

The Media and Perception

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The media in modern western-influenced culture creates a meta-reality for its consumers which supersedes the reality of their day to day existence. This essay looks at the difference between man's culturally-created reality and the reality of the Universe-as-it-is, and the supplanting of culturally-created realities by the meta-reality of the media sphere.

In her book "Doubt, A History", Jennifer Michael Hecht writes about the difference between the socially and culturally constructed world that humans make and live in and the world of Nature with its seeming indifference to humanity's hopes and dreams that we also inhabit. She says, "We live between two divergent realities: On one side, there is a world in our heads - and in our lives, so long as we are not contradicted by death and disaster - and that is a world of reason and plans, love, and purpose. On the other side, there is the world beyond our human life - an equally real world in which there is no sign of caring or value, planning or judgment, love, or joy."

Those rare times in our lives when the world beyond human life interrupts our human-constructed reality usually come as a shock to our minds. As Hecht said, they occur and affect our lives without regard to our plans, our sense of fairness or our concepts of humanity's place in the hierarchy of the Universe.

What we know of the world depends on the interaction of our senses and brain/nervous system with the "outside" world. Modern physics has taught us that what we can measure of "reality" is relative to the tools being used for those measurements. Simple observation of your own perceptions will prove that what you perceive is very relative to how you are perceiving it. The temperature of a bowl of water you put your hand in will feel different to you, depending on how warm or cold your hand is at that time. A simple book of optical illusions will show you the assumptions our brain makes about what we perceive through our visual system.

But, beyond the limitations imposed on our perception of reality by our senses and nervous system, we humans impose additional limitations on our perceptions through our belief systems. We build up a picture of reality in our heads based on limited sensory input and language constructs which have no actual relationship to any tangible thing in the "objective" Universe. What is

possible to know/perceive of reality is defined by our society and culture. This consensus reality permeates our social environment. Denying one's society/culture's consensus reality will get one labeled psychologically abnormal or ill.

In primitive, hunter-gatherer societies, people lived in small tribal units. A man's conception of reality and his place in the world were defined by the culture and/or religion or belief system of his tribe. These primitive tribes lived and survived close to the earth and had to have an intimate relationship to nature in order to survive that most of modern humanity does not have to have. Their religions and belief systems incorporated and formalized that relationship. From our origins in small tribes, man's social/governmental groups have grown and evolved into the modern nation-state. The consensus reality we live in and the groups that create and define that reality have evolved with the

advancements of civilization and technology. This change has radically altered the way we learn our culture's consensus reality as well as who defines our consensus reality.

For much of recorded history, religions and religious leaders held the power of defining consensus reality for their people. With the Renaissance and the advancements of the sciences, the church began to lose its grip on power. The technological advances of the Industrial Revolution signaled the beginnings of our modern media as newspapers grew at a quick pace. The freedom of the press provision of the American Bill of Rights encouraged newspapers to take a central role in directing national affairs. That influence on governmental direction, and their role in tying together a geographically widespread and separated populace meant they were inheriting the role of defining the consensus reality.

The technology explosion of the twentieth century increased the scope and reach of the media with the advent of radio and the cinema and then the defining media of that century, television. The eye of television and the reach of television became pervasive. Television began to complete the process of removing man from nature and "objective" reality that has been ongoing since man became self-conscious. Increasingly, we live our lives almost exclusively in man-made environments. Then, in this environment, we are surrounded (voluntarily or not) by media. The result of this is that we are even more removed from Nature and reality than our primitive ancestors were. The parts of the natural world that appear in our man-made environments tend to be

either highly artificial, cultivated and processed to conform to an idealized version of nature or the "wildness" of nature that impinges on our cities is what we consider the detritus of the natural world: weeds, vermin and wild life that has adapted to man's artificial environment. Even attempts to "get back to nature" are confined to a man-made expectation of what nature is or should be and occur in managed environments. So a prepackaged nature is what we get when we go camping in a state or national park or what is delivered to us on T.V. via wildlife shows.

The constructed world in our heads is more real for us, most of the time than the real world of the Universe. The media's contribution to this displacement of reality cannot be overestimated. Beyond man's "normally" constructed world in our minds, cinema and television have built up a simulation of our day to day reality that has become more real for people than their own daily experience and existence. The tendency of people who find themselves in situations highly removed from ordinary experience to compare the experience to "being in a movie" is an illustration of this idea. There is an interesting article at The Age's website <<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/01/09/1073437468260.html>> about a philosopher who survived a crocodile attack several years ago. She notes that even as the attack was occurring, she thought about how this couldn't be happening because "I'm not food". She goes on and talks about the dream-like quality of the attack, as if it weren't really happening but she says she has since come to the conclusion that our ordinary life and consciousness are the dream, an outlook echoed by many religions and mystics. That we live in the illusion that we are outside nature and can control it.

The reality of the media, which is everywhere within our culture can be considered a meta-reality. A kind of hyper-reality which contains our ordinary everyday reality. Since our day-to-day reality is small subset of the meta-reality presented to us by the media, it seems to be less real or important than the meta-reality of the evening news. But periodically, an event will occur within our personally familiar territory which is covered by the local media. This event and the coverage by the media validate our existence and reality within the local media's meta-reality. Now we do exist and our part of the world is real.

If we are involved or within proximity of an event which should receive national news coverage, we become even more real as the meta-reality of the national media contains the reality of the local media. This is why people are generally

willing, even eager to give 'man on the street' viewpoints to news organizations or in other ways grab their 15 minutes of fame. No matter how they would appear or come across in their localized reality, they are now 'real' in the meta-reality of the media.

As the media has become more pervasive in people's lives the affordability of the means to participate as a media producer has dropped, and with the advent of the internet has become accessible to anyone with a computer. Following the huge influx of people getting online starting in the mid-nineties, business and the media have attempted to incorporate the internet into their sphere of properties and influence, resulting in the internet taking on some of the aura of the media meta-reality. It has resisted being absorbed by these entities though, so anyone, with a modest investment can establish a presence on the internet and with a minimum of effort get good search engine placement and generate a modest amount of traffic. Via a personal website and public search engines, anyone can be as real in the meta-reality the internet represents as ABC News or Sony Corporation are. And, with sites such as the internet archive, a certain level of immortality in that reality is assured even if we let our website expire.