to make two or three observations. Television as a medium "flattens out" discourse. It is not discursive; it does not probe deeply and methodically into an issue. It is imagistic

– it is all about images. Ailes exploited that aspect of television by employing the techniques of consumer advertising to political campaigning. Rather than detailed analysis and discussion of an issue, Ailes presented imagistic collages driving home his thesis. A classic example is the Nixon campaign ad of a lone woman walking down a dark and rainy street as a narrator intones about the breakdown of law and order in American cities threatening American women.

If television as a medium is not discursive, then what does it best communicate? Personality, because as F. Scott Fitzgerald said somewhere in **The Great Gatsby**, personality is a series of successful gestures. Gestures are visual and television, although it has sound, is above all visual. And what is the most important of all visual cues – appearance and likeableness. Nixon, it seems, is the exception to that emerging rule, but we saw it first as the newsreels captured FDR's million-dollar smile, then again in 1960 when John F. Kennedy's movie star good looks and winning personality triumphed. [4] Nixon learned that lesson and placed himself in the background in 1968. But good looks and likeableness became the litmus test of future political candidates, all of whom Ailes said would be entertainers. Politics became like the fourth grade, in which likeableness and popularity, not policy, carried the day. Without getting into any discussion of policy, almost every winning post-1968 presidential candidate was handsome and projected likeableness – the pleasantly handsome Ronald Reagan, the likeable "good ole boys" Bubba Clinton and W. Bush, and the preternaturally, jazz cool Barack Obama. Add to that list Donald Trump, who Roseanne Barr famously said was so popular because he sounds like us. Television drove policy out the window and welcomed personality to the party. It is a cliched observation, but Abraham Lincoln could never win an election in mediated America.

Television is also theater. Without getting into literary theory, the heart of drama and comedy is conflict. Television turned the news into entertainment, turned the news into theater, and that brought conflict to the fore. In 1968, the ratings for the famous William F. Buckley versus Gore Vidal debates, in which the camera perfectly captured the two commentators' visceral dislike for one another, buried the more traditional news coverage. They transformed the "news" from a recitation or recapturing of events into a sparring match of warring opinions in which the personalities of the opinionators counted for far more than their opinions. There is a direct line of descent from those debates to Fox News, CNN, and every other cable news commentary show. In fact, calling them "commentary shows" reveals the transformation. They are not "news," they are bloviators commenting on the news, the program's energy generated by the differing opinions, which might or might not be real. Substance got buried in style and the style was all flash points and "gotcha" moments. They are "shows."

With the revocation in the late 1980s of the Fairness Doctrine, which mandated that both sides of an issue must be presented, naked bias oozed across the public

air waves bringing to life Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Tucker Carlson, and other purveyors of creep and crud. (The left also has its cretins but none so famous as the aforementioned. We could spend a **Book Note** or two trying to understand that factoid). Combined with the technological revolution empowering more and more individualistic media – everything from "boom boxes" to personal computers to iPods to the Internet and Web 2.0 with user created and curated content – we have now arrived in 2022 with Steve Bannon's "flooding the zone." When one "floods a zone," one floods the *mediascape* (all media taken as a whole, from podcasts to Facebook and other web-based noxious weeds to Twitter to the **New York Times** and **Wall Street Journal** to any slushy daily and the alternative weekly of your choice), one floods the *mediascape* with more and more data points no matter how outlandish and silly or dangerous and deadly. The point is not to inform, but to "flood the zone" with so much bogus information it is impossible to tell the truth from January 6, 2021 to QAnon to pizzagate.

We've arrived at a time, drowning in a sea of information and misinformation, that it is no longer even necessary to be likable to be a viable candidate. All that is necessary is to somehow prove that your follower's enemies are your enemies ("the enemy of my enemy is my friend") and you can be an obnoxious ass, but some people will still follow you.

So, in a great irony, television, the "massiest" of mass mediums, fractured the illusion of a unified, holistic American culture created by recorded music, radio, and the movies in the early to mid-20th century. Today, we live in that fractured, media saturated world.

What is to be done?

We'll explore that in future **Book Notes** later this fall. But some "thinking points" with which to begin include the marginally hopeful observation by some commentators that our current bewildering mediascape is what always happens as people adjust to new channels of communication. We've not yet adjusted to social media, instant news and "flooding the zone," but history says we will – in a generation or two. The example usually given is that people finally adjusted to the printing press and the mass distribution of books, but such observations usually gloss over the fact that the adjustment came after a century or two of brutal religious wars.

How to avoid religious or civil wars resulting from our current information overloads? Well, we could reinstate censorship, but that always begs the question of who will be the censor. So, that is a less than welcoming suggestion. But we could begin to seriously discuss how the editorial function might be returned (in this case, initiated) in social media.

No, the answer, as always, seems to be education, education, education. It's slow and fraught with its own internal and increasingly external (i.e. politically partisan) arguments, but it is our best hope.

Education for what? I'd suggest two things: Civics and media literacy. Civics, which once upon a time was a part of every middle school and high school curriculum, teaches how our democratic system of self-government works (or is supposed to work). Media literacy teaches how "to read" media, how to understand the biases and perspectives of the various channels. Media literacy would teach how to understand media. Equally important, it also should include the study of rhetoric, which is the art of argumentation. It ought to do this not to make us more argumentative, but to make us more critical and intelligent consumers and analysts of the endless arguments (both faux and genuine) that now pass for news.

That's probably not the quick and easy answer you hoped for, but it is almost certainly our best hope for a saner future. We'll look at these ideas in future **Book Notes**, but next week we'll conclude this series on "The Seeds of Our Discontents" by looking at America's great triumph, which has served as a global beacon of hope since the beginning and continues to do so down to today, for why else are they still coming to America. That's next week in "The Fusion Thread."

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"Shannon and Weaver Model of Communication" at **Communication Theory** available <u>here</u> accessed July 28, 2022.

End Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon see Bernard Bailyn's **The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution,** Enlarged Edition. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1967/1992).
2. The great civil rights acts of the 1960s were the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

3. Cf. *"The Living Room War – Vietnam"* at **You Tube** available [here](#) accessed July 30, 2022. Although not very "intellectually sophisticated," this brief video highlights the phenomenon.
4. Cf. ***Book Notes # 27*** "Mediated America," which can be found [here](#).

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