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Keynote address: Fast Media/Media Fast - an overview of “overviews”

Tom Cooper
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This Keynote address was delivered at the 70th annual New York State Communication Association Conference on October 12, 2012. Dr. Cooper provides an survey of some of the highlights in the history of media ethics research and key conclaves. His “overview of overviews” leads to an examination of the epistemology and ecology of an important topic in the field —media saturation. Just as Thoreau went to Walden to gain a perspective on the environment of his day, Dr. Cooper conducted a “media fast” to examine the media environment of the 1980s and has been taking his classes on such fasts and related media diets ever since, as discussed in his new book *Fast Media/Media Fast*. Inspired by McLuhan’s insight that one does not learn the true impact of a medium until it is subtracted from society, Dr. Cooper compares media saturated societies such as the U.S. with “no media” (e.g. the Amish) and “low media” (e.g. the Rapa Nui) zones to gain a better understanding of our own media, society, and some resulting ethical issues.

Dr. Cooper is the author or co-author of six published books about media ethics and criticism including *Television and Ethics: A Bibliography*, *Communications Ethics and Global Change*, and his most recent, *Fast Media/Media Fast*. The co-publisher of *Media Ethics*, an independent academic and professional magazine, Cooper has written over a hundred articles and reviews. From 1975-1980 at the University of Toronto, Cooper served as an assistant to Marshall McLuhan. He has received numerous fellowships, awards, and grants, and was founding director of the Association for Responsible Communication, which was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1988.

It is my great privilege to address the “Occupy Honor’s Haven” movement this evening which is appropriate since I’m sure you were all Honors students.

Earlier today I had a long-lost memory of my first date with a Radcliffe woman, who, in those days, we called “Cliffies.” I was just a freshman at Harvard and it never occurred to me that there were, with apologies to any Radcliffe or other “Seven Sisters” women in attendance, women in the world who, if I invited them to a football game, they would look at the sport with great intellectual or moral disdain, compare it to “tribal warfare,” and admit they had never attended a game in their lives. So when I received this type of response from a “Cliffie,” I talked

her into going to her first football game as an anthropology project. She said she'd be analyzing this quasi-primate behavior and let me know her findings after the game.

Thus we watched the Harvard-Dartmouth game and when it was over I thought I'd be in for a treat to hear what a tabla rosa football virgin would see hidden beneath the sport. Instead she surprised me by saying, "Its not the anthropology of the sport which is a key point of analysis—but the economics." So I thought to myself, "What in the world is she talking about?"

Naturally I pressed her for an explanation and she said, "Well, I just couldn't understand why grown men would fight for two hours over just 25 cents." Now she really had me and I said, "What in the world do you mean?" And she replied, "Well, at the beginning of the game, one man flipped a coin which looked like a quarter." Then for the rest of the game, everyone kept shouting, "Get the quarter back! Get the quarterback!"

Tonight I want to talk about a world which gives us as unique and bizarre a misinterpretation of the game of life in the electronically mediated world as my date gave me about football, and I want to give you an example about how this misinterpretation works.

Every year I query my students about how they obtain their "knowledge." I ask how many of them "know about" or "have strong views about ...": Obama, Romney, Ben Laden, Lady Gaga. All raise their hands.

So then I ask, "How many of you have actually spent at least eight hours with any of these people to see what they are really like, unedited, off camera?" None raise their hands. So I'll ask, "How many of you have read at least three serious works of well researched, substantiated scholarship about any of these individuals from at least three completely different perspectives by veteran credentialed experts?" None raise their hands.

Now I love all my students and they are quite bright, so I'm not suggesting something is true about them which is not also true whenever I give lectures at other universities, organizations, and clubs.

We say we "know about..." but what is the current character of our knowing via Wikipedia, Fox, tweets, iPads, jingles, soundbites, tabloids, infotainment, and recycled, serialized sensationalism in this decade?

I call this the new epistemology—epistemology being, of course, the study of the nature of the character, limits, origins, and ways of knowing and knowledge. We

think we know but how do we know *if* we know and what we know—and if what we think we know *is* knowing—and involves thinking?

I don't know about you but, often, after I've been talking to someone for say ten minutes, whether we are talking about Afghanistan or the reputed lost continent of Atlantis, I can tell whether I am hearing ABC, or NBC, or Fox, or BBC or Boston on-line or Perez Hilton.com because what we hear increasingly is not original thinking but rather recycled media dialects from the five primary political parties of our day—CNN, CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox—with PBS, NPR, Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, the tweet beat, and a lot of dotcoms on the margins. And so, increasingly what we hear is not “thinking” but rather audience programming.

Now usually when I say this, I hear the bright objection, “I am NOT programmed.” But then my question becomes, “When we say this, are we emulating the disciples who, every time the guru says, ‘We are all free thinkers,’ nod their heads and say, ‘We are all free thinkers’?” I don't mean this in a condescending way because I am not saying YOU—personally—I am saying WE culturally and WE globally and WE.com.

Most, if not all, of us were encouraged to be independent, individual critical thinkers. And yet, increasingly and currently, when I ask my students and even my colleagues, many of whom are from the Ivy League or Oxbridge or the left coast Stanford/Berkeley mafia, “Have you ever had an original thought?” and then I ask them to tell it to me, most are hard pressed to prove to me that the thought is genuinely original. How would you know total originality, and how could you prove it?

So, when I say I wish to provide an overview of overviews in the field of media ethics tonight, one type of overview is the canopy which prevents our minds from seeing the universe—the ceiling of media “myth interpretation”—and it is this “myth interpretation” which may be the largest of all ethical issues—because the way we primarily know the world is also the way we know what we mean by ethics and what we think the other ethical issues and priorities are.

But there are many other contenders to the throne of primary issues in what we call media ethics. So I'd like to share with you some master shots or establishing shots of global research projects with which I've been associated in the past thirty-five years.

The first was in the 1980s when Cliff Christians, Bob White, Fran Plude and I had the privilege to assemble twenty-three media scholars from fourteen countries in six continents. Together and separately we canvassed codes of ethics and similar documents from their own and from neighboring countries worldwide to ascertain

the leading protonorms or ethical values and practices which people expect from their national and local media.

Despite many subtleties, interpretations, and methodological challenges, what emerged were these top three contenders for global or universal status 1) truth-telling 2) professional or social responsibility and 3) freedom of communication.

First we need to realize that at that time half the population of the world had not made a phone call nor seen television. So speaking of the half of the world which IS wired, let me use a simple example. No matter what the cultural, political, and religious differences of audiences worldwide, for the half of the people who do use media, here is their aggregate expectation:

- If there is going to be monsoon or hurricane tomorrow, they want their weatherman or woman to say so rather than say it will be a nice day—they expect *truthfulness*.
- They don't want the weatherman to be so drunk, he doesn't CARE whether it will be a monsoon, hurricane, or nice day.... So they expect *professional responsibility*.
- They don't want someone with a gun planted in the back of the weatherwoman forcing her to say it will be a nice day when she knows it will be a blizzard. Audiences hope that the script and spontaneous remarks will not be censored—they aspire toward *freedom of communication*.

In all the documents we assessed, these three ethical aspirations—truth-telling, professional and/or social responsibility, and freedom of information—appeared with greater than 90% frequency. We inspected hundreds of media policy and professional ethics agreements and rank-ordered them according to frequency of emphasis and the rank order of the top three were—truthfulness, responsibility and then freedom.

During the next decade I realized I had studied less than half the peoples of the world. Why? Because our research included so-called developed and developing nations but did not include indigenous nations. So I decided to work with other scholars and with many chiefs, elders, and other indigenous leaders to see which proto-norms, ethical values, and aspirations informed indigenous ethics worldwide.

The most prominent pattern I discovered was that although indigenous peoples, each unique, hold to some common ethical values regarding truth, responsibility, and freedom as well, their communication agreements were based upon a protonorm sadly lacking in many Western documents—respect.

As you may know it is the indigenous way in many tribes to respect nature so much that they do not cut down a tree until they can use all of its parts, nor kill an animal without asking its permission. So it is not surprising that many groups have ethical teachings such as: you cannot demean or defame another person or speak with him or her until any incident or history between you has subsided and you see him or her again through the lens of respect.

Some tribes have teachings that you can only speak about what you know first hand, only speak for as long as you are willing to be silent, and never speak ill of the elders of the tribe. So we called this approach—communication ethics based upon respect—the fourth universal which complements truth, responsibility, and freedom of expression.

Over ten years later, in 2007, we took on a much larger study of a smaller population. It was larger because it meant summarizing literally hundreds of polls, surveys, and studies by everyone from Princeton and Gallup to ABC, NBC, FOX, and CNN. It was smaller because it focused only upon U.S. citizens. In essence we wanted to know the leading ethical concerns American adults had about the U.S. media.

So I inspected hundreds of polls, studies, and surveys conducted between 1987 until 2007 and isolated questions and findings about attitudes toward U.S. media. When an overview of these overviews could be synthesized, the #1 concern of the American people turned out to be the issues which orbit truth-telling such as media bias, sensationalism, hype, distortion and deception.

The second greatest concern by percentage were issues which pertained to excess such as excessive violence, excessive sex available to children, excessive advertising, excessive celebrity and crime worship, excessive smotherage or overkill of the same old stories whether of O. J. or Lindsey Lohan in jail or Britney Spears shaving her head. This finding was as if Americans in the aggregate were saying to the media, “Enough already!”

In the aggregate the third largest concern we American adults voiced through surveys and polls was “privacy”—not just the privacy of celebrities hounded by paparazzi and politicians smothered by camera packs, but also all levels of privacy invasion from spyware and telemarketing, to hidden cameras and satellites.

Now any one of these issues could lead us to a lengthy and fascinating discussion, as could the global findings, including those of developing, developed, and indigenous groups worldwide. But if you want to rise to an overview of overviews level, it seems that the one over-arching concern all these groups share is “truth” and an underlying assumption that at least some types of media should be a

purveyor of “truth” whatever that means in each culture, and they are not doing so.

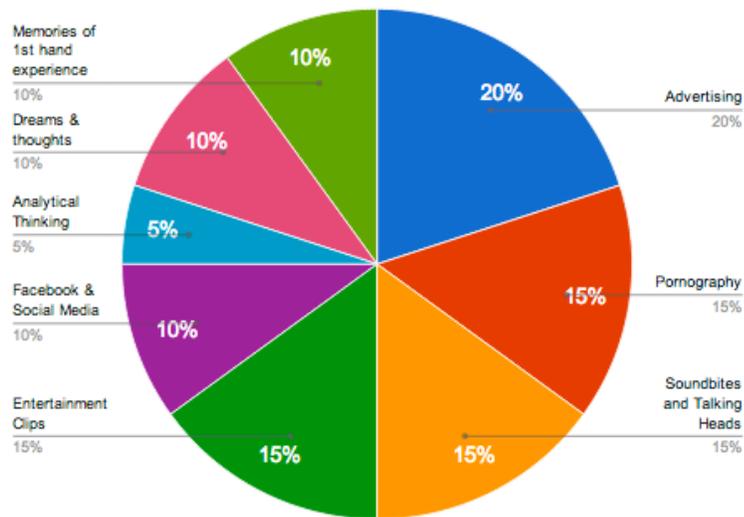
This is one reason why my research has more recently turned to the related issue of media saturation. If the mediated world fools us into thinking that we “know about” the real world, what does it mean that media have become our number one means of knowing—and that we are downsizing other means of knowing, such as scholarly research, critical thinking, and first hand experience, in proportion to what we know via what I might call intravenous electronic feeding.

Recently, Dr. Marie Pasinski, who teaches at Harvard Medical School gave an excellent talk about the brain and memory to the Harvard Club of the North Shore. When I asked her if television, in the famous words of our parents “turns our brains to mush,” she noted that media certainly can have that kind of effect especially if we consume the same types of media repetitively.

Dr. Pasinski’s medical expertise about how the brain works was from an anatomical, neurological, and psychological standpoint. And I was very grateful to learn from her astute intelligence. However, there is another level to what specialists say is inside the brain—one which is less studied. I’d like to call this area “media content” and let you know that it includes recycled e-info of all kinds.

If you created a pie chart of the collective American brain at this stage you might see something very different from the collective medieval brain—in the 21st century U.S. “mega-brain” we might see something like this: 15% pornography; 20% advertising; 15% soundbites and talking heads; 15% entertainment clips

21st Century U.S. "mega-brain"



such as rock videos, car chases, and violence; 15% facebook and other social media fragments, etc., etc., with perhaps only 5% analytic thinking, perhaps 10% memories of first hand experience and conversational remnants, or similar, and the rest dreams and other thought genres. Whether or not these figures are accurate, I think you can see that the primary sources and ratios of experience,

memory, and subconscious storage are extremely different than say in the so-called Dark Ages or the Renaissance or during the Ming Dynasty.

Just to give you a personal example, sometimes I wake up singing Madonna's "I'm a Material Girl"—but clearly I am neither. Or I might wake up singing that I'm Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream"—but I am also neither of those. So I often ask my colleagues, students, and anyone who enjoys thinking—which might well be us tonight—So, just who am I BENEATH my programming? And how can I be sure?

Now perhaps some of you are already engaged by this line of thinking but I think I know my scholarly colleagues well enough to know that others of you need proof, evidence, statistics, lab results, and “the numbers”—not just my personal experience. So here is some research, which is based on over 173 studies over 28 years and which includes those from Yale University School of Medicine, the NIH, California Pacific Medical Center and more. When I wrote the book *Fast Media/Media Fast*, our children ages 6-12 were spending

- 45 hours per week with media
- 30 hours per week in school
- 17 hours with parents

(Yale U. School of Medicine, NIH, Cal. Pac. Med. Center review of 173 studies reported by Common Sense Media—28 years of research)

So, who are the real teachers in this generation? MTV™ and VH1™? Facebook™? *Gossip Girl*? Wikipedia™? The iPad™? Beyonce? Jenna Jameson? Howard Stern? Michael Moore? Twitter™?

Ask 100 seven year olds what they know about Pocahontas or Aladdin and listen to their “facts” and odds are they know Disney—not Pocohontas, not Aladdin, not literature and textbooks—not that. I'm claiming that text books are necessarily “reliable and valid knowledge.”

Let me save a lot of time by not giving you all the numbers because I've just spent time synthesizing various summaries of what some key studies of the decade say about the relationship between children and entertainment media in the aggregate. If I were to predict what I might be saying to you five years from now based on trends, despite various exceptions and qualifications, I'd say in broad brush strokes ...

Based on AGGREGATE U.S. STUDIES:

The greater the excessive consumption of mainstream entertainment media, the higher the odds a child will become obese, A.D.D., alcohol or tobacco dependent, academically mediocre or poor, housebound, prematurely sexually active or pregnant, violent, and/or distant, if not alienated from parents and peers.

Naturally there are exceptions to all of this and we could spend 2-3 hours citing all the qualifications and defining terms and discussing methods and differing studies and interpretations... but I thought you'd want to know the bottom line rounded off to the nearest dollar rather than pursuing pennies and dimes for the rest of the evening.

Now that's children—what about those of us who are presumably teaching them? According to Nielsen's 2010 Three Screen Report, adults continue to INCREASE video/TV consumption:

- 5+ hours per person per day - TV/video
- (almost) 4 hours—Internet
- 59% consume Internet/TV concurrently

What about YOUTH, the age group we are supposed to be preparing for Harvard University? When I was writing the book, the consumption rate for entertainment media was 7½ hours used per day by 8-18 year olds (more than 53 hours per week).

But let's remove the demographics for a minute and talk about everyone.

The average American will spend three years of his or her life watching television commercials. (Michael Jacobson, founder/director of CSPI, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, as published in *Marketing Madness*, 1995, Westview Press). That was 1995—what is it now?

At the current rate, those of us my age will have grandchildren who consume FOUR of FIVE YEARS of TV (or the equivalent screen) advertising alone—add to that the Internet, radio, thin hand-held devices, magazines, video games, i-everything, social media of all kinds, and consider that perhaps up to two fifths of all our programming is advertising. Whatever the numbers turn out to be, and with whatever margin for error you give for my own number, the overall message to us all is:

“Something is wrong with you—BUY SOMETHING”

You are asking, “Is this media-bashing?”

No. Much outstanding inspirational, educational, creative, artistic, inventive programming and material is mediated. In fact, if you ARE thinking, and you can communicate FRESH thinking, you'll create better media if given the chance. Media can be therapeutic and, in moderation, provide happiness and fun if not education and life-changing moments. Media is highly diversified and one may become the creator, not the consumer with media by composing, producing, directing, writing, designing, performing, etc.

However, I began to discover with students and groups, not only the demise of original thinking, but also:

- An increase in divorce rates related to media: Man marries media—a Japanese man actually did marry his video game last year. Here's a Martian observation—to what extent are machines replacing relationships? Who are their children? Intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, socially, politically, economically, culturally, holistically—who will our children be if we are procreating with iPads and eBay and Glen Beck and 900 phone numbers?
- An increased environmental impact: Gulf oil spill—news oil spill; paper; plastic; etc. More forests are killed by newspapers than by all the loggers Greenpeace would like to lasso... not to mention the hazardous waste associated with computers, the timber depleted by telephone poles, phone books, the side effects of fiber optics, ad nauseum, ad infinitum, ad absurdum.
- A need for a Walden withing: Thoreau, noise pollution; Wurham's information anxiety, etc.
- Pascal's problem
- An aggregate statement above—children as couch potato sponges rather than finding voice and creating/thinking/enjoying outdoor life, sports, arts, etc. Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* and Susan Linn's "Free Screen Week."
- The emergence of MEDIA FAST—self, class, group:
1/3—fast; 1/3 diet; 1/3 control group - mirror diary

I began seeing possibility—living with Amish, Hawaiians, Dine, Rapa Nui, etc.—what are pros and cons of media saturation?

I began to think of implications of the triple-ups—speed up? Blow-up? Keep-up? What are pros and cons?

Can one reclaim one's thinking, time, creativity, money, health, balance, and control over one's relationship with all forms of media? May I *choose*, and

intelligently create my media diet just as I do what I eat and drink? From consumer to creator?

I am not anti-media—I've worked with film-makers, film critics, musicians and others who return to their work much sharper, lighter, clearer, more original, thoughtful, and focused. Their media fast or diet actually *improved* their effectiveness within the media.

They were also more balanced, had deeper relationships, caught up on priorities, were more socially integrated, lighter, rested, more productive, and returned to their original purpose, possibly opening their spiritual side, their service to humanity side, or to animals and the environment. There were so many benefits.

One doesn't "die with my music still in me" or have on one's tombstone enscribed "Watched 100,000 episodes of 'As the Stomach Turns'" but instead it says "made a difference" or "contributed to the history of ideas."

I do not have a lot of time to discuss all these ideas so in the book there is a chapter on each major area such as:

- Individual fast or diet
- Group fast or diet
- "No media" cultures like the Amish, Kogi
- "Low media" cultures like the Rapa Nui and Dani
- Speed-up vs. slow-down
- How media and thinking are related
- How media and the environment are related
- How media addiction works and how to break the addiction
- The ultimate questions—who am I under my programming?

Once I return to balance and clear thinking in my life, what is my direction, thinking capacity, purpose, prime relationships; how do I rebuild my creative, spiritual, intellectual prowess? How do I proceed with maximum effectiveness and contribution, whether to family, society, self, causes, a higher power, charities, those neglected, the earth, or whomever?

My ultimate goal was to say, "How do we find the Walden within in the 21st century and rediscover who it was that we set out to be so we will not die with our

music still in us?” For me there is also Ghandi’s challenge: “We must be the change we wish to see.” If I am bemoaning the death of thinking, I’d best do some myself. And there is Sartre’s notion of freedom beyond mere political freedom: freedom of action, thought, perspective, choice, and insight.

As we approach our question, answer, and conversation, I think of Martin Buber’s “I must behold the other such as the very one I am . . . and engage in a true common fruitfulness and in genuine dialog,” which is what I hope we will do tonight just as when we first had that second beer in our college dormitory and debated with roommates and friends whether God does really exist or whether evolution causes greater change than revolution.

Martin Heidegger said that, “thinking is that which is slipping away.” I hope tonight we can engage in regaining some of that which is slipping away so that, unlike Eugene O’Neill’s character, we do more than have a moment in which “The curtain lifts, we catch a glimpse of something, and then the curtain falls again.”

I am hoping we can move beyond that state and genuinely learn from each other and from the act of thinking rather than “learn” from tabloid infotainment and buy our ideas on e-Bay. For me media saturation has become the leading ethical issue in which all the others are contained.

To the extent we have a media-dominated consciousness and do nothing about it, we will assume that our greatest concerns should be about which brand of clothing we should wear, or about which brand of politician should be elected, or about whether Casey Anthony or George Zimmerman, people we’ve never met, are innocent or guilty, or exactly who should win “Dancing with the Stars” or “America’s Got Talent”—rather than doing something about genocide or, worse still (if there can be anything worse than genocide), omnicide, the death of all life as we know it—which is what our colleagues in environmental science tell us should be the lead story and our greatest ethical concern. After all, if the planet dies, all other lesser ethical issues die with it. So media saturation has a huge impact on whether we see and act upon the largest possible ethical issues of our day. Our smart phones and screens are the newest way to fiddle while Rome burns.

Thank you.