

INFORMATION UNDERLOAD

WE HEAR ON ALL SIDES that we suffer today from Information Overload. Yet from trends in the 1980's — affecting journalism, criticism, political economy, and the communications industries — it would seem that the reverse is more likely to be true: we get more comment, but less information; more statistics, but fewer facts. Perhaps facts have gone out of fashion. In their place, however, has come not the informed commentary that might be expected from such freedom (if, indeed, it is that) — the pursuit of differing perspectives for the sake of the illumination that they might cast on individuals and events — but a greater desire, in the face of clear uncertainties, to have existing preconceptions reconfirmed. People *can* create order by refusing to recognize that their version of the world ignores the realities of other people's lives. Such "order" is meaningless, fundamentally, but there's no argument with faith, even when the faith is placed in something that history and experience repeatedly deny. At any time when the mirror seems to be more attractive than the lamp, we are in danger. We are in danger all the more when the mirror is marketed to us as a lamp and we do not use our minds to question why.

We get into such situations when the journalist, instead of investigating the reasons why some stories are made public (to divert attention from the stories kept covert, perhaps?), merely interviews other journalists, in the name of in-depth commentary. Or when the politician, more keen to be leader of lemmings than to be leader, period, dismisses those who disagree as disloyal. Or when the economist, keen for neatness and consistency, ignores the values that differing cultural systems were designed to serve. Or when the critic, more mindful of ego than of text, savages others' reputations in the name of scholarship but does so in the greater desire to hold some perceived dimension of power alone. Such persons create the illusion of authority, market themselves as authorities, but are really authoritarians in disguise, limiting options — often in the name of democracy. "*In the name of*": we are repeatedly asked to respond to the format, but not to listen for the likelihood. Thus we make ourselves susceptible to big lies. Whenever there seem to be more things to read and listen to, the sheer bulk of

information leads most people to grab onto any easy, comprehensible guide through it. But the bulk, like the easy guide, is frequently misleading; the increase in mass does not always mean an increase in data or in different perspectives, and the absence of difference leads to further complications still. In an age of statistics, we are rhetorically convinced by numbers — hence if “everyone” says the same thing, it “must” be true. Too often, however, everyone “says the same thing” because of information underload, because instead of analyzing data, people exchange and repeat it, until the illusion comes to seem factual and any challenge to the illusion is dismissed as the voice of a crank.

Sometimes such active marketing of mass opinion — the selling of bigotry and racism, for example — is patently vicious. Sometimes it appears innocent enough, and takes an apparently passive form, as in most news broadcasts, but is nonetheless *not neutral*. Sometimes it is based upon — and so actively perpetuates — a distortion of terminology. Sometimes it misrepresents history, partly because Canadians do not understand their history adequately enough to know that it is something (strengths and biases included) which for all their differences they actually share.

Consider first the small (though by no means trivial) presumptions that direct the shape of the nightly television news. We might note to start with that television news differs from radio news in substance as well as method, but if we do not attend to both, we won’t know that: television news, clearly, is marketed as visual spectacle — so much so that any opportunity to *replay* a scene of riot or private disaster has lately been sufficient invitation to do so, even if this means that “news” is being manufactured more than reported. There is, moreover, a standard pattern to Canadian evening news programmes that expresses a set of presumptive priorities about “Canadian” culture, but these are priorities that have more to do with the particular origin of the news programming than with the nation as a whole. Distinctions between English- and French-language news priorities offer the most immediate demonstration of local differences (why was René Lévesque’s death headlined in the English news as “QUEBECKERS MOURN . . .” — why not ALL CANADIANS?); there are others. The basic format on the English-language CBC seems to consist of three initial steps: the Ottawa story, the Washington story, the Toronto story — but each of these often seems less like a “story” than a *news release*, a report of a briefing session rather than a report of an investigation. I am not saying that the CBC does not investigate, but it often reserves its investigative journalism for programmes other than the evening summary, and so (rhetorically) separates the two functions. By personalizing the news, too — by taking the time to tell TV watchers whether the news-reader will be with us tomorrow (or is not with us today!) — the news-writers make the personality of the news-reader seem as newsworthy as the events chosen for summary (or vice-versa: the events are made to seem as inconsequential as the presence on the

screen of any particular “star” reader). Some handouts are thus marketed as news; some news is marketed through the star system; the economics of audience attraction governs how things are said, and therefore governs what is said and what is present to *be* interpreted, accepted, or received.

By extension, the visual rhetoric of cultural presumptions extends to the national reports that follow the lead stories. Here the reiteration of conventional tropes serves curiously covert political ends: if a human-interest story is wanted for a particular night’s “news package,” then the camera shifts to the Maritimes; if the show needs comic relief, it turns to British Columbia. The Prairies, the North, and Northern Ontario occupy similar rhetorical niches. Some cultural status quo is thus reconfirmed. B.C. does not have to be taken seriously, even though what happens there might be having extraordinarily serious impact not only on the people in B.C. but also on the character of the culture at large; and the Maritimes are kept at bay, preserved as “down home,” therefore consigned (as Leacock once consigned Orillia/Mariposa) to a past which “sophisticates” can be confident they have outgrown. Such presumptive categories feed regional resentments; they are also symptomatic of the kinds of easy exchange of existing attitudes, the mirror-imaging of the world, that masquerades as each night’s new information.

With politics itself, the consequences are even more acute. When the boardroom desire for reflective reconfirmation (yes-man; yes, Minister) affects government, then larger securities are involved. When political rhetoric in Canada confuses the Canadian system with the American, and when news commentators do not repeatedly challenge this confusion, then a whole cultural history is in danger of disappearing. People do not, it seems, differentiate adequately between parliamentary and congressional systems of governance. In Canada, in the parliamentary system, “government” has a very special meaning, but it is not one that is reflected in current speech. By tradition and design, “H.M. Loyal Opposition” (the oxymoron of the title is important) *is part of government*; it is an intrinsic element in a system of governance which ostensibly takes serious consideration of alternatives and options before embarking on any course of action. In practice, that isn’t true. “Government” increasingly refers, in the rhetoric especially of governing parties, to the governing parties alone, with serious ramifications. Not the least of these is that opposition, in the form of any notion of alternative policy or possibility, is rejected summarily, and “government” is deemed to be responsible only to those in the electorate who support the party in power. Here, the desire for the reconfirming mirror actually affects legislation *and the procedures of disagreement*. We live in a time when one of the governing bodies in Canada seriously attempted to introduce legislation that would have imposed the terms of the federal seditious act to prevent the expression of “opposition to government policy.” That such legislation was thrown out by the courts before

being enacted is some comfort, but not a resolution to the presumptiveness that led to the desire for the legislation in the first place.

Inherently, such authoritarian attitudes derive simultaneously from a commitment to a restrictive definition of what constitutes value and from an undeclared uncertainty about that very value system. If something is good, says the believer, then any opposition must (absolutely) be bad — hence it is easy to reject opposition and easy to construct a binary rhetoric that dismisses its potential value. The need to dismiss potential value, however, declares a fundamental insecurity. For the so-called “good” performs for the “believer” a second function: it reconfirms *position*, especially in a world beset with changes and uncertainties and apparent masses of information. The committed authoritarian resolves contradictions by denying them, attacks all “liberal” positions (the term has in ten years’ time turned from being an epithet of approval to being an epithet of abuse) because these positions explicitly encourage the expression of alternative ideas (and hence intrinsically challenge the order of the fixed universe in which the authoritarian rules). The authoritarian defines “education” as a training programme in the social status quo rather than in terms of questioning, and *in the name of facts* markets his or her own answers to insecurity as the only guide through uncertain times. Authoritarianism depends, in other words, on insecurity, and thus can make easy use of the illusion of information overload.

Because numbers and articulate speech alike make many people feel insecure, control over both becomes part of any authoritarian system. Populist forms of authoritarianism repeatedly invoke the “real” values of vernacular speech; economic forms of authoritarianism surrender reflective thought to numeric pattern. The October 1987 upheavals in the stock market, aggravated as they were by programmed computer reactions, exemplify this process clearly. Many stocks went on the market because computer programmes had been designed to sell stocks automatically, as a fail-safe, if prices fell in any given day beyond a pre-set margin; the effect of the mass sales caused further selling, engendered this time by simple panic, which continued to encourage a spiral downward. The point here is that people surrendered to the numerical accuracy of the computer, as though they could respond better to uncertainty by not thinking than they could if they engaged their minds.

Engaging the mind — and this is one of the challenges involved in thinking — requires us not to respond automatically, not to presume that we know all the facts already — or, indeed, that we know enough facts for the occasion, or that facts exist to be known at all. Gradgrindism is no more a solution to social uncertainty now than it was in the days of Dickens’ *Hard Times*. Closed systems repeatedly insist that the world behave in accordance with pre-determined data; they do not take people’s active, imaginative, inventive, flexible, and often contrary lives into account. Within closed systems, plan supersedes possibility. That’s

why they can promise order. Yet for all their appeal, closed systems are only an artificial defence against uncertainty. One of the points that Evelyn Cobley makes, in her striking essay on Foucault and Formalism in the Spring 1987 issue of *Mosaic*, addresses this very question. In Foucault's terms,

... the explanation of a system is in turn a system in need of explanation, so that all systems are open, unstable, and unknowable in their totality. The hierarchical arrangement of a system is the result of interpretive acts rather than of naturally-given properties. Conflicts of interpretation... are... ideologically interested. Interpretations are sanctioned not only because they are adequate for their object but also because they have been appropriated by a power structure. All interpretation is implicated in an ideologically-nurtured power struggle and can never be innocent or neutral.

It's a process that encourages more interpretation, not less. Order is not free.

Satire and polemic are, of course, two open forms of declaring an ideological disagreement. They are rhetorical forms resistant to the mirror-wishes of closed worlds. They call for more information, and for the rethinking of available data. They reject passive acceptance. "Comedy is the best exorcist," writes Donald Jack. But it is more than that, potentially. Thomas Chandler Haliburton announced his blunt purpose in one of his Sam Slick sketches more than a century ago, in a way that specifies why people need to resist authoritarian command: "When reason fails to convince, there's nothin' left but ridicule." It is a comment that bears thinking about. For not only does it deal with issues of hierarchical power, it also clearly rests on some basic suppositions about the reformative effects of language. These suppositions also make presumptions. And B. W. Powe, writing about Wyndham Lewis in 1987 in *The Solitary Outlaw*, makes a remark that underlines how much the public culture no longer necessarily shares in them. "Laughter," he writes, "cannot overthrow the tyranny of inarticulacy." The implications here are not comforting. When the structures of power in any society are deaf to language and blind to all images of possibility except those that reflect themselves, then the authoritarians have taken over the ordinary avenues of change.

W.N.

POSTAGE-STAMP SURVIVAL

Mona Elaine Adilman

Some marriages survive
on skulduggery.
A sleight-of-hand mystique
keeps the relationship going.