

## The Age of Access



--an excerpt from Chapter 8, "The New Culture of Capitalism" in Jeremy Rifkin's book *The Age of Access*.

### Communication and Culture

Even many of the most ardent supporters of the new communications revolution have yet to fully grasp the close relationship that exists between communications and culture. If culture is, in the words of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, "the webs of significance" human beings spin around themselves, then communications— language, art, music, dance, written text, film, recordings, software— are the tools we human beings use to interpret, reproduce, maintain, and transform these webs of meaning. (2) "To be human," notes media theorists Lee Thayer, "is to be *in* communications in *some* human culture and to be in some human culture is to see and know the world— to communicate— in a way which daily recreates that particular culture." (3) Anthropologist Edward T. Hall reminds us that "communication constitutes the core of culture and indeed of life itself." (4) There is an inseparable link, then, between communications and culture. "Culture communicates," said the late anthropologist Edmund Leach. (5)

Information specialists and engineers tend to view communications more narrowly as the transmission of messages. Their focus is on how senders and receivers encode and decode and use channels effectively with the least amount of noise. This process approach to communications, which dates back to the pioneering work of Norbert Wiener and other cyberneticians in the late 1940s and early 1950s, is concerned with how one person uses communication to affect the behavior or state of mind of another person.

The anthropological school, in contrast, sees communication as the generation of social meaning through the transmission of texts. Semiotics, a field pioneered by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce, is concerned with how communications establish meaning, reproduce common values, and bind people together in social relationships. Structuralists are interested in how language, myth, and other symbolic systems are used to make sense of shared social experiences.(6) This is the sense in which communications and culture each become an expression of the other.

It's no accident, then, that communication and community stem from a common root. Communities exist by sharing common meanings and common forms of communications. While this relationship seems obvious, it's often overlooked in discussions of communications, the implicit assumption being that communication is a phenomenon in and of itself, independent of the social context it interprets and reproduces. Anthropologists argue that communications cannot be divorced from community and culture. Neither can exist without the other. That being the case, when all forms of communication become commodities, then culture, the stuff of communications, inevitably becomes a commodity as well. And that is what's happening. Culture— the shared experiences that give meaning to human life— is being pulled inexorably into the media marketplace, where it is being revamped along cultural lines. When marketing experts and cyberspace pundits talk about using the new information and communications technologies as relationship tools and preach a commercial gospel based on selling personal experiences, commodifying long-term relationships with customers, and establishing communities of interest, what they have in mind, be it conscious or not, is the commercial enclosure and commodification of the shared cultural commons.

Herbert Schiller, professor emeritus of communications at the University of California at San Diego, poignantly observes that "speech, dance, drama, ritual, music, and the visual and plastic arts have been vital, indeed necessary, features of human experience from earliest times." What is different, says Schiller, is "the relentless and successful efforts to separate these elemental expressions of human creativity from their group and community origins for the purpose of *selling them* to those who can pay for them .(7)

The evidence is everywhere. The culture industries—a term coined by German sociologists Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the 1930s—are the fastest growing sector of the global economy. Film, radio, television, the recording industry, global tourism, shopping malls, destination entertainment centers, themed cities, theme parks, fashion, cuisine, professional sports and games, gambling, wellness, and the simulated worlds and virtual realities of cyberspace are the front line commercial fields in an Age of Access.

Cultural life, because it is a shared experience between people, always focuses on questions of access and inclusion. One either is a member of a community and culture and therefore enjoys access to its shared networks of meaning and experience, or one is excluded. As more and more of the shared culture deconstructs into fragmented commercial experiences in a network economy, access rights will similarly continue to migrate from the social to the commercial realm. Access will no longer be based on intrinsic criteria— traditions, rights of passage, family and kinship relations, ethnicity, religion, or gender— but rather on affordability in the commercial arena.

### The Rise of Cultural Production

The transformations from industrial to cultural capitalism and from property rights to access rights have been slow. The roots of the change can be traced back to the latter part of the nineteenth century. Several social forces emerged during the late Victorian era whose full impacts are only now being felt as the global economy makes the final shift to cultural production as the

dominant form of commercial activity.

Daniel Bell divides modern civilization into three distinct but interacting spheres: the economy, the polity, and the culture. The essential principle in the economic sphere, he argues, is the economizing of resources. In the political sphere, participation is the prime value. In the cultural sphere, the value is fulfillment and enhancement of self. (8) Over the course of the past century, the values of the political and cultural spheres have increasingly been commodified and drawn into the economic sphere.

The notions of democratic participation and individual rights found their way to the marketplace, where they were reborn in the guise of consumer sovereignty and consumer rights. For millions of Americans, the rights to buy and own have become far more significant expressions of personal freedom than the exercise of the franchise at the ballot box. We need recall that consumption, up until the early 1900s, had only a negative connotation. To consume meant to lay waste, to pillage, to exhaust and deplete. At the turn of the nineteenth century, when a person had tuberculosis, it was popularly referred to as "consumption." The introduction and widespread use of store-bought, brand-name products and the rise of mass advertising and marketing campaigns all served to glorify the act of consumption. For the waves of immigrants anxious to claim a part of the American Dream, the ideal of civic participation, although honored in the classroom and in official celebrations, was less coveted than the array of choices available in the beckoning department store palaces. "Participation" fell from its lofty perch in the political realm and metamorphosed into the idea of unlimited consumer choice in the commercial realm.

Culture, on the other hand, continued, for a time, to be the refuge of those critics who warned of the pervasive presence of material values. Romantics and later Bohemians searched for self-fulfillment in nature and in the arts, hoping to find a nonmaterialist road to progress. "Man," they argued, "does not live by bread alone." They evangelized for the uplifting of the human spirit and viewed the arts and aesthetic experience as liberating tonics to a life of relentless toil and constant material accumulation.

The social critics longed for personal transformation rather than mere material wealth. Their desire for self-fulfillment, however, was also gradually pulled into the commercial arena, as had occurred with the uprooting of participation as a civic value in the political sphere and its subsequent reimplantation as a consumer value in the marketplace.

The story of how the consumption ethic and the self-fulfillment ethic, initially at odds, began to find common ground in the capitalist marketplace in the twentieth century is one of the most important and interesting chapters in commercial history. The force that brought together these two seemingly irreconcilable values was the arts, the prime communicator of cultural norms.

The arts are the most sophisticated mediums of human expression. They are honed to the task of communicating the deepest meanings of culture. The arts organize and communicate social experience in a way that penetrates to a deeper recess of the human spirit than economic and political forms of communication. The lasting effects of rock music and new forms of art and dance on the social psyche of the baby boom generation in the 1960s and 1970s is testimony to the power of the arts to convey social meaning and create a sense of shared values.

It was during the romantic period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that artists came to be associated with oppositional values. They expressed the feelings and desires that had been repressed by the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the demands imposed by the industrial marketplace. In a world organized around efficiency, utility, objectivity, detachment, and a fixation on material values and property accumulation, the artists communicated the other side of human experience—the side anxious to burst out of the confines of an industrial way of life. The artists became the Janus face of modernity. They substituted subjectivity for objectivity, and creativity for industriousness. The artists communicated the feelings of abandon and ecstasy, of liberation from the drone of a puritanical way of life that yoked people to workbenches and machines. The artists spoke to each individual's desire to find personal self-expression and fulfillment in a world awash in mass production and lost in a mass anonymity.

The oppositional stance of the arts was taken up by a new generation of Bohemian artists and intellectuals in the 1920s in places like New York City's Greenwich Village. They found themselves at odds with the older Protestant ethic that continued to promote the ascetic values of self-sacrifice, hard work, and the sublimation of bodily and emotional pleasures. The new artists, observes Mike Featherstone, professor of social theory at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom, celebrated living for the moment, hedonism, self-expression, the body beautiful, paganism, freedom from social obligations, the exotica of far-away places, the cultivation of style and the stylization of life." As fate would have it, their sensibilities, although meant to be oppositional to the prevailing capitalist system, became the ideal stimulant for an economy in the throes of a transition from a production to a consumption mode.

For the first hundred or so years of capitalist development, the emphasis was on savings, capital formation, organization of the modes of production, and disciplining workforces. Capitalism's success, however, created a new challenge by the early decades of the twentieth century—how to get rid of the accumulated inventories of goods streaming off assembly lines and conveyer belts in factories around the country. Entrepreneurs found their solution in harnessing the very oppositional values that had been used by artists to critique the capitalist way of life.

If the older production-oriented capitalism had repressed creativity, self-fulfillment, and the desire for pleasure and play, the new consumer-oriented capitalism would release these pent-up psychological needs by using the arts to help create a vast consumer culture. The new consumer-oriented marketplace drew the arts from the cultural realm, where they were the primary communicator of the shared values of the community, to the marketplace, where they were made the hostage of advertising firms and marketing consultants and used to sell a "way of life."

In the 1920s one began to hear the phrase "consumer culture" for the first time. Advertisers purloined the best young writers, artists, and intellectuals of the day and put them to the task of attaching cultural significance to commercial products. Creativity,

self-fulfillment, a sense of community, and spiritual elevation— all things normally sought after in the cultural realm— were fast becoming purchasable in the marketplace in the form of culturally ascribed products and services. In the process, the utility value of goods and services became tangential to their psychological value.

Advertisers successfully used a host of mediums, including chromolithography, the electric light, film, print, and radio, to draw the psychic energy of the public away from the cultural sphere and to the commercial marketplace. The new communications technologies and artistic mediums gave the capitalist market a powerful advantage over traditional cultural mediums like paintings, dance, song, theater, pageantry, parades, festivals, sports and games, and civic involvement, all of which relied heavily on intimate face-to-face engagement to reproduce shared experiences. Culture now could be harnessed in bits and pieces to electronic mediums and spread quickly over great distances, bringing the masses of people together in simulated kinds of shared cultural experiences that, while less intimate, were often more seductive and entertaining. Locally reproduced art and culture were hard pressed to compete with electronically generated art forms like film and radio.

Because the arts— and the artists— were appropriated for the marketplace, the culture was left without a strong voice to interpret, reproduce, and build on its own shared meanings. The significance of this capitulation didn't become obvious, however, until the 1960s. By the time Andy Warhol unveiled his reproductions of Campbell's soup cans and other products as works of art, the transition from traditional culture to consumer culture was far along. Art, once an adversary to the values of the marketplace, was now its primary apostle and the main communicator of its values.

Today, however, capitalism faces a new challenge. Video artist Nam June Paik put it best when he remarked that "there is nothing more to buy." (10) For the wealthy nations, and in particular the top 20 percent of the world's population who continue to enjoy the many fruits dished up by the capitalist way of life, the consumption of goods is reaching the point of near satiation. There is only so much psychic value one can get out of having two or three automobiles, a half dozen televisions, and appliances of every sort servicing every possible need and desire.

It is at this juncture that capitalism is making its final transition into full-blown cultural capitalism, appropriating not only the signifiers of cultural life and the artistic forms of communication that interpret those signifiers but lived experience as well. Alvin Toffler is one of a growing number of futurists who envision the companies of tomorrow planning out and managing whole parts of people's lives. "Eventually," says Toffler, "the experience-makers will form a basic— if not the basic— sector of the economy." When that happens, says Toffler, "we shall become the first culture in history to employ high technology to manufacture that most transient, yet lasting of products: the human experience.(11)

Norman Denzin, professor of sociology at the University of Illinois, echoing the sentiments of the French postmodernist Guy Debord, is more critical in describing the monumental change in human relationships brought on by the forces of cultural capitalism. He writes: "Lived experience is the last stage of commodity reification. Put another way, lived experience ... has become the final commodity in the circulation of capital .(12)

In the Age of Access, one buys access to lived experience itself. Economic forecasters and consultants talk about the new experience industries and the experience economy, phrases that did not exist even a few years ago. Experience industries, which include the whole range of cultural activities from travel to entertainment, are coming to dominate the new global economy. Futurist James Ogilvy observes that "the growth of the experience industry represents a satiation with the *stuff* that the industrial revolution produced." Ogilvy says that "today's consumers don't ask themselves as often, 'What do I want to *have* that I don't have already'; they are asking instead, 'What do I want to *experience* that I have not experienced yet?' (13)

Ogilvy, like other analysts of capitalist trends, is beginning to sense the significance of the transition from an industrial economy to an experience economy. He makes the point that "the experience industry is all about trading in what makes the heart beat faster." (14) Although he acknowledges that critics will "object to the commodification of passion", he argues that "passion is so much safer" when confined to the market than "when it erupts through the sublimations of religion and politics." (15)

Management consultants B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore advise their corporate clients that "in the emerging Experience Economy, companies must realize they make *memories*, not goods.' (16) They suggest that manufacturers, for example, "experientialize" their goods. Automakers, they argue, should focus on enhancing the "driving experience," furniture producers the "sitting experience," appliance manufacturers the "washing experience and cooking experience," apparel manufacturers the "wearing experience ." (17)

Pine and Gilmore report that employment in the experiential industries is growing nearly twice as fast as in the service sector as a whole.(18) The birth of the experience industry is the next stage of evolution of the capitalist system that began with the commodification of land (the enclosure movement) and led to the commodification of home and craft production and then family and community functions. Now the totality of our existence is being commodified: the foods we eat, the goods we produce, the services we perform for one another, and the cultural experiences we share.

## Notes

2. Sarah Sanderson King, *Human Communication as a Field of Study* (New York State University of New York Press, 1989), p.111.
3. Lee Thayer, *On Communication: Essays in Understanding* (Norwood NJ: Ablex, 1987), p.45.
4. Quoted in Warren I. Sussman, *Culture As History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), p.252.

5. Ibid.
6. John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, 2nd Edition. (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.2.
7. Herbert I. Schiller, *Culture Inc: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 31.
8. Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post- Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 12.
9. Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage Publications, 1991), p. 114.
10. Quoted in Carl Eugene Loeffler, "Virtual Polis: A Networked Virtual Reality Application," in Carl Eugens Loeffler and Tim Anderson, eds., *The Virtual Reality Casebook* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1994), p.60.
11. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), pp.234, 236-37.
12. Norman K. Denzin, *Images of Postmodern Society: Social Theory and Contemporary Cinema* (London: Sage, 1991), p.44.
13. James Ogilvy, "This Postmodern Business," *Marketing and Research Today* 18 (February 1990):14.
14. Ibid., p.20.
15. Ibid.
16. B. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), p.100.
17. Ibid., p.16.
18. Ibid., pp.14-15.