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**Seeing Is Believing: Media
As Evidence**

October 8, 1992

MIT COMMUNICATIONS FORUM
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**MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
COMMUNICATIONS FORUM**

"Seeing Is Believing: Media As Evidence"

**October 8, 1992
4:00 to 6:00 p.m.
Bartos Theater
20 Ames Street
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts**

Speakers:

**Barry Day, Vice Chairman and Director
International Advertising Development
Lintas: Worldwide**

**William McKibben, Author
The Age of Missing Information**

**Rapporteur: Amy Blitz, Ph.D Candidate
Political Science Department, MIT**

Introduction by Professor Sherry Turkle:

This session of the MIT Communications Forum brings together two speakers for a discussion of issues related to the political and social impact of the media. Misinterpretation of the Patriot Missiles' performance as seen on television and the use of the video in the Rodney King trial have raised urgent questions about how people interpret evidence and about the role of media technology in this process. This forum explores how media can be used both to manipulate and to challenge our perception of what we "know."

The first speaker, Barry Day, is Vice Chairman and Director of advertising development for Lintas: Worldwide, an international advertising firm. Educated at Oxford, he works from both his London and New York offices and has had extensive experience as creative director throughout Europe and the world. Among the highlights of Mr. Day's career were two advertising firsts: he chaired the programme committee for the first worldwide advertising congress ever held in China in the Great Hall of the People in 1987 and he made the first presentation on advertising to an audience of Russian manufacturers in Moscow in 1988. He is author of four books on communications and has edited several compilations. He has also been communications advisor to leading British figures, including Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher.

The second speaker, Bill McKibben, is visiting Cambridge from his home in the Adirondack mountains of upstate New York. He is no stranger to Cambridge: he was editor of the Harvard Crimson while an undergraduate at Harvard University. He later became a staff writer for The New Yorker from 1982-1987. He is author of The End of Nature, which has now been translated into sixteen languages, and he recently published a new book, entitled The Age of Missing Information. In this recent book, he discusses among other issues how we come to know and define reality through the images selected and presented to us by the media.

We begin with Mr. Day.

Day: Will Rogers used to say that he only knew what he read in the papers. In his disingenuous way, he was saying that, bizarre as an event might seem, if it was dignified by the attention of the media (as they then were), it must be true. And Will Rogers didn't live to see television!

Things have come a long way since then. Despite visual literacy, our superficial sophistication, the media have most of us totally mesmerized. If I saw it on television it must not only have happened; it must have happened the way I saw it because I have been watching "immediate reality." Even though it may well have been recorded days, even months, earlier. I was there!

Even though we know (theoretically) about film editing, about "sound bites" and all other forms of technical manipulation that are possible, it remains virtually impossible to ignore the immediate testimony of our own eyes. You don't think of that while you're actually watching.

When the newspaper was king, The Times' correspondent could weigh every word before he filed his story. During the French Revolution, for instance, reports were at least four days old. The first you'd hear about insurrection in some far-flung spot was when the

story appeared, sometimes several weeks later. It had no excuse for not being as reasoned a piece of writing as the correspondent was capable of compiling. And then you, the reader, in a reasonable way, could calmly analyze and critique the words you read before you took out your quill pen and wrote your "Letter to the Editor." More to the point, the statesmen, the people who affected those events, had time to think before they decided. Not any more. Not with the immediacy of television. What's immediate is more important than what is important.

Television turns statesmen into politicians. The politician who isn't "Instant" is a wimp. Television takes away time. The fact of live coverage outweighs the meaning of what's being covered. (While showing a video sequence from the Gulf War, Mr. Day argued that CNN and the Gulf War brought home these points.) Many a "Live from Baghdad" transmission was devoted to a reporter reporting that he was not sure at all what was going on. Several times he got it entirely wrong. The wonder, which began to fade even before this short-lived event was over, was that he was there at all! The medium was in severe danger of overwhelming the message - and not for the first time. The very fact that both sides monitored the progress of the war by watching CNN's coverage and deliberately communicated with each other, at least in part, by the interviews they gave to CNN, is an interesting footnote to the way we live and communicate now.

To my mind, the worrying aspect of all this is what, for want of a better phrase, I'll call the "media effect." The media creating an event over and above the one they're supposedly reporting and transforming the original event in the process is worrisome. The fact, the possibility, of media coverage encouraging the creation of an event so that the media will cover it is even more worrisome. Wars fall into that category since Vietnam. Elections, those relatively bloodless wars, also qualify. Civil demonstrations, terrorism, you name it, can also qualify. Any event that provides activity, violence, drama, preferably involving large numbers of people, permits good pictures and makes "good television." Sterile debate does not.

If you want to put the date to the first visible flowering of the media effect, Chicago 1968 is as good as any. (While showing a video of the Chicago 1968 Democratic National Convention, Mr. Day argued that the players were aware that "the whole world was watching.") An orchestrated playing to the television cameras by the protesters to the home viewing audience, until at least one network, NBC, ordered its crews to cover their cameras and move away, if they saw people "behaving" for their benefit. Nonetheless, what we know of Chicago 1968 comes from the pictures that did get through. Whatever else happened, whatever "balance" there was in the full story, these images defined the event. Managing, manipulating, even hi-jacking the news is now common practice. So common, in fact, that we're only aware of it as news when it is sufficiently overt to make the headlines and prime time news casts.

(While showing scenes from the L.A. riots, terrorism and the Rodney King video, Mr. Day expanded this point.) You have to assume that the brushfire of terrorism would not have happened unless the media had been there to cover it minute by agonizing minute. And the L.A. riots were triggered by a home movie, endlessly repeated on television. We were all shocked to be sharing that sordid reality. Shocked that anyone could even think that Rodney King might even possibly be encouraging that violence on himself to create a

newsworthy event; but come to think of it...Shots like these were history in the making. They are now the "perceived truth." They tell most people as much as they want to know, as much as they have interest in knowing. Right now, every bar is full of semi-literate people with very clear views on what happened in L.A. and what should happen in Bosnia, even though they probably could not place it on a map. Television made them instant experts.

After Chicago, of course, came Vietnam. (Vietnam video) It is commonly accepted now that the television coverage of Vietnam, America's first all-color, prime-time television, direct-to-the-comfort-of-your-home, television war played a substantial role in turning Americans off. If this was what fighting the good fight involved, which in previous wars had never been made so abundantly clear, then let's get the hell out of there! Years later, that point was further proved in two other conflicts, also far-flung.

(South Africa video) South Africa in the mid-1980's, making its first tentative move towards an implacable rest of the world, relaxed one of its own rigid rules and allowed in the television cameras. Their presence turned up the heat in the situation immediately. We have been reading about these unacceptable events for years but when you actually saw them, unacceptable suddenly became unbearable. World pressure mounted. The South African government got the point. Out went the television journalists. The temperature stabilized and "liberalization" was, arguably, given the time it needed to avoid even greater bloodshed.

Media watchers also confirmed another precept, which has to do with the economics of media coverage. The cost of a camera crew in a particular hot spot means the spot had to remain hot long enough to justify the cost of keeping them there. In turn, they have to fill the time the News Editor feels obliged to allocate to coverage from such an important location that justifies the presence of a camera crew and so on... If you happen to be that camera crew and nothing much is happening where you happen to be sitting and your deadline is looming, well, we'd better get out there and make something look exciting. "And that's the way it is in "wherever we happen to be"...now back to the studio.

(Falklands video) The lesson was truly learned in a minor skirmish that some of you may have missed, if you were watching the wrong channel. The Falklands War was Britain's replay of World War II but away from home, much as the Gulf War was America getting Vietnam right. Because of the importance of maintaining the solidarity of U.K. morale, the Thatcher government restricted television reporting to one network and insisted they make pictures available in a "pool." The pictures themselves were carefully vetted and often delayed. The media, as you might imagine, was irate. The British government, however, was not contrite. They felt the risk was worth it and it paid off. The Falklands War for us Brits had much in common with World War II. It was managed. We knew what we were told.

In the television age, it was a remarkable achievement, made possible by the fact that the war didn't much matter to anyone else. President Bush could hardly have gotten away with it in the Gulf, with the whole world really watching! Whatever really happened, the event is defined by the images that survive it.

We don't need many images. In fact, we can't retain many. What images do most Americans remember? Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon? The assassination of JFK?

Most of the rest would probably be sports.

And here we have another aspect of the media effect; everything the media records remains in a world of continuous present tense, ready to be re-experienced over and over again. All of us who read The National Enquirer know that JFK, Marilyn, James Dean and Elvis are really alive and well and living together in a Swiss clinic with a few assorted Martians. But such fantasies aren't too surprising because none of them has ever really died. When you can see the constant replay of the image, how can you accept the reality of death?

(JFK montage video) That, you could argue, is a psychological side-effect of technology. Without the capability to capture, store, and repeat those images, there wouldn't be such an effect. We don't feel the same personal rapport with more significant historical characters. Who gives a hoot about Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great? Even Abraham Lincoln owes a lot to the people who have played him in the movies. Technology has a lot to do with it but it is what we do with the technology that is the concern. And some of the spin-offs raise questions.

Everyone of adult years has seen this film clip. (Oswald being shot). Documentary. Archival. True. But what about this sequence from the movie JFK? (Oswald sequence from JFK) It is a movie melange. Real archive footage that has become history. Plus, there is extended footage, seamlessly filmed to look like archive footage that could easily be archive footage. It is pseudo-history, all shot in historical, authentic black and white. And the movie packaging, a fictionalized real life story shot in degraded period color, so that you can distinguish between what is "real" and what's "reel."

We wouldn't be fooled by this, or would we? What about the post-Kennedy generation to whom all of this is as remote as the Civil War? And all the generations to come? Isn't it at least possible that, with their ever-contracting interest span, they could look at a well-made speculative movie like this and consider that most of it was factual? Is this now history? Will the packaging persuade?

I merely raise this disconcertingly "moral" question. Is it not dangerous to blur the line between what was and what might have been, just because it is now relatively easy to do? Or because it gets the ratings, the box office response, or whatever?

Let's go back to the issue of technology. When film makers attempted fantasy once upon a time, you could see the joins and the jerks. It helped you keep your distance and objectivity. The monster was a model or a man dressed up. Disbelief was always in a state of semi-suspension. And you felt safe and superior. Now you can see things happen on film that can't be happening. Yet you've just seen them happen, courtesy of the computer. (Ad of car transforming)

That computer-based technique is called "morphing." One thing is metamorphosed into another. Here's another. (Diet Coke commercial) If you've seen the recent Diet Coke spot and wondered how Paula Abdul got to dance with Gene Kelly, here's how. (Video of commercial in various stages of production)

Is it any wonder all of us, particularly kids, find it hard to be sure where real life ends and television begins? "All I know is what I see on television." And what I see is recognizably my life, but better. Television life is plotted. The characters are sharper. Their lines are wittier. And after a while I begin to remodel myself on them, at least a bit.

After all, their problems get solved in half an hour.

So, now all the world's no longer a stage. All the world is a soap. From there, it is a short step to casting real people, important people, in fictional stereotypes, a factor that came into focus when an actor became President and played the "part" of President to perfection. Today all politicians have to resign themselves to being actors. (Video of Bush at Republican Convention '92) "Mr. President, can you give us that regular guy look? Hey, we can turn this into All in the Family."

The immediacy I mentioned earlier plus the blurring of roles is an important part of the media effect. There isn't a world figure, be it in politics or other branches of entertainment, who isn't conscious of their television persona and their "ratings." Thatcher's rise (and demise) had a lot to do with having the media create an image, which the subject victim subsequently starts to believe. This year's election will be largely decided by whether we like "The Clintons" in their "pilot" program, or whether we decide to renew the "I Love George and Barbara Show" for one more season, before consigning them to reruns. The inevitable fact of the media effect is that we get tired of the show, of the characters, of their familiar phrases. etc. Whatever happened to heroes? Can there be heroes?

(Royal family video) A great deal of the dilemma Britain's Royal Family is suffering from right now is over-familiarity, created by the media. The show is getting boring, because the plot isn't developing properly. The Queen should sit them down and give them a good talking to. Charles should top it all with a good one-liner, etc. Or we'll change channels!

The media effect inevitably leads to wear-out. It also encourages encapsulation. Visual literates that we all are, we have grown used to picking up the cues, piecing together the clues, completing the message before it is anywhere near over. Being in the game, we frequently get ahead of the game. The message must thus be increasingly compressed to fit the time or space available. The problem is not in comprehension, it is in distortion, or over-simplification at the very least. You can't convey a political platform in 30 seconds, which leads you to devising policies that can be headlined. This is worrying because the process is dictating the decision.

Information acceleration is a general phenomenon, in which my own business, advertising, has played some part. Simplification, dramatization, and encapsulation are all necessary elements of the commercial imperative. And with the decibel level rising all the time, we are always looking for new ways to catch your eye. (Ever-Ready battery commercial) You thought you knew where we were taking you. You got ahead of the game, only to find you were facing in the wrong direction. Gotcha! It is both fascinating and frightening, the speed of reaction and the possibility of misdirection.

One television commercial sums it up for me. (Commercial for The Guardian - A "skin-head" is seen running toward a man in a trenchcoat, pushing him into a doorway. The shot is then widened to show that the "skin-head" is pushing the man out of harm's way, away from where a load of bricks is falling.) You had seen that spot in its entirety long before it was over. The misperception, the prejudice, the false truth, were all the things you brought to this. If someone hadn't stopped the show and shown you how the conjuring trick worked, well...where would you have been?

Joe Friday used to say, "Just give me the facts, Ma'am." But how do we know what

the facts are? This caught my eye after I had put all of these thoughts down as further proof of real life reacting to reel life. After the Republican Convention, carefully targeted and timed for the television cameras and the "great constituency," Jack Kemp becomes himself a victim of the media effect. (Video of Kemp explaining that he hadn't yet heard what the media had said about Bush's statement so he did not yet know how to interpret it.) If it had been true, I would have seen it on television.

Will Rogers, where are you?

Mckibben: Lawyers are now using dramatic reenactments in courts, hiring music video people to film these. This actually closes down the court system. Images are locked in. They have a narrow range of view, sounds, and imagination ceases to operate except along the most programmed channels. What goes on when the camera is not on, doesn't happen. Compare John F. Kennedy and Abraham Lincoln. Try to recollect images of WWII, and there are constant images on cable channels of Hitler and other scenes from WWII; but try to recollect images of WWI.

Let's move away from war, from big events to a big theme, to what the medium doesn't say as well as what it does. That is, context gets lost when the media covers things out of context, as separate parts of a whole. This may seem like a small point but nature shows are often faked. Producers declaw jaguars and hoist them into trees to create an illusion, just as Pentagon briefers did in the Persian Gulf crisis in 1990 and 1991. It is not just the specifics of the fraud but the general problem that what is shown on television has a credibility otherwise not possible. I live in the wilderness and I rarely see big animals around. When I do, they are usually running in the opposite direction. By the standards set by natural television shows, this would seem quite boring. If filmmakers showed viewers what natural life was really like, they would probably be out of business in a year. But what this kind of television misses is the stasis, the wisdom, the peace, the slow-paced reality of nature. And finally, television doesn't show the connectedness of all things in nature - the trees and the gorillas, etc.

Television is not merely limited; it lies. This has tremendous consequences. For the environment, it is hard to stop dangerous environmental practices. We're also misinformed by news, as in the coverage of the Gulf War. The Patriot Missiles didn't work as well as pictured. The same was true of the smart bombs. But the bigger lie was that television was "bringing the war into our sitting rooms." But we only knew what was happening as bombing because Peter Arnett was telling us it was. It looked like no more than a light show, however. We missed the noise, the pain. And this is related to the willingness with which we draw lines in the sand.

Everything on television is embedded in a geology of unreality. Quayle sends Murphy Brown's baby a present. Which character is real? On a deeper level, sound bytes are a deeper fraud. Nobody talks in bumper sticker thoughts, except people who have been trained to do so. To change not just what they say but also how they think. All of this exists in its own phony world. Even things that television should be best at, it inexorably makes unreal. The Olympics, for instance, are always spoiled by the packaging that surrounds it, with endless shots of athletes' faces, the pathos of the speed skater, etc.

Television, having fostered its own unreality, cannot break through it. With the

Rodney King video, we watch it over and over again and eventually it loses its impact. Nothing viewed alone makes much difference because the next minute, something new is on. Only the few repeating elements are remembered and yet, almost by definition, these are not the most challenging. The galloping sense of unreality is fed by the lack of actual experiences, which decreases as people spend more and more time watching television. Four to five hours per day is average. To undo the effects of television, viewers must step away from it and get back to the real world, to experiences. But this becomes more and more difficult as we use television to keep emotional thermostats in check, to avoid risks.

Questions and Answers

Q: How can you deal with objective truth in a subjective universe?

A: McKibben: It becomes difficult to think of society outside of television. It drives virtually every other event. The nexus of what people are talking about is in television.

Day: People experience "objective truth" through television.

Q: The implication is that we leave television knowing less than before because we are not visually literate.

A: Day: We need a certain kind of visual literacy. It is not a question of knowing less but rather of understanding things differently. Visual literacy means that the message is easily assimilated.

Q: Wouldn't literacy mean the ability to critique, to understand what is happening?

A: McKibben: No, visual literacy means that people anticipate, assimilate, construct sound bytes.

Q: If media is transforming events, it seems that media is not unreal. Watching television, we know more about Murphy Brown than our neighbors do. Might we embrace this reality and teach people to use it well?

A: McKibben: You're right. As an environmentalist, I'm concerned when unreality of television collides with the real world. In the process of learning about Murphy Brown, we do environmental damage, hurt the poor, or accomplish things because people are living in the unreal world of television.

Day: There is always something on television that is just interesting enough to keep people from doing what they might have done otherwise.

McKibben: From the beginning, there was a sense that television could be used for good. For thirty years, we have continued to conclude that something had to be done to

improve television. The relationship of passivity never really changes and it is unlikely that a less passive relationship will be created.

Day: Good television gets poor ratings. Our tasks are so degraded...

Q: You mentioned Bush and Clinton, that who wins depends on their ability to capture the media. What about Perot?

A: Day: He's turning into a bad guy. He's flubbing his lines and he's trying to hide behind packaging to avoid issues.

McKibben: But he's also using the media. His graphs, the little pointer, etc., are anti-media and they have been very effective strategies.

Q: For McKibben, regarding the King video - was it real or was it manipulated?

A: McKibben: I worked for many years as a reporter and spent a lot of time with the police. It didn't surprise me at all. I have seen worse things with my own eyes.

Q: When we bring preconceived notions to such events, how do we know what is real?

A: McKibben: We need real world experience, otherwise we cannot distinguish between what is real and what is not.

Day: People think their experiences are wider than they are. Tourists, for example, often don't recognize places when they get there.

Q: The impact of the auto has been similarly pervasive, as an earlier analogy of how technology can affect society. What is your reaction to such a comparison?

A: McKibben: Yes. The auto is the other technological device that has transformed our lives, utterly changing our experience of things. We no longer notice topography. It has changed the way we construct our communities, economies, etc. There is also the same sense of being in a cocoon, of being safe and secure from the outside world. That is why the recent car jackings strike such fear in the public. There has always been a sense that you are inviolate when in your car. Now that's gone.

Q: What do you think the impact is on children growing up now? What are the long-term implications of the problems we're talking about today?

A: Day: We have the technology and it won't go away. Technology is neither good nor bad; it's what's done with it that is good or bad. Children are more and more exposed to television and, frankly, I find this depressing. At the very least, I think it is important to build a critical faculty so that children can understand what is being seen.

McKibben: We can already see the social effects. The amount of television watching has not gone up appreciably since the inception of television. But in your own personal life, it is not hard to make it go away.

Day: This may be a saving grace. Current generations are becoming more skeptical of what they are seeing and are beginning to have a sense that none of it is too important.

Q: We have focused on issues of television shows but what about the thirty-second commercial? As a producer, I feel that the expectations for television are shaped by commercials. What is your response?

A: **Day:** Most of what we do is take forms already out there and play with them. We speed these up. If we were to stand out, we would not be understood. It is a seamless process. We are trying to inveigle you, seduce you.

McKibben: I'm not a big fan of the commercial but in its defense, there is a way that it allows you to know that what is going on is not real. Commercials step back. We are all cynical enough to know that it is not real. It may be less damaging than watching something like 48 Hours where everything presented is billed as "truth."

Q: Can television be its own undoing of such problems? At a recent conference of photographers, a suggestion was made that photographs be labeled. Would this be possible for television, to have producers let viewers into the process, to label something as, for instance, a composite?

A: **Day:** With commercials, this is the law. Anything simulated must be labeled as such.

McKibben: I don't think that it would make much difference. Look at the limited effect that warning labels for cigarettes have had on cigarette consumption.

Q: Is there any way to safeguard television into the next century, to protect what is real from what is not?

A: **McKibben:** There is now way to do this. It is not about integrity. It is about whatever pleasant emotion television wants to evoke.

Day: We have to study the way the machine works to create our own antibodies from it in a sense.

Q: We have alluded to the effect of television on values and perceptions of reality. Does the media have some responsibility in terms of projecting to societies values based in reality? The very survival of commercials is to create an unreality based on fantasies, not to reflect reality, isn't that so?

A: Day: There are several questions here. First, commercials are meant to persuade, to provide optimism, good news. But it is regulated carefully. If we can do this well, then great! If not, we are out of a job. But we cannot control television or its effects.

McKibben: Reality television will get low ratings no matter when you put it on the air. Television, in fact, gets most ludicrous when it tries to do this. It is not a problem if television is a small part of our lives. It only becomes a problem if we continue to mainline in the quantities we currently do.

Day: The genie is out of the bottle. But there are some reassuring things, too. We have tended to focus solely on the negatives. Take the Brady Bunch, for example. Children now see the family values of that era and would like to return to it.

McKibben: I would say that television is mostly bad. Television is pretty much the way it is going to be; but as individuals, we don't have to live with it.

Q: Is there a responsibility in television to do something?

A: McKibben: Even if there is, it is unlikely to have much effect.