

NO SENSE OF PLACE

The Impact of Electronic Media
on Social Behavior

Joshua Meyrowitz

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Nothing can be further from the spirit of the new technology than "a place for everything and everything in its place."

Marshall McLuhan

Among all the things of this world, information is the hardest to guard, since it can be stolen without removing it.

Erving Goffman

Preface

On November 24, 1963, Jack Ruby shot and killed Lee Harvey Oswald, the suspected assassin of President John F. Kennedy. The shooting was broadcast live to millions of Americans. Those who saw the event on television would probably claim that they "witnessed" the murder—that is, that they saw it "first-hand." Whether or not one fully accepts that television viewing is equivalent to "first-hand" experience, it is clear that television and electronic media, in general, have greatly changed the significance of physical presence in the experience of social events.

At one time, physical presence was a prerequisite for first-hand experience. To see and hear a President speak in his office, for example, you had to be with him in his office. If you read his speech in the newspaper or if you listened to an account given by someone else present at the time, what you read or heard was at best second-hand information. Live and mediated communications were once vastly dissimilar. This is no longer the case.

The evolution of media has decreased the significance of physical presence in the experience of people and events. One can now be an audience to a social performance without being physically present; one can communicate "directly" with others without meeting in the same place. As a result, the physical structures that once divided our society into many distinct *spatial* settings for interaction have been greatly reduced in social significance. The walls of the family home, for example, are no longer effective barriers that wholly isolate the family from the larger community and society. The family home is now a less bounded and unique environment because of family members' access and accessibility to other places and other people through radio, television, and telephone.

Even within the home, media have reshaped the social significance of individual rooms. At one time, parents had the ability to discipline a child

by sending the child to his or her room—a form of *ex-communication* from social interaction. Such an action, however, takes on a whole new meaning today if the child's room is linked to the outside world through television, radio, telephone, and computer.

Traditionally, neighborhoods, buildings, and rooms have confined people, not only physically, but emotionally and psychologically as well. Now, physically bounded spaces are less significant as information is able to flow through walls and rush across great distances. As a result, *where* one is has less and less to do with what one knows and experiences. Electronic media have altered the significance of time and space for social interaction. Certainly, physical presence and direct sensory contact remain primary forms of experience. But the social spheres defined by walls and gates are now only one type of interactional environment. The walls of the mightiest fortress no longer define a truly segregated social setting if a camera, a microphone, or even a telephone is present.

Moreover, electronic media are present in nearly all physical settings in our country. Almost every American home has at least one telephone and television set.¹ There are more radios in the country than people.² Electronic media are considered necessities rather than luxuries even by prisoners and welfare families.³ The average household has a television on for nearly fifty hours a week.⁴ Our Presidents have access to side-by-side television sets so that they can monitor all three network news broadcasts simultaneously;⁵ Charles Manson gets by with only one television set in his prison cell.⁶ And computers are now entering every social environment from children's bedrooms to corporate boardrooms. In many ways, electronic media have homogenized places and experiences and have become common denominators that link all of us regardless of status and "position."

As the confines of the prison, the convent, the family home, the neighborhood, the executive suite, the university campus, and the Oval Office are all invaded through electronics, we must expect a fundamental shift in our perceptions of our society, our authorities, and ourselves. But what exactly is the nature of such a shift? Part of the problem with merely describing the presence of electronic media in various social settings is that we need to go further and ask: In what ways did more *isolated* social settings once shape social interaction? Without understanding how *limits* to social interaction affect behavior, we cannot appreciate the impact of their removal or change.

To examine the effects of new patterns of social communication, this book takes a "situational approach" to the study of media and behavior. Sociologists have long noted that people behave differently in different social "situations," depending on *where* one is and *who* one is *with*. Implicit in such an approach is the idea that behavior in a given situation is also affected by where one is *not*, and who is *not* there. A situational approach is inherently a study of boundaries and limits. Yet many sociologists think of a society's social situations as relatively stable. Further,

situations are usually defined in relation to *physical* settings: places, rooms, buildings, and so forth. The theory developed here extends the study of static situations to the study of changing situations, and extends the analysis of physically defined settings to the analysis of the social environments created by media of communication.

This book is about the roles we play and witness in our everyday lives as they are increasingly played before new audiences and in new arenas—"audiences" that are not physically present and "arenas" that do not exist in time and space. It is about the ways in which individuals and groups have changed their behaviors to match these new situations.

The situational analysis offered here describes how electronic media affect social behavior—not through the power of their messages but by reorganizing the social settings in which people interact and by weakening the once strong relationship between physical place and social "place." The structure of social settings is shown to be a key element in all group identifications, in transitions from role to role, and in the ranks of social hierarchies. The study describes how, as we lose our old "sense of place," we gain new notions of appropriate social behavior and identity. This book suggests that *change in behavioral settings* is a common element linking many of the trends, events, and movements of the last three decades. This analysis of the new situations, or "information-systems," shaped by new media is not intended to provide a complete explanation for social change or for all the current characteristics of our society, but it is meant to suggest that changes in media may have much more to do with recent social trends than is generally thought. The larger purpose of the book is to offer a new approach to studying both media effects and social change—not only for the study of the present but also of the past, *single* *differs* and the future.

The book first develops general principles concerning the relationship among media, situations, and behavior and then explores the potential effects of a shift from "print situations" to "electronic situations" on a broad range of social roles. Finally, three detailed "case studies" are presented on changing conceptions of masculinity and femininity, childhood and adulthood, and political heroes. The first chapter of the book introduces the major arguments and approach; the last chapter summarizes the theory and discusses its implications for the future. The appendix discusses key concepts and their interrelationships.

The book is intended for general readers and for scholars and students in several fields. Different readers may wish to approach it differently. After reading the first chapter, some readers may wish to skip to the "case study" chapters and then return to earlier chapters to see how the arguments are developed. Although the case studies grow out of, and build on the earlier chapters, I have tried to make them comprehensible on their own. With the different needs of different readers in mind, I have also divided the footnotes into two categories. Those on the bottom of pages are general comments, examples, or research and poll statistics that

should be of interest to most readers. The much more numerous scholarly references, qualifications, and comments are contained in notes in the back of the book.

I think my parents unintentionally started me thinking about some of the issues raised in this book when they steadfastly refused to "rush" into purchasing the new "toy"—television—that was spreading through our neighborhood. It seemed as if nearly every family we knew owned a television before we did, but my parents resisted, saying that "they haven't perfected it yet." (To this day, my parents have not bought a color television for the same reason.) As luck would have it, the set we finally did buy—a large console model with doors covering the screen (so that it could pass for a radio)—was a "lemon," thereby justifying my parents' fears. The set seemed to be broken as often as it worked, and my parents rarely hurried to get it fixed.

The on-and-off exposure I had to television as a child made me sensitive to how different the view of the world was to a child with television compared to one without. Although I didn't give it much thought at the time, I responded to television as if it was a "secret revelation machine" that exposed aspects of the adult world to me that would have otherwise remained hidden. My primary response to television was *not* imitation of the behavior I saw on it, nor was it to be persuaded that I needed to own the many products advertised. Rather, the information I received about social interaction on television affected my own willingness to accept other people's behaviors and claims at face value. Television educated me and my friends about certain aspects of adulthood that no longer allowed our parents to "get away" with some traditional parental behaviors. It also affected our views of members of the other sex and of teachers, police, politicians, and other "authorities." As silly as much television content was, its close-up views of strange people and places shaped my evaluation of the social performances of those I knew and met. Television changed the ways in which the walls of my home formed and limited my social experience.

Many years later, when I began studying for my master's degree, I was interested in analyzing the interaction of media and interpersonal behavior. I was surprised to discover how independently the two areas were being researched. Certainly, people looked at how media affected real behavior and how real behavior related to the content of media, but there were few models that dealt with both systems of communicating as part of a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Most of the concerns were about people *imitating* behavior they saw on television, or about the inaccurate *reflection* of reality as portrayed in television content—real life *as opposed* to the media. Few studies examined both media and interpersonal interaction as part of the same system of "behaving" or responding to the behavior of others. Few people seemed to be studying the ways in which

new patterns of access to information about social behavior might be affecting people's ability to play old forms of roles.

As I describe in the first chapter, a few of the frameworks I studied in college suggested the possibility of piecing together such a theory. In my master's thesis at Queens College, I took a first step toward creating a new bridge between media theory and interpersonal behavior theory by looking at structural similarities between rules of interpersonal behavior and conventions of television production.⁷ I began working on the broader theory developed in *No Sense of Place* in 1976 and presented an early draft as my doctoral dissertation at New York University in 1978 (University Microfilms, 1979). After letting the ideas ferment for a while, I began in 1981 to revise and expand the work for the present book.

Some of the ideas developed here have appeared elsewhere in various forms. Versions of Chapter 14 appeared in *Et cetera* in 1977 as "The Rise of 'Middle Region' Politics" and in *Psychology Today* in July 1984 as "Politics in the Video Eye: Where Have All the Heroes Gone?" A conference paper based on Chapter 13, "Television and the Obliteration of 'Childhood,'" is included in *Studies in Mass Communication and Technology*, volume one of the selected proceedings of the 1981 International Conference on Culture and Communication, edited by Sari Thomas (Ablex, 1984). An essay drawn from Chapter 13 was published in the Summer 1984 issue of *Daedalus* as "The Adultlike Child and the Childlike Adult: Socialization in an Electronic Age." A very brief form of the same chapter also appeared in *Newsweek* in August 1982 as "Where Have the Children Gone?"

Many people have contributed to this study and I would like to mention some of them here. The most concrete assistance came to me from colleagues who agreed to read and comment on parts or all of the manuscript. Jan Alberghene, Larry Baron, Bill Beeman, John Kelly, Tom Kochman, Jack Lannamann, Paul Levinson, Sheila McNamee, Bob Mennel, Ed Wachtel, and Mark West offered extremely useful comments and suggestions. My many debates and discussions with psychologist Carolyn Mebert helped sharpen the arguments in Chapter 13. David Leary also deserves special thanks, for reading and commenting on the manuscript, for easing me into the world of "word processing," and for being an enthusiastic and supportive colleague in more ways than are easily described.

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Most of all, however, I would like to thank my wife Candice Leonard and my daughter Janna who give me love and support and who continually offer me perspective on the relative importance of people and writing. Candice also provided detailed criticisms and suggestions, numerous references, and ideas. And Janna, who was born during the tense period of completing the final manuscript, has provided me with a whole range of new emotions and experiences I could not have previously anticipated or understood. Together, Candy and Janna continue to give me a firm sense of place and permanency in an ever-changing world.

Somersworth, N.H.
October, 1984

J.M.

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1

Introduction

Behavior in Its Place

When I was a college student in the late 1960s, I spent one three-month summer vacation in Europe. I had a wide range of new and exciting experiences, and when I returned home, I began to share these with my friends, family, and other people I knew. But I did not give everyone I spoke to exactly the same account of my trip. My parents, for example, heard about the safe and clean hotels in which I stayed and about how the trip had made me less of a picky eater. In contrast, my friends heard an account filled with danger, adventure, and a little romance. My professors heard about the "educational" aspects of my trip: visits to museums, cathedrals, historical sites, and observations of cross-cultural differences in behavior. Each of my many "audiences" heard a different account.

The stories of my trip varied not only in content, but also in style. There were varying numbers of slang words, different grammatical constructions, and different pronunciations. The pace of my delivery, body posture, facial expressions, and hand gestures were different in each situation. Each description had its own unique mix of earnestness and flippancy. My friends, for example, heard a speech filled with "sloppy speech" and sarcasm.

Did I "lie" to any of these people? Not really. But I told them different truths. I did what most of us do in everyday interaction: I highlighted certain aspects of my personality and experience and concealed others.

At the time of my trip, I was not even aware of this variable feature of my behavior. Like most people, I thought of myself as a unified "me" who always behaved in roughly the same way. I focused, as I now realize, only on what was *constant* in my behavior across situations. I concentrated on my choices within a given situation, rather than on the overall constraints. I thought of my range of possible comments in a seminar, for

example, and neglected to notice that I did not, as a student, have the option of getting up and leading the discussion (just as now, as a professor, I do not have the option of sitting quietly and blank-faced through a class). I did not consider that in some situations it was normal for me to sit silently and passively (while listening to a religious sermon, for example) and that in other situations the same behavior would be interpreted as strange or hostile (dinner with a friend). And although I and everyone I knew unconsciously changed behaviors from situation to situation, I thought (in keeping with the sentiments of the times) that "playing roles" was something done by people who were either dishonest or not in touch with their "real selves."

My perceptions of my behavior, and of social interactions in general, changed the next semester when I became familiar with the work of sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman describes social life as a kind of multi-staged drama in which we each perform different roles in different social arenas, depending on the nature of the situation, our particular role in it, and the makeup of the audience. Goffman's work reads like anthropology, but instead of focusing on a strange or primitive culture, his observations illuminate our own society and behavior. Goffman made me aware of perceptions and actions that are normally intuitive and unconscious. He made me aware of things I knew, but did not know I knew.

Although Goffman gave me a whole new perspective from which to view social behavior, I felt that something was missing from his view of social life. It was the height of the turbulent 1960s, and Goffman's frameworks—first developed in the 1950s—were unable to account for the changes in social roles that were taking place.

The general picture of social interaction that Goffman presents is one of people actively involved in many different dramas: People are constantly changing costumes and roles, learning and adhering to a complex matrix of conventional behavior, and working hard to maintain their performance in each ongoing situation without undermining or threatening their *different* behaviors in *other* social situations. Goffman's social scenario is very dynamic on the surface. But the dynamism usually rests in the kind of activity needed to adjust to a relatively stable social order with fixed rules, roles, social occasions, and institutions. Individuals must absorb the social conventions, must practice, rehearse, and maintain their performances, but the scripts and stages are relatively unchanging. In Goffman's social world, the dynamism is mostly in the projection of figures against a static ground. Behavior may change from place to place, but the ways in which it changes, as well as the situations for which it changes, are usually constant.

This stable view of social life did not correspond to the events of the time. Although people in the late 1960s were still "playing roles," they were not playing the same roles they had played in the past. In Goffman's terms, the performers seemed to be mixing up their performances and their styles of interaction. Things that were once kept in the "backstage"

area of life—such as sex and drugs—were now being thrust into the public arena. People were dressing and speaking in public as if they were at home. Many journalists and scholars were abandoning the public ideal of “objectivity” and were incorporating their personal experiences and subjective feelings into their work. There were pressures to break down old segregations of behaviors and audiences and to treat people of different sexes, ages, races, and professions more alike. Nuns were shedding their habits and moving from convents to the community. Female secretaries were refusing to make coffee for their male bosses. A “youth culture” arose across class, race, religious, and even national lines. Children were calling parents and teachers by their first names as if they were peers. Men and women were abandoning old forms of courtship and marriage. The President of the United States showed his operation scars to the nation as if all the people in the country were his intimate friends. There was a new distrust of government, politicians, and corporations. Centralized authority seemed to be giving way to “community control.” Amidst these and many other changes, Goffman’s stated quest for a “minimal model of the actor” that would allow us to “wind him up, stick him in amongst his fellows, and have an orderly traffic of behavior emerge” seemed illusory.¹

Another theorist I was studying, Marshall McLuhan, offered one possible source of explanation for widespread changes in social behavior: changes in media of communication. McLuhan’s work reads more like epic poetry than traditional scholarly analysis, but, in his own way, McLuhan predicted the behavioral changes of the late 1960s more effectively than Goffman did. Writing in 1961 and 1963, McLuhan drew a surprisingly accurate picture of what would be happening in the streets of New York, San Francisco, Washington, and other American and European cities between 1967 and 1972. McLuhan wrote of widescale social change, of “retribalization,” of the decline of traditional feelings of nationalism, of the demand on the part of youth and minorities and others for “in-depth” participation, and of the distrust of distant authority. The long hair, beards, nudity, tribal music, and chants against the “Establishment” seemed to fulfill McLuhan’s prophecy.

McLuhan attributed such changes to the widespread use of electronic media. But the mechanism through which electronic media bring about widespread social change is not made very clear in his work. McLuhan describes media as extensions of the senses, and he claims that the introduction of a new medium to a culture, therefore, changes the “sensory balance” of the people in that culture and alters their consciousness. But McLuhan offers few specific clues as to why people with different sensory balances behave differently.

As a college student trying to integrate all that I was learning and experiencing, I was disturbed by the incompleteness of these two theories and yet intrigued by both their visions of the social order. Goffman and McLuhan each provide a different clue to understanding social behavior.

Summary
Goffman offers one factor that molds behavior: the "definition of the situation" as it is shaped by particular interactional settings and audiences. Yet Goffman explicitly ignores *changes* in roles and the social order. McLuhan, on the other hand, points to widescale change in social roles resulting from the use of electronic media, but he provides no clear explanation of *how* and *why* electronic media may bring about such change.

This book has grown out of more than a decade of interest in weaving these two strands of theory into one whole cloth. I suggest that Goffman and McLuhan have complementary strengths and weaknesses: Goffman focuses only on the study of face-to-face interaction and ignores the influence and effects of media on the variables he describes; McLuhan focuses on the effects of media and ignores the structural aspects of face-to-face interaction. These oversights may stem from the traditional view that face-to-face behavior and mediated communications are completely different types of interaction—real life *vs.* media. This study explores a common denominator that links the study of face-to-face interactions with the study of media: the structure of social "situations." I suggest that the mechanism through which electronic media affect social behavior is not a mystical sensory balance, but a very discernible rearrangement of the social stages on which we play our roles and a resulting change in our sense of "appropriate behavior." For when audiences change, so do the social performances.

Consider, for example, what would have happened to the various accounts of my European vacation if, on my return, my parents had decided to throw a surprise homecoming party to which they invited all my friends, relatives, professors, and neighbors. What would have happened to my description of my trip if I could not have separated my audiences? If my parents had ushered me to the center of a large circle comprised of all these people and asked me to give a fifteen minute talk on my trip, what could I have said?

Had I begun to give the "safe" description that I would have given privately to my parents, my friends would probably have been bored or might even have started to giggle. Had I reported on my dangerous or romantic adventures, my parents and the neighbors might have felt uncomfortable. Clearly, almost any account designed for a specific audience would probably have offended or bored parts of the combined audience. So I might have become tongue-tied or I might have been able to adapt quickly to the combined situation and devise a new, synthesized account that said a little bit to each segment of the audience, but was bland enough to offend no one. But no matter what I said, the situation would have been profoundly different from the interactions I had with isolated audiences.

The point is that when distinct social situations are combined, once appropriate behavior may become inappropriate. When a particular private situation becomes more public by being merged into other situations, behavior style must adapt and change. A combination of situations changes the patterns of role behavior and alters the texture of social real-

ity. The situation I would have faced at such a homecoming party serves as a rough analogy for the situations that are created by electronic media of communication.

The combination of many different audiences is a rare occurrence in face-to-face interaction, and even when it occurs (at a wedding, for example) people can usually expect the speedy resumption of private isolated interactions. Electronic media, however, have rearranged many social forums so that most people now find themselves in contact with others in new ways. And unlike the merged situations in face-to-face interaction, the combined situations of electronic media are relatively lasting and inescapable, and they therefore have a much greater effect on social behavior. If, for example, I could *never* get away from the mixed group at my return party, those things I wanted to say only to my friends would have to be spoken in the presence of my parents and professors—or never said at all. Further, if my parents and professors could never leave the mixed audience of the party either, then my friends and I would likely begin to see and hear aspects of their behavior—arguments, illnesses, doubts, anxieties, sexual behaviors, and so forth—that they had once kept hidden from us. The new merged patterns of behavior might lack the extremes of the previously distinct encounters, but they would also contain many behaviors that were once considered inappropriate in “mixed company.”

Similarly, I argue in this book that while there are still many private forums, electronic media—especially television—have led to the overlapping of many social spheres that were once distinct. In contrast to face-to-face conversation and books, for example, radio and television now make it more difficult for adults to communicate “among themselves” because they are often “overheard” by children. In a similar way, electronic media have heightened men’s and women’s knowledge of each other’s social performances for the opposite sex. And the merger of different audiences and situations through radio and television has made it difficult for national politicians to say very specific things to particular constituencies or to behave differently in different social situations. The theory developed here suggests that such restructurings of social arenas and social performances are at least a partial reason for recent social trends, including the blurring of conceptions of childhood and adulthood, the merging of notions of masculinity and femininity, and the lowering of political heroes to the level of average citizens.

Put very simply, the basic argument here is that many of the traditionally perceived differences among people of different social “groups,” different stages of socialization, and different levels of authority were supported by the division of people into very different experiential worlds. The separation of people into different situations (or different *sets* of situations) fostered different world views, allowed for sharp distinctions between people’s “onstage” and “backstage” behaviors, and permitted people to play complementary—rather than reciprocal—roles. Such distinctions in situations were supported by the diffusion of literacy and