

Stealing Calm: An Ode to Radio

CHANCES ARE, UNLESS YOU'VE EVER BEEN ALONE IN A radio booth, you have never experienced complete silence. I've had the privilege a number of times in the last few years, and have come to savor it. Whenever I'm scheduled to record a commentary or defend my point of view on a talk show, I try to show up a few minutes early just to bathe in the silence of the studio. Radio booths are generally cramped and are rarely much to look at—ratty carpet, corrugated walls (designed to nullify all sound waves coming from whatever angle), soft creakless chairs. But the stillness lends a cathedral-like quality. An unnatural calm slows down time. You can hear your own breath.

Of course, no one listens to radio in that kind of cocoon. We turn it on in the car, the backyard, the kitchen. But the silence of a radio booth says something important about the nature of the medium. As the delivery mechanism for a precious, fragile stream of audio, there is an uncompromising, almost militaristic component to radio's mission—that of vigilant protector. Seal the perimeter. Radio tightly focuses

perspective that fundamentally changed the way I think about music or politics or language or science. But I do know that I owe a good bit of my life and career to what I've heard on shows such as "All Things Considered," "Fresh Air" and "A Prairie Home Companion," and I have spoken to many others who feel the same way. With no disrespect to the many serious and talented practitioners of commercial and public television, TV is regrettably not a medium that regularly nourishes the spirit or challenges the mind.

A comparison with TV is particularly instructive in light of the impending televisionization of the Web. The other day I was asked to appear on CNN*fn* for a brief discussion about the cultural implications of the failure of Panamsat's now-infamous Galaxy4 satellite. Always happy to plug my book, I ironed my shirt and found my way to CNN's New York studios, near Penn Station in midtown. The differences between TV and radio were much on my mind as I arrived at the 20th floor and began to notice that everything about the studio, from the make-up to the polished veneer set to the antiseptic

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on a certain sound source to the rigid exclusion of all others. In a radio engineer's control room, there's a sanctity surrounding audio that you just don't see anywhere else in the media world. That's because with most other communications technologies, particularly anything with moving visuals, the task is not to slow down time, but to feed it as it ravenously marches forward.

I've been thinking a lot lately about the difference between radio and multimedia, wondering how it is that such a technically confined medium seems to me so intellectually superior. How does radio, with its limited bandwidth and narrow one-lane avenue of sensory impact, triumph over the audio-visual feast of television and even the World Wide Web when it comes to conveying memorable information, provocative ideas and deeply human feeling? Marshall McLuhan wrote that radio "is really a subliminal echo chamber of magical power to touch remote and forgotten chords." I know I couldn't possibly count all the times, in 10 years of daily listening to a variety of programming on National Public Radio, that I have wept, had deep spiritual epiphanies, come up with provocative story ideas, or heard an idea or

dialog on the teleprompters, said: "Skim the surface." I wasn't there to truly discuss information proliferation; I was there to look the part of having a discussion about information proliferation, to mimic the type of discussions that might occur if the TV cameras weren't on. The audio would provide an appropriate backdrop for the image of the anchor and me speaking, looking into each other's eyes, exchanging penetrating remarks.

I did my seven minutes. It was, like the rest of the spots I saw that morning while I waited, unmemorable. I shook hands with the anchor, thanked him. Then, as I was heading away, a funny thing happened. One of the production assistants caught up to me and said, "Hey, interesting stuff, can I ask you a question?" We proceeded to talk for another seven minutes or so about computers, the Internet, Bill Gates and so on. It was about the same length as my conversation on air, and infinitely more interesting. It was an actual conversation, with a life of its own that couldn't have been charted in advance.

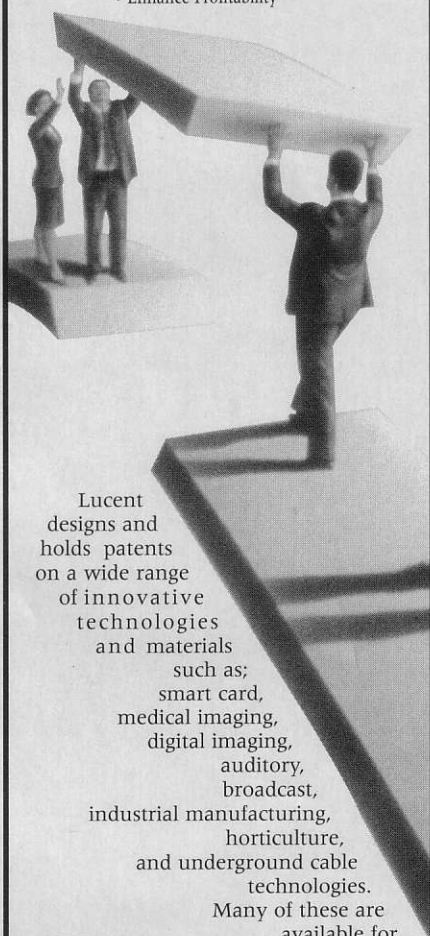
I don't fault the anchor or the producer for the drabness of the CNN*fn* conversation. I think the flaws are embedded in the video medium itself. There's an interesting paradox at

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work here: Moving images capture attention but subvert thought, a condition that is perhaps most vividly illustrated in the 1991 Wim Wenders film "Until the End of the World." Setting: It is 1999, and a scientist has just invented a camera that can record and replay not just images, but also the neurological recipe behind each image. It can enable the blind to see what sighted people see, or for anyone to replay their own dreams. Several characters in the film become hopelessly addicted to, and strung out on, an endlessly intoxicating video montage. The story is an elegy for our postindustrial society: a *fragmented, alienated collection of individuals* who seem to continually shift their attentions between flickering images—GameBoy, flashing billboards, news and stock tickers and so on.

Wenders calls this "the disease of images," the problem where "you have too many images around so that finally you don't see anything anymore." This in-your-face property of television becomes its defining characteristic for both producers and consumers. The inherently captivating and distracting properties of moving images allow—force—TV and its practitioners to constantly acknowledge and flaunt the primacy of images over ideas. It would seem as fundamental a natural law as paper-covers-rock or scissors-cuts-paper: Video trumps thought, complex thought anyway. Narratives work brilliantly on TV, of course, and the medium thrives on con-

bit under the weather and just want to escape; we don't turn on the radio in those instances, or pick up a book. We watch TV. It's the great escape because it does all the work for us.

NOTICE THAT THERE IS NO analogous "disease of sounds." Sound moving in time is not inherently mesmerizing or captivating. It doesn't grab. To the contrary—the listener has to reach out with his or her attention and grab it, pull it in, and keep pulling with a considerable amount of *focus*. Television producers and Webmasters have learned to speed up images as a way of seducing people to refrain from changing channels. That doesn't work in radio. String together 90 split-second fragments of nonlinear audio in the same way that MTV does with video, and you'd see many unhappy faces.

Images captivate us effortlessly, and are difficult to filter out. Screening out sounds, though, is something that humans are well-constructed to do. It is very easy, we all know from experience, to lose focus on what someone is saying to you in a room, even when there is very little audio competition. And it's downright common to have the radio on and stop noticing its contents altogether. As soon as we stop pulling audio in, it fades into the background.

Being able to ignore radio so easily turns out to be the luckiest thing of all for

Video trumps thought. What Wim Wenders calls the "disease of images" is all around us: We are bombarded by so many images that we don't see anything anymore.

veying primal feelings like lust, betrayal and triumph. There's something about the power of the moving image, though, that not only doesn't require much intellectual effort to consume, but actually discourages such exertion. *Sit back and let me come to you.* The vacant look in any TV viewer's eyes confirms this. So does the feeling we all have when we're a

the medium, because it also means that in order to really listen to it, we must become truly engaged. Radio won't "work" in the neural background. It won't settle for an intellectual glazing over. It requires more of a commitment, a certain level of consideration, concentration, rumination. And there's a direct payoff for the cerebral effort: Studies by the University of Califor-

nia, Los Angeles' Patricia Greenfield and colleagues show that radio inspires more imagination than television.

A healthy imagination and other aspects of creative thinking are the surest signs that we're pulling the information into our minds and interacting with it, that we're converting the information into knowledge. Kurt Vonnegut expressed this point marvelously in a recent magazine interview: "I can remember when TV was going to teach my children Korean and trigonometry," he said. "Rural areas wouldn't even have to have very well educated teachers; all they'd have to do is turn on the box. Well, we can see what TV really did....We are not born with imagination. It has to be developed by teachers, by parents....A book is an arrangement of 26 phonetic symbols, 10 numbers, and about 8 punctuation marks, and people can cast their eyes over these and envision the eruption of Mount Vesuvius or the Battle of Waterloo. But it's no longer necessary for teachers and parents to build these circuits. Now, there are professionally produced shows with great actors, very convincing sets, sound, music. And now

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Vonnegut's remarks suggest that electronic visual technologies have changed the rules of imagination. Historically, we have associated sight with understanding. "Of all the senses, trust only the sense of sight," Aristotle wrote in his *Metaphysics*. Our current language is loaded with words and phrases that analogize the two—"insight," "illuminate," "enlighten," "clarity," "observation," "brilliant," and so on. In an age in which more and more images are in motion, though, sight can neither be trusted nor counted on to propel us into thought and action. We're going to have to recalibrate our language and our thinking for a digitized age.

FORTUNATELY, WE HAVE ABUNDANT text and audio resources at our disposal. We have the freedom to retreat to serious radio programming, to pull into the interior of our mind, to engage. The sanctity of audio allows for an intellectual intimacy that can be as nourishing as we allow it to be. None of these technological parameters ensure that a great percentage of radio programming will live up to the medium's potential—there's as much titillating mindlessness available on the radio dial as there is via the television remote or the Web browser. But it does set the bar high enough that an ambitious few will inevitably scale great



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