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"Media Elision"
Carol Wilder
Associate Dean & Chair
Department of Media Studies and Film
The New School

One of the weighty topics of conversation in the slow news Summer of 2000 was the significance of the phenomenal success of the television show "Survivor." In this CBS offering sixteen carefully chosen people (real people acting as actors acting as real people) are "cast away" on a movie set that happens to be on an exotic island. Left to their Darwinian devices, the "castaways" put to rest once and for all Karl Marx belief in the essential goodness of man. But how "real" is "reality television" ? Where is the line between reality and unreality, between news and entertainment? Frank Rich wrote that "the only viewers who could think ~Survivor" is real are those who thought ~The Blair Witch Project" was a documentary," but weren't there plenty of people who thought initially that "Blair Witch" was a documentary?

Another recent boundary debate erupted when ABC sent Leonardo DiCaprio to the White House to talk to Bill Clinton about global warming. The horror! A mere movie star feigning the gravitas that a real journalist would bring to such an event? When his own news staff protested this blur of news and entertainment, ABC News President David Westin was compelled to issue a press release stating that he did not send DiCaprio "to interview the president." "No one is that stupid."

Hardly a week goes by without public notice of some trespass of the boundaries once widely understood -- even taken for granted -- to separate news and entertainment. What happens when we lose these distinctions between genres and modes of discourse; between dramatic unity and logical unity; between fact and fiction? How do we negotiate our information environment when the signposts are moved or missing? How do we determine credibility in a world of factoids and simulations? If , as Gregory Bateson believed, information is a difference that makes a difference, what happens when the differences slip away? Does "information" disappear along with it? Is the sweeping media elision of the past few decades a minor curiosity of the opening years of the information millennium, or is it something more; something transformational?

The past thirty years have seen a steady erosion of differences and distinctions in our media environment, resulting in a radically altered info-culture.

The entertainment aspect of this culture has been ably described, notably by Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1986) and Neil Gabler in *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* (1998) I am not concerned here with the perils of "The Great Entertainment State," but rather with tracing the outlines of the differences

that have been lost as genre boundaries have blurred and elided. In any case, the issue is not entertainment in and of itself, but the cultural landscape that "amusing ourselves to death" obscures, along with the challenge of learning to master this brave new language.

Not so very long ago, "rhetoric" and "poetic" could safely be put at the top of a long list of complementary yet distinctive pairs of communication genres:

fact	fiction
reality	fantasy
education	entertainment
politics	show business
news	advertising
information	persuasion
documentary	drama
reporting	commentary
speaking	acting
word	image
presentation	representation

Now, insert into this tidy epistemological matrix: infotainment, docudrama, infomercial, advertorial, edutainment, factoid, and disinformation, and very quickly the boundaries of communication territories that had been thought to be both real and important simply vanish.

For instance, compare the typical newspaper format to the typical web site. In newspapers, articles that are "news" or "features" have titles and bylines and run in columns; editorials and op-ed pages are identified as such either by placement or by captions or both. Display advertisements are mostly in boxes with heavily graphical content. They "look" different from news and features. Advertising that "looks like" reporting because it shares some of the characteristic features (bylines, discursive text) is captioned "Advertisement" at the top of the page. Magazines have similar territorial markers. But try distinguishing advertising from information on most web pages, and you soon find that there are few markers; any link can lead you to a commercial, a personal website, a nonprofit resource, etc. It's all the same, at least it all looks the same. To which AOL executive Barry Schuler said "our users don't care what the financial relationship is between us and the provider of the content they see. They care about whether it is convenient and does what they want it to."

Saul Hansell wrote in the New York Times that "trusting an internet site to navigate the web is akin to following a helpful stranger in Morocco who offers to take you to the best rug store." Amazon.com created an uproar last year when it was revealed that

they were doing what they call "co-op placements" where publishers pay money to subsidize featured titles, a practice subsequently modified but hardly eliminated.

This elision was noted frequently with reference to both television and the Internet during the 1990s, beginning with a 1990 *Time* essay by Lance Morrow, who argues that "television has eaten a hole through the membrane separating America's right brain and left brain. Fantasies seep into facts. Entertainment and journalism drift back and forth across the borders. The bicameral arrangement of culture and politics dissolves." A few years later, in 1994, Marvin Kalb wrote in the L.A. Times on "Telling the News from the Pseudo-News," reflecting the confusion that has occurred in both the news room and the living room because of the "disturbing blurring of the line between news and entertainment, between reporting and editorializing, between fact and opinion, between 'old and 'new' media -- between Koppel and King."

Even TV Guide made the point in 1994, in "O.J. The News as Miniseries," with Neil Gabler asking "What is the difference between A Current Affair's Steve Dunleavy and PrimeTime Live's Diane Sawyer, save that one is overtly smarmy, the other is earnestly smarmy and gets invited to better parties." On a more serious note, Gabler intones that "the real sea change in American journalism over the last decade. . .has been the extent to which the story function in the news has eroded the information function," a thesis he expanded into his recent book.

Max Frankel, writing in the New York Times in 1997, uses "The People vs Larry Flynt" to express his concerns about docudramas in particular, asserting that "Worse than any single perversion of reality is the profusion of docudramas on both large and small screens," which misappropriate public figures and facts and "damage the appeal of fiction and corrode the meaning of truth." Meanwhile, genuine documentaries have become an endangered species of filmmaking.

The concerns expressed by Morrow, Kalb, Frankel, and others are no longer isolated voices, and today similar criticism is widespread among journalists. A recent Pew Research Center survey of 552 journalists reported in the New York Times found that two-thirds said that the boundaries between reporting and commentary had eroded, and fully three-quarters of staff journalists (and more than one-half of news executives) said that the increasing pressure to attract new audiences was driving media coverage in the direction of "infotainment."

When speaking of "infotainment," one must not overlook the culture of the classroom, especially the university classroom. "Let Me Edutain You," wrote Cornell Dean Glenn Altschuler in a 1999 essay about how students "attest to the pervasiveness, in colleges and universities, of the same culture, obsessed as it is with entertainment and celebrities, that dominates the rest of American society." Altschuler's student teaching evaluations cited "books" as the thing that detracted

most from the course, and praised him for knowing "how to teach in an entertaining way (almost like TV)." He rues the extent to which "every class has become a show and every instructor a personality." In my own teaching experience, this phenomenon began to pick up speed in the late 1980s when the first "Sesame Street" quick-cut TV generation was reaching college, echoing the observation that "Sesame Street" doesn't teach kids to love learning; it teaches kids to love television."

Much of this elision can be linked to the synergy of capitalism-meets-television. Note that in the "rhetoric & poetic" genre list given earlier, most of the categories on the left -- rhetoric, fact, news, information, word -- are staples of the verbal grammar of the print world. Most of the terms on the other side of the list -- poetry, fiction, show business, drama, image -- more appropriately characterize the medium of television. Television privileges the visual grammar of images, and is largely impervious to rhetorical interventions or argument based on the epistemology of print. This feature of television, linked inextricably with rapacious free market capitalism, has been the defining cultural context of the late twentieth century United States and, increasingly, the world. Led by the revolutionary impact of television, the last half of the twentieth century was a time of breathtaking change in the media and communication environment.

As far back as 1964, Marshall McLuhan's first line in *Understanding Media* was "After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding." At that time, the implosion had barely begun. One of the most salient and interesting contemporaneous cases of genre meltdown occurred barely two years later with Truman Capote's publication of *In Cold Blood*, which received massive press and even several treatments by rhetorical scholar Phil Tompkins, one essay in *Esquire* and one in the academic journal *Quarterly Journal of Speech*.

Capote called his new work about the 1959 murder of the Clutter family in Kansas a "nonfiction novel," because he combined techniques from journalism, screenwriting, and fiction to recreate a riveting murder story. Of course, Capote was not the first to blend fact and fiction -- we can go back as far as Homer for that -- but he was probably the first to do so with such fanfare. As Capote biographer Gerald Clark put it, *In Cold Blood* was not a new species, but to many readers it seemed like one."

Tompkins takes serious issue with some of Capote's facts and rhetorical choices, using *In Cold Blood* to anchor his 1969 essay "The Rhetorical Criticism of Nonoratorical Works." By applying techniques of rhetorical (rather than literary) criticism to genres other than oratory, Tompkins was making a daring statement at the time. His citation of subjects for possible criticism such as The Beatles "Sgt. Pepper" album and Stanley Kubrick's film "2001" were radical ideas, and it is a measure of how much things have changed that in 2000 the analysis of popular

culture, considered barely legitimate when Tompkins wrote, dominates much of the field.

Following Capote, the "nonfiction novel" and the "new journalism" were suddenly everywhere on the bestseller lists (Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night*) and in progressive periodicals (Hunter Thompson in *Rolling Stone*). If Capote had not quite created a new genre, he had certainly popularized it, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the height of his celebrity in the late 1960s coincided with the height of Marshall McLuhan's. Capote "imploded" the borders of fiction and nonfiction, introducing a hybrid form, and definitely transforming the perception of difference between them.

There were many more instances, large and small, of media elision in the years following Capote. Ronald Reagan's 1980 election as president fused Hollywood and Washington, entertainment and politics, and gave rise to Michael Rogan's wonderful book *Ronald Reagan, the Movie*. Reagan was well noted for using movie quotes in his presidential role -- "Go ahead. Make my day." -- and even inadvertently called his dog "Lassie" in front of reporters. Rogan writes that "Reagan's easy slippage between movies and reality is synecdochic for a political culture increasingly impervious to distinctions between fiction and history."

It is probably fitting that Jean Baudrillard's essay on "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media" was published in 1983, during the Reagan presidency. Baudrillard describes "the brutal loss of signification in every domain," which is "directly linked to the dissolving and dissuasive action of information, the media, and the mass media." "Information dissolves meaning," leaving us in a hyperreality of simulations, Medium and message have imploded, each pole absorbed by the other, and we are left in "this awakened dream of communication." We are left with "Ronald Reagan, The Movie." What is dissolved in this equation is difference, or at least differences that make a difference, i.e. information.

To consider the changes in difference at another level, consider Ben Bagdikian's book *The Media Monopoly*, first published in 1986 and now in its fifth or sixth edition. Bagdikian was the first to comprehensively document the outlines of the new media corporate global state, where media ownership is more and more concentrated in a few hands. Obviously, what is in danger of being lost here is the diversity of access and expression that widely dispersed ownership can provide. Bagdikian told me that many people thought he was crazy when the book first appeared, but as the concentration has accelerated during the past decade he can hardly keep up with the changes. The ownership question is almost innocuous compared to the "faux ownership" facade whereby many small media companies keep their original name -- their "brand" -- and corporate control is invisible. Enter hyperreality. Genre meltdown has picked up speed during the past decade. Consider these cultural spectacles: the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings in 1990, Oliver Stone's fact/fiction melange in *JFK* in 1991, the controlled mini-series-video-game

representation of the Gulf War in 1991, the "Oprahization" of political campaigning in 1992, Dan Quayle's factual run in with Murphy Brown's fictional pregnancy the same year, the O.J. Bronco chase complete with sign-waving fans on the overpasses in 1994, Elizabeth Dole breaking the fourth wall in 1996, the tabloid Drudge Report breaking the Lewinsky story in 1997. Kurt Andersen's 1999 novel *Turn of the Century*, a hefty tome weaving fact and fiction about the world of contemporary media, could stand as a both a primer and an exemplar of media elision.

One example of an obscure practice of media elision illustrates that the phenomenon exists at all levels. In 1993, all big three big broadcast networks began experimenting with "hot switching," creating a "seamless transition" between programs that eliminates station breaks. So much for the chance to channel surf or visit the refrigerator. Another marker of daily life slides away in the quest to keep eyeballs front and center and hands off the remote.

The boundaries between modes of expression are vanishing in nearly every realm. Take another usually invisible juggernaut -- "product placement," the strategic injection of advertising into the body of the content of entertainment. I mentioned earlier Amazon.com's "co-op placements" that backfired when the practice was disclosed in the New York Times. Amazon's spokesman acknowledged that the response was "almost surprising in its intensity," an encouraging indication that "users" care about credibility and want to know the difference between an ad and an editorial opinion.

But product placement is ubiquitous. What do the movies "Risky Business," "The Blues Brother," "Top Gun," "Men in Black" have in common? They all featured characters wearing Ray-Ban sunglasses, supplied by Bausch & Lomb. Taking product placement even further, Tommy Hilfiger contributed ten million dollars to the Miramax campaign for the film "The Faculty," in addition to contributing most of the wardrobe. Even the independent film world (of which Miramax is technically a part) is succumbing to the temptation to replace funding that should be coming from the National Endowment for the Art with funding from corporate giants, a situation that Chris Gore, publisher of Webzine Film Threat, calls "another nail in the coffin of independent film." Perhaps the ultimate thus far in product placement is "virtual" product placement, where Coke cans or Nikes can be digitally inserted into any image.

More and more information (or at least more data) plus fewer rules or boundaries for genres of communication have led inexorably to the present state of affairs where O.J. and Diana and Monica and Kosovo and Littleton and Survivor all become part of the same spectacle; all part of a seamless cultural narrative where "Wag the Dog" could be a documentary and "Primary Colors" a work of fiction. This dulling sameness of what Mike Nichols calls "The Big Soap Opera" has comprised both our

ability and our willingness to engage fully with what is important, or even to discern what is important.

In Julian Barnes' novel *England, England*, a new theme park on the Isle of Wight replicates the England that is no more, while the real thing slips further into decay. Not surprisingly, people now "prefer the replica to the original," complete as it is with the King in residence as well as the Manchester United Football Club. More than thirty years earlier, Marshall McLuhan declared to Tom Wolfe and others at a lunch at Lutece that whole cities, and especially New York, would end up as theme parks. The question in the title of Wolfe's 1965 essay, "What If He Is Right?," begs to be asked again, perhaps during a stroll around Disneyfied Times Square.

When the differences between genres disappear, even as the quantity of "data" increases, we effectively have less information, not more, as the metacommunicative frameworks we use to make sense of data dissolve. Here is where Baudrillard's world of "more and more information and less and less meaning" becomes a world of "more and more data and less and less information," and it becomes clear why Gulf War TV studies found that "the more you watch the less you know." Map and territory, medium and message, are imploded, creating an epistemological haze where the territory of data is ever expanding, and the map of meaning and analysis is melting away.

This has not been bad for everyone (or maybe for anyone). In fact, one of the fastest expanding media segments is punditry and media articles and shows about media articles and shows: The Nation's "Media Watch," Max Frankl's "Word and Image," CNN's "Reliable Sources," Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting's newsletter "Extra," Brill's Content, Mark Crispin Miller's Media Ownership Project, and on and on.

Also, it must be noted that some of the most potent political communication has come through the political theatre of "genre breakers" like Bertold Brecht and, more recently, Augusto Boal, who use the classical function of poetic to convey essentially rhetorical messages that create powerful hybrid forms of political discourse. During the Gulf War, for instance, the satirical anti-war skits performed by the San Francisco Mime Troupe were as effective as any network newscast could hope to be.

The "Survivor" series drew twice the television viewing audience of the two major political conventions of Summer 2000. "Through a weird cultural reversal," Frank Rich wrote in the *New York Times*, "America is now a place where there is now more spontaneity and 'reality' in a prime-time network entertainment series than there is in the TV spectacles staged by our political parties over supposedly momentous issues of public policy." The weird and scary thing here is not that "Survivor" and the political conventions both blur genres of news and entertainment -- no surprise there -- but that "Survivor" is perceived as more credible, more authentic, and more

viewable than a political process that should be central to the self-interest of everyone.

Credibility, believability, authenticity, and trust depend upon the ability to assess the truthfulness of what we are seeing and hearing. When verisimilitude passes for verity, the foundation for informed decision making passes with it. Not only have fact and fiction merged, but fiction can now be more real than reality, more credible than fact. Maybe the fact/fiction, news/entertainment borders were permeable and imaginary in the first place, but they served well for thousands of years. There are interesting times ahead when the discussion about media elision itself melts away in a context where people neither care about the differences between forms of communication nor remember that they ever existed.

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