

# Information Overflow

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## MEDIA UNLIMITED

*How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives*

By Todd Gitlin

Metropolitan Books:  
262 pp., \$25

Marshall McLuhan once said that whoever discovered water wasn't a fish. It's hard to put the mass media in perspective; most of us, most of the time, are fish in the media ocean. But it's not impossible to be amphibious and see our information society as a sometimes oppressive torrent of words and images, flowing through a variety of media that entertain and inform us, while variously distorting, compressing, magnifying, ignoring and counterfeiting different aspects of social reality.

In fact, this age of Really Big Media also happens to be one of great media theory and criticism. If the eccentric McLuhan has faded away, Todd Gitlin and several of his colleagues at New York University decidedly have not.

Gitlin's "Media Unlimited" isn't the first attempt to make overall sense of what he calls the "media torrent": television, radio, film, video, music, print media, the Internet—the whole shebang. Guy Debord's "Society of the Spectacle" and David Shenk's "Data Smog" are among its precursors. There are also faint echoes here of the economist and social theorist Thorstein Veblen; and Gitlin resurrects an early-20th century German thinker, Georg Simmel, in tracing the "all-engulfing spectacle" to the 19th century. That history is a key contribution of this book.

Gitlin's goal is "to grasp the totality of the media," which might imply common properties, underlying patterns, systemic relationships. It originates in a web of supply and demand, involving modern capitalism, available technology and human desires, especially the modern desire for what Gitlin calls "disposable feelings," and the quick and transient (and thus self-perpetuating) pleasures of drama, emotion and connection.

After exploring the sources of the media torrent, Gitlin identifies various coping styles. The "fan" selectively over-identifies with media icons; the "content critic," on the other hand, "[b]eholding the media flux . . . tries to keep a certain distance from the foam to avoid a soaking" but assumes that "if the content were only improved, so

would the world be." Other responses include the "paranoid," the "exhibitionist" (an eager participant), the "ironist" (knowing but not overly subversive), the "jammer," the "secessionist" and the "abolitionist." All are useful constructs; there is a bit of most of them in most of us. The author is something of an ironist.

"Media Unlimited" doesn't arrive at any unified-field explanation for the media torrent. Gitlin seems reluctant to follow the traditional explanatory path of the left: to follow the money. Greed may fuel the speed and plenitude of the media, but the torrent's synergy, he suggests, transcends profit. Capitalism and modern technol-

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ogy don't simply mold us, they confront and accommodate us.

Anyone looking for a philosopher's stone of the media totality will be disappointed here. But in the search for that totality, Gitlin provides an excellent overview and many arresting insights and side-lights. He notes, for example, that "best-seller sentences have gotten briefer, simpler, and closer to screenplays." English, he argues, is "the most torrential language." And among many cross-references that link various media and genres, he observes that "[t]he TV series 'Sixty Minutes' and its investigative offshoots are the Westerns of journalism: every week, the good guy breezes into town . . . uncovers evil, and defends the community." Even the most tawdry media frenzies, such as the ones involving O.J. Simpson, Monica Lewinsky and Chandra Levy, have a redeeming edge, as ways in which the country "confront[s] its major social and cultural conflicts."

Quibbles inevitably arise. Gitlin cites evidence that media violence makes already aggressive young people more aggressive; but elsewhere he minimizes the media's responsibility, saying we should focus on guns instead. Could we not, by a similar logic, ignore guns and focus on bullets? Powerful and pervasive as the media are, how can they not affect gun use, gun control and criminal justice as a whole?

Gitlin seems averse to the notion of media effects on behavior and even vacillates between a horror of the media torrent and a contrarian



Illustration by WES BAUSMITH  
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embrace of it. Granted, research on media effects is something of a quagmire, which has consumed careers and filled many recondite learned journals with little, pardon the expression, effect. Yet effects there must be. Larger questions remain. Are the media essential to modern capitalism? How has the media's gigantic yet shadowy footprint affected gender, faith, family, the arts? Is it why, in Robert Putnam's phrase, we "bowl alone"? Is there a dark corner of our society that television or the Internet has not somehow influenced? And

where is it all going?

The media's virtual saturation of politics is a subject that has spawned a light industry, including Gitlin's "The Whole World Is Watching" about the left and the 1960s. Here, he observes some ways in which media skew to the right but adds that "skew . . . is the least of the media's political impacts. The bigger story is demobilization. The ceaseless quest for disposable feeling and pleasure hollows out public life altogether."

I found myself both marveling at, and partly concurring in, Gitlin's sanguine assessment of the role of American popular culture in the world at large. Images of mediocrity to some Americans are images of subversion, energy, freedom and innocent pleasure elsewhere. There is an innocuous quality in Hollywood's fixation with pleasing and teasing, and so maximizing, its audiences: a devotion to distraction, stimulation and "packaged innocence." Besides, people like it; no one forces the Danes to watch "Dallas." But what of the languages and cultures that are dying out? In embracing the media's messy, torrential totality, Gitlin also embraces uncertainty and complexity. If "Media Unlimited" doesn't entirely relocate that unifying idea, it covers vast reaches of largely familiar terrain with exceptional skill and daring. Such is the scope of the media in modern life, that rather than grasp for simple answers, "Media Unlimited" invites us to follow the poet Rilke's advice and "love the questions." □