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Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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Mediated America Part One: Superman Comes to the Supermarket

Mailer, Norman. "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," *Esquire Magazine* (November, 1960) available at <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a3858/supermansupermarket/> accessed September 19, 2020.

In July 1960, reporting on the Democratic National Convention from the City of Angels, *Los Angeles*, Norman Mailer discovered an America **where** no one had yet surveyed, no one had yet described much less mapped for future travelers.



It was a mythical **where**, a mediated **where**. It confounded traditional reporters of the **Five W's** and raised troubling questions, such as:

Where do you live?

Are you sure?

How do you know?

Can you live in more than one place at the same time?

As Kurt Andersen's ***Fantasyland suggested***, Americans, since almost from the beginning but increasingly in the Age of Electronic Media, seemed to live in multiple realms, living as they did in their conventional towns doing their conventional chores while simultaneously living and making decisions based on notions gleaned

from a mediated dreamscape **where** of shifting images only loosely tethered to the conventional reality of who, what, **where**, when, why, and how.

Where do you live?

Are you sure?

Keep those questions in mind as we explore the **Five Ws**.

Remember the **Five Ws** – *who, what, when, where, and why* (and sometimes *how*)? While usually ascribed to journalism, their origin goes back to Aristotle, who was attempting to understand human agency in any *circumstance* – agency being how humans act and make decisions. Aristotle wanted to know how and why changing *circumstances* (the *what*) acted as *modifying or influencing factors* in human decision-making at any time (when) and anyplace (**where**). [1]

Hold onto that thought about “a modifying or influencing factor.”

Regardless of the antiquity of their origin, the **Five W’s** are the fundamental research questions, whether for a historian trying to understand conflicting accounts of an event, a detective attempting to answer “Who did it?” or anyone trying to solve a problem. They are the foundational questions in information gathering, intelligence analysis, and problem solving. Each is a factual question; none can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” [2]

Of the six – I know they are called the **Five W’s** but we have to include “how” – all but *why* are tangible, i.e. they are physical and, in theory, can be fixed in time and place. *Why*, however, speaks to motivation, which takes us into the realm of reason and emotion or perhaps reason overridden by emotion. Economics asserts that humans are rational creatures that always act in their own best interests. Humans seek to maximize *utility*, economic jargon for “the capacity of a commodity or service to satisfy some human want.” [3]

That may be fine in theory, but humans as rational actors who always make utilitarian decisions designed to maximize their welfare explode in response to a simple question: Did you ever do anything knowing as you did it that it was not in your best interest but you did it anyway because it felt good or you hoped it would?

So, we discover that *why* can be ambiguous, perhaps even delusional, but *who, what, when, where, and how* are straightforward, right? They are factual, tangible, real, and cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.”

So, back to the beginning and those questions I asked you to remember. For the moment we will forget about *what* and *when*, but ask you – the *who* – ***where*** do you live?

You will almost certainly answer that you live at Number X on Street Y in the community of Hometown in the State of MyState in the United States of America on the North American continent of planet Earth.

Correct, as far as it goes, but we (you and I) also live between our ears in a mental construct of images both visual and verbal. That is what Norman Mailer discovered about Americans in 1960 in Los Angeles as he watched *Superman* – John F. Kennedy – come to the *Supermarket* – that most banal of American entities, the market, yet overflowing with abundance and possibilities – happiness in a Hostess’s HoHo.

On the one hand, it was only a store; on the other, the image of pure possibility.

In some sense, the image of the supermarket is the ultimate literal extension of the evolution of human communications – *the exchange of images*. For most of human history, images were visual, but then humans began to name their images. Then, attempting to make sense of their experience, humans began to weave the things they named into stories that, woven together, gave meaning to their lives. In doing so, humans began to reshape their surroundings, their ***where***, to fit the stories they told themselves.

They began to live in two worlds; maybe humans always did. One hypothesis neuroscientists and philosophers attempting to understand the origin of consciousness have espoused is that consciousness originated in the brain’s left and right hemispheres communicating with one another via the corpus callosum, that bundle of nerve fibers connecting the cerebral hemispheres.

Regardless, language was the medium humans used to navigate between their two worlds. First it was only gestural and tactile; then spoken evolving from grunts into patterned sound, then pictographic, then written. Spoken language, memorized as stories about ***where*** humans originated, how they were to behave, and ***where*** they were going became a tradition reported down the generations. In the process, the oral tradition created a sense of the past and defeated time; written language defeated space, for now speaker and hearer did not have to be present to one another.

So, like the *supermarket*, ***where*** became both a physical place and a metaphoric space enabling humans to inhabit two worlds. Talk about “*a modifying or influencing factor*” – the evolution of communications at each stage changed how humans lived.

From small hunter-gatherer bands to pastoral nomads to small village agriculturalists to urban dwellers, communication's changing *circumstances* invented human culture.

All human culture is metaphoric. It is a mediated creation, in which people tell themselves stories to make sense of their experience.

This is not new. It might be considered that which makes us humans and not just chimps with an overdeveloped cerebral cortex. But for the longest time the process was slow, as in ages and millennia. Humans had time to adjust as they assimilated new media moving from a visual, then aural world to a world of texts only a few could cipher and decipher and then read aloud to others.

But then a *circumstance* occurred that influenced and modified everything. A scant 500 years ago, the printing press set in motion a communications revolution bringing more information faster to more people than ever before. Subsequent developments in communications technology accelerated the speed of change until today humans communicate at the speed of *Now*.

All media defeat either time or space or both; all subsequent media subsume older media, accelerate the speed with which messages can be sent and received while increasing the number of recipients a message can reach until now it is theoretically possible to speak simultaneously to every person on and even off the planet (for example, aloft in a plane or among astronauts working on the space station).

So, ***where*** do you live?

How has the communications revolution modified and influenced the circumstances of your life?

We live, you say, at the literal ***where*** of "Number X on Street Y in the community of Hometown in the State of MyState in the United States of America on the North American continent of planet Earth," but we also live in the ***mediasphere*** – "the collective ecology of the world's media, including newspapers, journals, television, radio, books, novels, advertising, press releases, publicity, the blogosphere; any and all media both broadcast and published" [4] that gives rise to the ***mediascape*** – "the metaphorical [landscape](#) of trends, tastes, etc. promoted by the [media](#)." [5]

Not to mention social media, which is literally a world, a ***where***, unto itself.

OK, that was pretty abstract and admittedly oversimplified, but it's important. One might even say it is crucial, mission-critical, as in life and death, that we learn how to

understand our mediated world, our mediated *where*, if we are to have any chance to solve, or, if not solve, manage the current discontents roiling American culture.

Now, let me ask again:

Where do you live?

As Americans struggle with their current cultural disagreements, it is important they be able to distinguish between those disagreements anchored, in Karl Rove's memorable phrase, in the *where* of a "reality-based community" and the *where* of those disagreements that are really conflicts about, as we try to make sense of the "reality-based community," the stories we tell ourselves. Ideally, we want those two versions of reality to be in complete sync with one another, if not literally then metaphorically. If not in complete sync, then they are at least more or less connected into a sensible whole and not in open conflict with each other.

Norman Mailer was among the first to identify, particularly as it applies to American politics, that our images and stories and the real they allege to describe had come uncoupled. In a brilliant *Esquire Magazine* essay first published in November 1960, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," Mailer not only invented New Journalism, that genre of journalism using the novelist's techniques he would later perfect in *The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, he also captured Americans succumbing to a movie-based reality only tangentially connected to Rove's "reality-based community." Here is Mailer describing John F. Kennedy's arrival at Los Angeles' Biltmore Hotel for the 1960 Democratic Convention:

For one moment he saluted Pershing Square, and Pershing Square saluted him back, the prince and the beggars of glamour staring at one another across a city street, one of those very special moments in the underground history of the world ... all the while the band kept playing the campaign tunes, sashaying circus music, and one had a moment of clarity, intense as *déjà vu*, for the scene which had taken place had been glimpsed before in a dozen musical comedies; it was the scene where the hero, the matinee idol, the movie star comes to the palace to claim the princess, or what is the same, and more to our soil, the football hero, the campus king, arrives at the dean's home surrounded by a court of open-singing students to plead with the dean for his daughter's kiss and permission to put on the big musical that night. [6] (Note: Mailer's comments, though unattributed, are indicated by direct quotes and indented passages throughout the remainder of this article).

Mailer's profound observation was that America, the land of the movies, had become a movie, for "the Democrats were going to nominate a man who, no matter how serious his political dedication might be, was indisputably and willy-nilly going to be seen as a

great box-office actor, and the consequences of that were staggering and not at all easy to calculate.”

“(T)he consequences of that were staggering and not at all easy to calculate.” From the vantage point of 1960, Mailer could not have foreseen Ronald Reagan, he of *Bedtime for Bonzo fame* (the preview trailer for which can be seen [here](#)) or Donald Trump, whose businesses declared bankruptcy six times between 1991 and 2009, resurrected as *The Apprentice*, but he sensed their approach. A scant eight years later, Roger Ailes, godfather of Fox News, said Richard Nixon, 1960’s loser but 1968’s comeback kid, would be the last politician elected President. All the rest would be performers. [7]

Why? “Because America's politics would now be also America's favorite movie, America's first soap opera, America's best-seller.” Americans were living in two *wheres*, the reality-based community and the mediasphere. As Mailer observed:

Since the First World War Americans have been leading a double life, and our history has moved on two rivers, one visible, the other underground; there has been the history of politics which is concrete, factual, practical and unbelievably dull if not for the consequences of the actions of some of these men; and there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation.

How did this happen? What had influenced and changed the circumstances of our *where*? Mailer explained:

The twentieth century may yet be seen as that era when civilized man and underprivileged man were melted together into mass man, the iron and steel of the nineteenth century giving way to electronic circuits which communicated their messages into men.

People had become *mediated*. As they sought to make sense of their experience, the images they once created for themselves would now be prepackaged for them in living color synced to a soundtrack as their “extremes of personality (would be) singed out of existence by the psychic fields of force communicators would impose.” [12] And nowhere would this be felt so acutely as in America, that land of rootless immigrants which was “the first and most prolific creator of mass communications” and “most vulnerable ... to its own homogenization.”

But Americans also had a creed of freedom, equality, and opportunity. It was “the country in which the dynamic myth of the Renaissance – that every person was potentially extraordinary – knew its most passionate persistence. Simply, America was the land *where* people still believed in heroes.” As Mailer continues, “If America was a

country built by one hero leaping past another – is there a county in all of our ground which does not have its legendary figure?” – then when Frederick Jackson Turner declared the frontier closed “the expansion turned inward, became part of an agitated, overexcited, superheated dream life.”

If one could no longer, as Horace Greely exhorted, “Go West, young man,” then Americans went to the movies as “the film studios threw up their searchlights. ... and the romantic possibilities of the old conquest of land turned into a vertical myth, trapped within the skull, of a new kind of heroic life.” Americans found new heroes in movie stars and celebrities as they vicariously lived out the “myth, that each of us was born to be free, to wander, to have adventure and to grow on waves of the violent, the perfumed, and the unexpected.”

And no matter how strenuously those in the reality-based community – teachers, parents, politicians, professors, and priests – strove to tamp down that mythic energy, it bubbled back to the surface in rock ‘n’ roll, Elvis Presley, James Dean, Marlon Brando, Jack Kerouac, and Mailer himself. As the Greatest Generation tried to come down from World War II and the ‘40s’ adrenaline high, the myth “stayed alive. ... It was as if the message in the labyrinth of the genes would insist that violence was locked with creativity, and adventure was the secret of love.”

If the settling of America was a mythic adventure, then those pioneer descendants, if they too were to go on an adventure and fulfill their destiny, needed a hero. For every adventure, every quest, whether to tame a continent like Kit Carson and John C. Fremont or to build their perfect building like Gary Cooper’s Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*, needs someone to lead it: “a hero central to his time, a man ... who could capture the secret imagination of a people ... (who) embodies the fantasy and so allows each private mind the liberty to consider its fantasy and find a way to grow.”

So, as America’s two **wheres** merged into a mediated *here*, Jack Kennedy, genuine war hero married to the beautiful Jacqueline, became the first movie star president; the new Arthur creating the new Camelot who would redeem the nation because redemption does not come from social legislation and personal counseling but from “a hero who reveals the character of the country to itself.”

Although he knew movie stars and loafed with them – Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Sammy Davis, Jr.; and his sister Pat was married to one – Jack Kennedy himself was not. But he could look like one and the camera loved him. As Mailer notes:

He would seem at one moment older than his age, forty-eight or fifty, a tall, slim, sunburned professor with a pleasant, weathered face, not even particularly handsome; five minutes later, talking to a press conference on his lawn, three microphones before him, a television camera turning, his appearance would have gone through a metamorphosis, he would look again like a movie star, his coloring vivid, his manner rich, his gestures strong and quick, alive with that concentration of vitality a successful actor always seems to radiate.

As Roger Ailes said, all the rest would be performers.

That new truism was driven home in the fall of 1960 as the new medium of television swallowed print, radio, and the movies to make politics electric. The medium was, indeed, the message. In that fall's now historic first televised presidential debates, it was Kennedy, the mediagenic new King Arthur, who bested Richard Nixon, the plodding Uriah Heep, that diligent clerk.

Those who only read newspaper summaries of the exchange, thought Nixon the better prepared; those who only heard it on radio, thought Nixon the more astute. But the millions upon millions who saw it on television, who saw Nixon and his five o'clock shadow slog through answers, thought Jack Kennedy, handsome, glittering, smiling his telegenic smile, the hero they would follow.

And so, under the modifying influence of television, *circumstances* changed. One no longer had to go to the movies, for they were at home in the living room in television's flickering glow which set the path for Donald Trump a bit more than a half-century later.

Focusing on his real estate-based wealth, say what one will about Donald Trump, most people forget he is a genuine television star – the second to occupy the Oval Office. As the old Coco Cola ad put it, he's the real thing.

Lord of *The Apprentice*, keenly attuned to the camera's red light, sensitive to every twitch and nuance of audience reaction, he is a master of the *mediasphere*. He is utterly and completely at home in the *mediascape*.

Donald Trump knows *where* he lives. And he knows *where* you live, too.

We all live in *medialand*.

The Man of Queens, who was never quite accepted by Manhattan's glitterati, turned against the city and cities. He panders to the small towns in which he

has never chosen to dwell. With the con man's sure instinct, he tells them he feels their pain and will make them great again. He understands what Mailer said six decades ago:

In American life, the unspoken war of the century has taken place between the city and the small town; the city which is dynamic, orgiastic, unsettling, explosive and accelerating to the psyche; the small town which is rooted, narrow, cautious, and planted in the life-logic of the family. The need of the city is to accelerate growth; the pride of the small town is to retard it.

He will be “The Folks hero.” To paraphrase Mailer, Trump captures the secret imagination of a people and embodies their fantasy allowing each to find a way to grow. He does not speak to their pocketbook, but to their secret self as he tweets “I feel your pain.”

This denizen of Fifth Avenue and Palm Beach, first on *The Apprentice* then in the White House, playing Everyman's fantasy of an executive, firing first this staffer then that one, Trump rides on behalf of the proles who adore him and the plutocrats who can only wish they could behave as he does. They vicariously celebrate him as he rides the “myth, that each of us was born to be free, to wander, to have adventure and to grow on waves of the violent, the perfumed, and the unexpected.” Smiling and scowling all at once, on his ardent follower's behalf he gives the policy wonks and assorted do-gooders, who through social legislation and counseling sessions would bring them to heel, a Star Spangled middle finger.

Master of spectacle, using Mount Rushmore and the White House as backdrops, Trump invites his followers into their shared movie – an avenging *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* to drain the swamp; he'll be their “Don” in *Good Fellas* and *The Godfather*; Ivanka his *Evita*, and although he can neither sing nor dance, he'll do a *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and welcome *The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming* all woven into one social mediated, 24-hour cable news **where**.

Master of the media, you cannot escape him. He has made his **where** your **where**.

Where – the mediasphere, the mediascape, which is not a “reality-based” reality but a media-based reality *everywhere*, all at once, all the time.

It is every**where** and it is *nowhere*.

Norman Mailer first saw it in the Los Angeles smog of 1960 as he glimpsed a people's primal need for someone to meld their two **wheres** into some semblance of a whole, bent as it might be. What Mailer did not see – the forest for the trees? – was how to return to a “reality-based” **where**; how to tame the mediasphere and make it work for the common good.

For that you need to know the turf; for that you need a map.

Who knows this land? Who has mapped it?

Next week in **Book Notes** *Mediated America, Part Two: The Cartographers*: With the help of Marshall McLuhan, Daniel Boorstin, and Neil Postman, perhaps, like Dorothy, we can get back to Kansas.



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End Notes

1. “circumstance,” in [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) available at <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/circumstance> accessed September 20, 2020.
2. “Five Ws,” in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_Ws accessed September 20, 2020.
3. “utility,” in [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) available at <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/utility> accessed September 20, 2020.
4. “mediasphere,” in **Your Dictionary** available at <https://www.yourdictionary.com/mediasphere> accessed September 20, 2020.
5. “mediascape,” in **Your Dictionary** available at <https://www.yourdictionary.com/mediascape> accessed September 20, 2020.
6. To avoid littering the article with **End Note** numbers and a string of Ibids., all Mailer quotes unless otherwise noted are from Mailer, Norman. “*Superman Comes to the Supermarket*,” **Esquire Magazine** (November 1960) available at <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a3858/superman-supermarket/> accessed September 19, 2020.
7. Rosenwald, Michael. “*Television is not a gimmick*”: How Roger Ailes made Richard Nixon likable,” **The Washington Post** (May 18, 2017) available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/05/18/television-is-not-a-gimmick-how-roger-ailes-made-richard-nixon-likable/> accessed September 21, 2020.

Photo: <https://the6milliondollarstory.com/jfk-superman-comes-to-the-supermarket-by-norman-mailer/>

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