

Ian Hacking

Genres of Communication, Genres of Information

What do new modes of communication do to us? How do they change our self-conceptions and thereby change who we are and what we, as a species, will become?

The invention of speaking made it possible for us to be people.

The invention of writing enlarged our potential but it also made logic possible. The reasoning creature reflected on its reasoning, and self-identified as the rational animal. It also made us the historical animal. History, namely the conception that human events are uniquely well ordered in time, needs writing. Thucydides and Aristotle are accidents of Athenian culture but they are the necessary byproducts of the written word.

The invention of printing has been over-McLuhanized, as has the invention of television. McLuhan was wonderful, but even he did not foresee the return of writing, or rather typing, due to the global explosion of a trifling invention by the US Military. Thanks to that invention, everyone types and this forces a new kind of literacy, e-literacy, upon us.

Every communicational invention must diminish as well as enlarge. Printing substituted for the art of memory: it was no longer necessary to remember in detail complex arrangements of data. You could just look them up in a book. The accessible database was immeasurably enlarged, but we became reading, rather than remembering, animals. In much the same way, Google, while expanding our instant database beyond control, is changing us from linear creatures into hyperjumpers. Quite unexpectedly the end of linearity was not brought about by television, as everyone expected, but by www.

Regular and reliable public post is far less noticed than printing. Without this modest technology, no significant epistolary novel. Authenticity, as a virtue, is a curious kind of multi-layered self-honesty. It dawned in Europe during the eighteenth century, or so scholars contend. This wholly new self-conception is closely linked to the epistolary novel, which demands the existence of public post. The connection is nicely symbolized by the fact that *La nouvelle Héloïse* was finished the year rural postal service was established in France. A new vice came into being: the vice of inauthentic existence.

The telegraph has been mightier than the telephone, for it forced upon the human mind the idea of code. The first telegraph used semaphore, starting in 1795 with the service providing a semi-automatic link between Paris and Lyon. Then it went electrical, and the visual semaphore became the digital morse. That is the beginning of our information age, call it 1840. Shannon, DNA and the rest are byproducts. But let us give credit for what in turn made morse possible, a stupid and ugly alphabet that is discreet, rather than intelligent elegant ideograms.

Maybe we should date the beginning of the information age at 1844, when Samuel morsed "What hath God wrought?" from Washington to Baltimore. He had no idea what he had wrought, namely information. No more had the Europeans any idea of what would happen to the human self-consciousness with the invention of regular public post. No more had the Defence Advanced Projects Agency any idea when it invented the DARPA Net.

My emphasis is not the usual one: not the technical efficacy of each new invention of a communicational genre. It is not the radical change in human customs and achievements that each new medium produces. It is rather the wholly unanticipated reflexive effects that some

of these new genres induce. The telephone, of which great things were expected, did nothing to, or for, human self-consciousness. It was a bit like the letter. What made the letter important to self-consciousness was the new delivery service. The mobile telephone is a new delivery service for an old medium. Can we speculate on its consequences? We shall only fail, but let us flail grandly, like McLuhan.

The future mostly depends on which wins out, image or logic. If mobiles increasingly transmit pictures, they will be conservative, leaving us in the world of what is at present real, visual objects spatially arranged. But if the pictures are abandoned except for long-distance courting – we always marginalize sex – then we may find a reversal of our senses so that we cease to be tactovisual animals, and instead, like bats, evolve into acoustotactile ones. In either event, when cell phones are affixed to us in nifty ways that replace our present crude electromechanical contraptions, we shall have become cyborgs.