The Mediasphere

In 1980, the second edition of *How to Read a Film* concluded with a note on democracy in the media which observed that, while new technology had extended our power to create media, distribution of print, film, and television was still concentrated in a relatively small number of hands:

> The pervasion of the media has been a common theme in science fiction ever since George Orwell's vision of *1984*: "The instrument, the telescreen, could be dimmed but there was no way of shutting it off completely." But the facts bear repeating: what we still choose to call "reality" is now largely determined for us. It is not only that someone else is telling our stories—it's also the kinds of stories they're telling.

We then suggested that the channels of distribution were about to broaden, too, and listed a litany of imminent technologies from electronic mail to video on demand, from online data services to fiber optic cable, from direct-to-home satellite broadcasting to computers in every home. All of these innovations—and much more—are now part of our daily

lives. But one thing is clear: the digital revolution has radically altered the way we deal with reality—no matter who determines it.

My children, who were born after *How to Read a Film* first appeared and who largely grew up before I got around to the third edition in 1999, have enjoyed a wealth of media unknown before 1980. Their generation are prodigious consumers of internet, television, video, CDs, computer games, software, and theatrical movies, and (perhaps surprisingly, considering the wealth of new media) are not unfamiliar with the printed word—even if it is far more often delivered on the screen rather than on the page.

More important than the vast quantities of media they consume is the equally remarkable quantity they produce. They have at their disposal a range of software tools that would have astonished any professional writer, filmmaker, or painter twenty years ago. The Orwellian year has come and gone. (We've forgotten who won the Super Bowl, but we remember the commercial.) The warnings about control of the media seem less pointed than they did fifteen years ago. We are now, most of us, so intoxicated with our new power to produce and to distribute media (media of all sorts: multi, uni, ulti, hyper, visual, textual, and traditional) that we might care less who owns the old-fashioned media. A. J. Liebling, the great press critic, noted a half-century ago that "freedom of the press belongs to those who own one." We are now at the point where we all own one—and a film lab, and a recording studio. But what do we do with them?

The significant increase in distribution bandwidth in the last twenty years resulted in a political stasis in the media that is as frustrating as it is welcome. Most points of view get expressed. No social or political problem is left untreated in talkshows, blogs, or listservs. The trouble is that although we talk incessantly, we don't talk *with* each other. Instead we yell—and we yell for the benefit of our own crew. To a certain extent, this has always been true. When I was a boy there were seven newspapers in New York. (In most cities there were at least two.) You could choose your shade of opinion. But for the last half of the twentieth century the broadcast networks served as a unifying force. And now it's not a question of choosing among seven newspapers, but seven thousand blogs and websites.

The oughts have witnessed a true revolution in the architecture of our communications. Blogs (one to many), social networking (many to many), cellphones (one to one) have all worked to enhance our virtual communities. But these groupings are virtual, and narrowly focused: they are com-

munities of interest, not location. They bring isolated people together—but they further the separation of groups.

It is remarkable—and disturbing—that in this decade when democratic communication took a quantum leap forward we've also experienced the most Orwellian politics—ever—replete with Newspeak catchphrases, reductionist soundbites, and mesmerizing photo ops ("Mission Accomplished").

There are two ways to explain this conundrum:

1. The Newspeak of the oughts took hold early on, before the full effect of blogs and social networks took hold (in which case we will soon reach a tipping point and the nature of political discourse will be radically different in the teens).
2. You can never read Orwell without consulting Huxley: these apparently powerful new communications tools amount to no more than soma to distract the powerless.

Whichever of these two explanations turns out to be true about our political discourse it is as least as important to examine how this communications revolution has affected our social contract: the more connected we are in the mediasphere, the more isolated we are in what we used to call the real world. Armed with your iPhone, your Blackberry, and your GPS you are supremely independent of your physical surroundings. You don't need to know where you are or where you are going: your GPS does. You don't need to remember your mother's phone number (or even her name), just "Dial Mom." Just do what your Blackberry or iPhone calendar tells you and you'll get through the day. And, please—try to ignore all those pesky human beings who invade your space.

My friend Fred tells this story: recently, he was having dinner in a restaurant with his wife. There was a woman at a table near by with two kids who were running wild. Their yells and screams were understandable enough: they were having fun. But it made it difficult for Fred to hear what his wife was saying.

At the end of the meal, as they were leaving, Fred and his wife gently suggested to the woman with the two wild kids that she might have exerted a bit more parental control.

She shot back irately: "This is a public place!! I can do what I want!!"

[Lightbulb!]

In the civilized world, a *private* place was where you could do what you want. A *public* place was where you did what you should. In our new
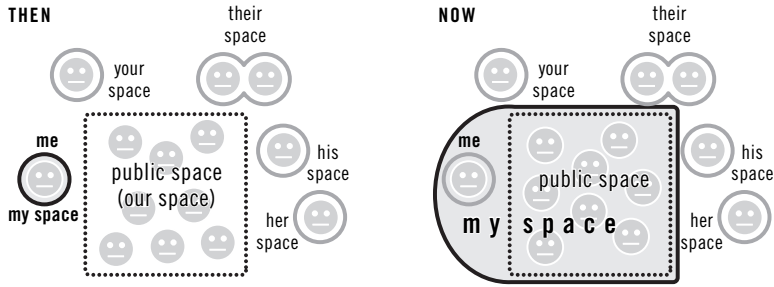
DIAGRAM Q. The public space—"our space"—no longer exists: "My space" has usurped it.

privatized world the public place belongs to you. The only place off limits is perhaps someone else's private place.

We have democratized the media more quickly and more thoroughly than we ever dared hope. Now we have the power. But as our own powers have increased in the real-life human world which we might call the "sociosphere," so have the power, reach, and pervasiveness of the mediasphere that hovers over us all.

Raymond Williams observed in *Communications* (1976):

> In societies like Britain and the United States, more drama is watched in a week or a weekend by the majority of viewers, than would have been watched in a year, or in some cases a lifetime in any previous historical period. It is not uncommon for the majority of viewers to see, regularly, as much as two or three hours of drama, of various kinds, every day. The implications of this have scarcely begun to be considered. It is clearly one of the unique characteristics of advanced industrial societies that drama as an experience is now an intrinsic part of everyday life, at a quantitative level which is so very much greater than any precedent as to seem a fundamental qualitative change.

Williams was talking about the television age; in the internet age, "two to three hours" seems like a frugal budget, and to the experience of broadcast drama we must add news-as-entertainment, video games, the constant music track provided by the iPod, DVDs, and email, chat, blogs, listservs, and the web. (And don't forget the time demands of the cellphone.)

And one implication is beginning to become clear: we are losing our grounding in reality. We are well on our way to David Bowman's fearful cage. The more time we spend in the mediasphere the less sense we have of the social contract that used to pertain. It is impolite to leave the room when your father is talking; it is not impolite to leave the room when Cliff Huxtable is talking. The more the social contract is weakened by the radia-
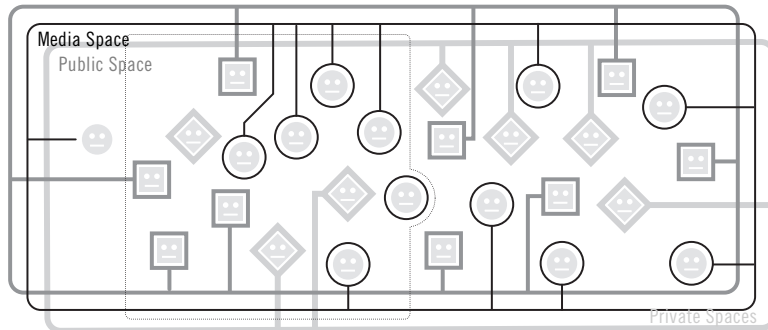
DIAGRAM R. The mediasphere superimposes itself on the sociosphere, both public and private spaces. (Not pictured here: the ecosphere of which we are all a part.)

tion from the mediasphere the more attention is diverted to the media space, and what is not diverted to it—or reflected from it—increases attention to self.

As Raymond Williams foresaw, we have given ourselves over to the fictions and truthiness of the mediasphere. Yet the single most important characteristic of the digital transformation of the last twenty years is not the increased pervasiveness of the Mainstream Media—as striking as that has been; it is the media power that the technology bestows on each of us individually. "Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one," Joe Liebling said. Now, you do. And with the growth of the internet in the nineties and oughts, you also have the power to distribute. (No, you don't have the marketing dollars of the Mainstream Media, but that advantage may be less important on the web.)

So don't blame the media: take responsibility: you have the power. Now, we must focus on the uses to which our talents and technologies are put. It is no longer sufficient to know how to read a film. Now we must also understand, in a profound way, how to *use* a film.