

We Christians were early called "people of the book" (as were the Jews before us), and the earliest non-Christian reference to us refers to us as singers ("at dawn singing hymns to Christ as to a god"). It follows that real, true-blue Christians will take singing lessons and reading lessons. This thinksheet is a reading lesson in the Jan'74 HARPER'S. The other pp. of the article maintain the tongue-in-cheek (and thus sophisticated), awe-and-wonder (and therefore neoprimitive) feel—the former, against an ideologically egalitarian, leveller culture; and the latter, for reading itself, which (with Dan Boorstin) I find growingly mysterious for me, my gratitude to God increasing for the riches in great books, especially the sacred books of the world, especially the Bible, but also in good books (of which almost none are published in any one generation, and so I vibrate with that 17th-century character, Jn. Webster, in his speaking of "the ignorant asses visiting stationers' shops not to inquire for good books, but new books").

by Daniel J. Boorstin

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A DESIGN FOR AN ANYTIME, DO-IT-YOURSELF, ENERGY-FREE COMMUNICATION DEVICE

ANYONE ALERT TO the problems of communication in our country today—to the scarcity of usable television channels, to the high cost of network broadcasting, to the frustrations of cable television, to the difficulties and dangers of government supervision of broadcasting, and, of course, to the energy crisis—will have no difficulty in writing his own prescription for the ideal communication device.

What we need, first of all, is a mode of communication that uses no external energy source. It should have the fewest possible moving parts, should require minimal upkeep, and yet be usable in any climate at any hour of the day or night. It should not require a continuous process of broadcasting. No wire or other physical connection should be required between broadcaster and receiver, and yet reception should be static-free. There should be an unlimited number of wavelengths or channels. And, since licensing would be unnecessary, there would be no risk of government control, favoritism, or corruption. Ideally, such a device should never become obsolete, and it should last indefinitely. If all these conditions were satisfied, there would, naturally, be no need for it to carry commercials. And (I almost forgot) the device should of course be biodegradable!

There is no better example of the technological amnesia that afflicts the most highly developed civilizations—our tendency to forget simple ways of doing things in our desperate preoccupation with complex ways of doing them—than our need to be reminded that we already possess precisely this device. The name for it (a wonderful four-letter word) is

*book.* Having taken for our motto (and made the basis of our economy) Rube Goldberg's aphorism, "Do it the hard way," we find it hard to keep our faith in ancient and obvious ways of doing things. For example, walking (except as a specialized sport of hikers and mountaineers) is beginning to become obsolete. We now seem to take it for granted that if God had intended man to walk, He would have given him wheels. Similarly, instead of assuming (like the generations before us) that since God gave man sight, He must have intended him to read, we make the more sophisticated (and far more American) assumption that since God gave man sight, He must have intended him to watch television.

But one of the unpredicted by-products of our sophisticated, attenuated lives is our unprecedented opportunity to rediscover the charm, the wonder, and the delight of the anciently familiar. We now have, of course, elaborated communication with unimagined new devices—electric, electronic, phonographic, and photographic. We have complicated the machinery of sending messages in fantastic new ways in order to make it possible for everyone to receive messages effortlessly in his own home simply by turning a knob and opening his eyes. What other people has invested billions of its social capital in the machinery and organization of a new style of broadcasting in order to persuade each citizen in his living or dining room of the mar-

ginal advantages of one kind of deodorant or a foolproof new way of ridding dogs of fleas? And yet, all this may make us the first generation qualified to grasp so poignantly the wonderful, the uncanny, the mystic simplicity of the book.

SINCE THE BOOK can accomplish (and has for millennia been accomplishing) all those things I have prescribed as most desirable in a mode of communication—and which lie beyond the powers of television—is it any wonder that civilized peoples have tended to treat the written and the printed word as somehow sacred? The hieroglyph, perhaps the earliest form of writing, meant "sacred inscription." The major religions of the world have been cults of the book (or of certain books). Sacred scriptures are vehicles and preservers of the holy and ineffable.

But while we should be newly qualified to see the providential power and simplicity of the book, other tendencies of modern American life have blurred our vision. Most striking is our passion for novelty. This passion perverts our view of history and distorts our view of all social process. It seduces us into what I call the Displacive Fallacy.

Our faith in progress leads us to assume that the bad is always, if gradually, being displaced by the good, and the good is being displaced by the better. The advertising industry—in fact our whole competitive, obsolescence-oriented economy—depends on our being persuaded that this assumption is correct, so that we will buy accordingly. We are inclined to take the annual model as the prototype of industrial progress.

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