The Ruin of the Digital Town Square

Imagine All the People

James Poulos

The discourse about digital discourse betrays a fundamental misunderstanding. Focused almost entirely on social media and its pathologies, it fails to grasp that social media itself isn't digital at all, properly seen, but is really just television pushed to its limit. Social media is imagination, exaggeration, and appearance on a mass scale, thriving on crisis, shock, and fear. From this standpoint, what went wrong with social media is what has always been wrong with television—only taken to the extreme by putting the production technology into everyone's hands.

Social media was built on TV culture's fantasy that ever-greater "connectivity" would perfect democracy and bring harmony. This fantasy is now dashed to pieces. But casting our current crisis as one of "digital discourse," or of social media betraying democracy, risks that we obscure both the nature of social media and of the threats the digital era will pose.

To understand televisual technology, we have to consider it in light of the culture it helped to produce. Televisual tech shaped a psychological and social environment where the starting point for personal and political agency was *imagination*. Those who could best imagine the future, and relay the right images to the world, could best change the world.

In its mass production and broadcast of ever more images that heightened, exaggerated, exceeded, or supplanted reality, television brought to the masses this imaginary power in a hypnotic new way. Television was democratic in its reach, although not in its use. Those who could master the new form of communication—elite broadcasters, advertisers, campaigners, activists, gurus, "leaders"—wielded tremendous power and gained new wealth. Those on the receiving end had their perceptions, feelings, and ideas decisively shaped and filtered by the new "imagineers," to borrow Disney's name for its theme park engineers.

James Poulos *is executive editor of* The American Mind, *a fellow at the Center for the Study of Digital Life, and a contributing editor of* American Affairs. *He is the author of* The Art of Being Free *(St. Martin's Press, 2017).*

We can see the televisual culture on display in how both the establishment and the counterculture exploited the new cultural place of the imagination, pushing it beyond "what is" to "what if"—a question asked of the whole planet. President John F. Kennedy famously spoke of a "new frontier": "the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, the frontier of unfilled hopes and unfilled threats" beyond which are "uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus." "The times," he said, "require imagination and courage and perseverance."

In the 1960s, there was no visual encapsulation of this ethos more fitting than the first images of Earth from outer space, images that enthralled the public and invited dreams of a new world to come. The same images spoke for the counterculture, on the cover of Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*. As Brand put it in a 2009 interview, the first satellite photo of the whole Earth in 1967 "created the environmental movement out of almost nothing."

To return to Disney, the corporate reach and mass popularity of its "dream it, do it" ethos powerfully demonstrated what the established and countercultural imagination shared: the belief that the image, rightly sold to the people, can help change the world. This is the essence of televisual culture.

On television itself, the series finale of *Mad Men* illustrated the point not long ago by having its ad-genius hero Don Draper, in the depths of a midlife crisis, rescue himself and his career by meditating up the "Buy the World a Coke" ad campaign on the cliffs of the hippie resort at Esalen. In fact, that real-life 1971 ad smashingly succeeded in capturing and broadcasting the essence of the televisual ethos, using imagery—in this case of five hundred young people from cultures across the world—to ask us to imagine a radically different world than the one we have: "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony."

The West's Cold War triumph cemented the concept of expert televisual imagineering as the foundation of a new kind of global governance. The establishment and the counterculture began to merge in the 1990s, as the great televisual communicators—Bill Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, Princess Diana, Bono—achieved a new level of social and cultural authority whose shared televisual premise was that to change the world you had to imagine it changed, and to do so on screens everywhere.

The televisual elite is hardly restricted to celebrities and the more fashionable members of the Davos set, although the overlap attests to the

power and prestige of the leaders and masters of televisual culture. Roger McNamee, the Silicon Valley investor who counts Bono as a business partner and writes and performs songs with titles like "It's 4:20 Somewhere," epitomizes the elite of the TV generation—establishment counterculturals whose formative '60s experiences with televisual tech, drugs, and rock 'n' roll led them to see imagination and technology as linked and beneficent forces for enlightened, peaceable life. Spread throughout the industries of entertainment, technology, media, advertising, and politics, the televisual elite—still mainly made up of Boomers, many of whom were once hippies—was a socioeconomic class with a distinct interest in using the image to manipulate the imagination. Ideologically conservative critics are apt to describe this class in ideological terms, as the "liberal elite." But the "liberal" ideology of the elite arose from their passions and interests, which were in turn encouraged by the psychological and social conditions of televisual culture.

Changes in technology brought changes in our psycho-social environment that the imagineers did not see coming, precipitating today's true crisis. The televisually expert class grandly imagined the Internet as the advance that, powered by the right dreams, would soon complete or perfect their global projects. At least at the beginning, they saw correctly that the difference between the old days of a handful of television stations and the dawning day of ubiquitous social media was one of degree, not of kind. Televisual broadcast media was at last truly democratized, not only reaching the masses as television did but giving each person a voice. Suddenly, anyone could be his or her own channel. In fact, anyone could be multiple channels, and audiences, all at once. Technology, democracy, liberalism, and globalism were all expected to converge.

That, of course, is not what happened. Modern technology has indeed consummated the televisual era, but with results quite opposite those the imagineers expected. Instead, a curious form of Hobbes's war of all against all was unleashed. Online, each "netizen" produced more and more opinions, fantasies, dreams, interpretations, and criticism. Marshall McLuhan forecast the situation in his concept of the "global village"—not a boundaryless and harmonious Eden sought by the imaginative social engineers of the world elite, but rather a hot, crowded, fragmented, and fractious realm, one much like the "world" that social media, to the shock of the elite, became.

Pushing televisual life to its democratic extreme did not perfect the authority of the televisual elite—it shook it, like nothing before. The elite,

unwilling to accept blame and responsibility for letting its imagination run away with it, has sought to wash its hands of the problem instead, blaming social media and its masters by portraying them as devils of the "digital" era using new technology to exploit us, not as the ultra-televisual phenomena they are. Roger McNamee, an early investor in Google and Facebook, now scorches the companies' products as "a menace to public health and to democracy" that employ "aggressive brain hacking," a term taken from repentant Google product designer Tristan Harris.

But the "huge power to influence you, to persuade you to do things that serve their economic interests," as McNamee describes the danger of digital tech companies, can be shocking only to someone who has been naïve about televisual technology. In his 2019 book *Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe*, McNamee writes about the early Facebook advisers and investors like himself that "we suffered from a failure of imagination. The notion that massive success by a tech startup could undermine society and democracy did not occur to me or, so far as I know, to anyone in our community." Their failure, however, was not in imagining too little, as McNamee thinks, but too much. Instead of spooking themselves with dystopian what-if scenarios, they should have focused on what so plainly was already the case: The more instantaneous and ubiquitous televisual technology grew, the less trustworthy a guide to harmony and enlightenment it became. Clearly, social media would only strengthen that logic. But even now, McNamee remains blind to how the harm of social media comes more from its televisual extremes than from the digital devices on which it operates alongside many different types of content.

Hence the fatal error in the discourse about the "digital discourse." We talk about the problem as though it arises from the nature of digital technology. But so much of what upsets us about digital discourse today is actually a problem of televisuality pushed to the extreme of democratization: Our discourse overwhelms us with a barrage of images and fantasies, which are increasingly difficult to distinguish from the trivia and "news" of the real world. And the value of discourse to the consumer crashes ever downward as the threats of squandered time and of mob hate ever rise.

Under these extreme conditions, which feel increasingly hostile to life, the public is angry and disillusioned, bearing the brunt of a cultural and institutional breakdown that panicking televisual elites cannot offer any path out of. Elites' desire to democratize televisual culture has ironically led to a moment in which some of them have become wary of democracy itself, seeking digital means to mute the microphone of ever more of the voices to whom they so recently handed it.

The lesson is a hard one. The failure of our elite to foresee the crisis that threatened their rule, and their follow-on failure to respond to it effectively, confirms two sobering points: First, looking back, they did not understand the true nature of televisual technology and the cultural environment it fostered; second, looking ahead, they do not understand the difference or the interplay between televisual and digital technology.

The best way to distinguish the televisual from the digital is to consider the contrast between social media and social credit, as in China's Social Credit System for assessing its citizens' reputation. Social media is all about the hallmarks of televisual culture: human image and imagination, fantasy and fakery, appearance and semblance. Social credit is all about something fundamentally different: identity and biography, in intimate, inescapable detail, cataloged totally and remembered completely by computers. Televisual technology—like social media—empowers *humans* to *disseminate* everything we can *imagine about ourselves.* Digital technology—like social credit, artificial intelligence, and facial recognition—empowers *computers* to *concentrate* everything they can *remember about us.*

The typical fear around digital technologies is that they will make it impossible for citizens to participate confidently and effectively in public discussion. Deep fakes, bot armies, secret surveillance, and other bugaboos will "hack" democratic discourse, leaving citizens too disempowered to function. The deeper, unarticulated fear, however, is that digital technologies are making it *uninteresting* for people to participate in "the discourse" as we have so long understood it under televisual conditions—not just in civic or political life, but in all realms dependent on the public projection of the imagination, including sports, entertainment, and the rest of popular culture. Digital technology promises that people will simply lose interest in "engaging with content" of the sort that floods the Internet and sustains so many televisual industries, including social media.

The reason has to do with the kinds of change in our social and psychological environment that the shift from televisual to digital dominance causes. When television was triumphant, we did not consume its content in some sort of contextual vacuum; we watched TV as socially and psychologically televisual people. Now, when we watch televisual content, we increasingly watch it as socially and psychologically digital people. The aura of significance, deep meaning, primal power, and relevance that once surrounded the televisual is now being disenchanted in the digital context, the hallmark of which can be summed up in the statement that "computers never forget." As McLuhan wrote, computer technology shapes our perceptions and experiences with its "perfect memory—total and exact."

In a world where there is nothing new under the digital sun because everything is stored somewhere, ostensibly novel creations lose their spice; imagination loses its mystique as the font of boundless possibility. Every kid now knows to skip ads as soon as they see them on YouTube, that TV is where fake news comes from, that social media is where grandpa complains, and that anything being "memed" should not be taken seriously. Adults, who associate televisual media with money and prestige, are still clinging to a sense of significance around it in the digital context. They still swipe for dates and curate their feeds, giving away their content and gamely weighing in on the issues of the minute—yet they are increasingly aware that this devours their time, offers diminishing returns, and opens them up to risk, liability, or attack. These are not hangover or overdose effects; what is losing its attractions and benefits under digital conditions is not "too much" televisual content, but the content as such.

Fewer and fewer of us welcome our new robot overlords, or the prospect of them taking our jobs, memorizing our biographies, and disenchanting our dreams. But the quest of today's would-be heroes of the anti-tech resistance—many of whom are themselves former techies—to reclaim human agency by recurring to televisual culture is doomed.

In *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (2018), Jaron Lanier, who once helped invent virtual reality, tells us we must drop out of social media to fight the Silicon Valley automators who deny the "mystical spark inside" us all. In *Stand Out of Our Light* (2018), former Google ad strategist James Williams urges us to reject the "attention economy" of social media, arguing that "at its best, technology opens our doors of perception, inspires awe and wonder in us, and creates sympathy between us." His illustration: The first images of Earth in the 1960s triggered a "shift in consciousness."

Unfortunately for these critics, their appeals to the televisual holism of cosmic unity, occult mysticism, and harmony between science and solidarity are all being obsolesced in our new digital environment. People will not delete their accounts, as though doing so would deliver the same cathartic jolt of meaning as burning a draft card, a flag, or a bra; they will neglect their accounts, because the form of life available there has become empty, boring, and pointless.

Though some sadness and confusion and resentment is inevitable, anti-tech "leaders" and the rest of us should, humbling as it may be, consider that it's actually good news that the fusion of fantasy, universalism, heroism, and moralism fostered under televisual conditions is growing

obsolete. The twentieth century was a parade of horrors conducted at terrifying and increasing speeds, climaxing in the violence promised by nuclear warfare. Christopher Lasch, René Girard, and David Lynch have amply shown that the televisual environment, beneath its cheerful, dreamy veneer, was predominantly a hostile one, distorting, dwarfing, and assaulting our human perceptions. The televisual politics of the charismatic leader with the disembodied image, of "shock and awe" and "if it bleeds it leads" journalism, of assassination and beheading videos, has been a fever dream brought to life.

People today rightly nurse hopes that our social and political life does not slip back into the darkness of the twentieth century. But the pressing question concerns the prospect of inhuman "peace" more than that of inhuman war. Digital technology—perhaps nowhere better employed to its designed ends than in the Chinese surveillance state—is wiping away all the sound and fury of the televisual age, and promises to take much of the clamor and contestation of public life away with it. In that new environment, public life as we know it may be taken away, or surrendered. The realization is dawning that the East, under Chinese domination, will apply digital technology without regard to the long-lasting Western fear and loathing of servitude.

But as the democratized public square retreats, digital technology is opening space for a retrieval of age-old Western forms of social organization, including lordship and fealty. Online discourse is already fragmenting into increasingly self-enclosed and self-selected subgroups. There is likely a narrow and closing window of time during which public discourse as a practice still holds general appeal. Using that time wisely means preparing elites and the public—but especially ourselves and those closest to us—for what is to come.