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## Review of Michael J. Hyde, ed., *Communications Philosophy and the Technological Age*

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### Disciplines

Communication | Communication Technology and New Media | Social and Behavioral Sciences

observation of instances of discourse? Aristotle begins the *Rhetoric* with the statement that previous attempts to accomplish that conceptualization have all been merely partial; his remark about the shoes at the end of *Topics VIII* is in the same direction. While modern editors of individual texts or students of particular movements tend to look at theory as distinct from practice, others, like Kennedy and Wilbur S. Howell, decline to discuss historical data without its deep immersion in context and circumstance. Each approach has its virtues and vices: clarity with a risk of anachronism for the first, richness with a risk of obscurity for the second. Roughly speaking, it is a modern continuation of the Isocrates-Aristotle split which Cicero recognized at the age of nineteen (*De inventione* II.ii.8).

If this observation is correct, the apparent obfuscation of definition in this book is not willful, nor is it of course a product of ignorance. Rather, it is a deliberate choice of method, based on an appreciation of a certain point of view. Whether the book's apparent lack of definition for the term "rhetoric" (or "oratory" for that matter) is a fault or a blessing, then, will depend on the reader's own point of view.

No matter how any individual reader may respond to the issue of definition versus context, all readers will recognize in this book a splendid addition to rhetorical history. Whether one sees the book as a Baconian mass of data for induction, or as an exposition already generalized, the book and its author have to be applauded.

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*Communication Philosophy and the Technological Age.* Michael J. Hyde, Editor. Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1982, Pp. 135. \$12.75

Philosophy seems to have a hard time dealing with technology. There is a scarcity of good philosophical material, at any rate, on the relationship of man and machine, though this is by common consent a topic of enormous interest and importance. The five

essays in this collection, revised versions of papers delivered at a 1980 University of Alabama symposium, attempt to explain how technology modifies communication, a concern that is surely central to a philosophy of communications or technology.

Though they are only loosely related to one another, these essays share a number of conventional assumptions about people and their tools. They argue that technology is something fundamentally and obviously apart from us, something that menaces us by seducing us to become like it. Their authors also believe that modern electronic technologies from mass broadcasting to computing have a significantly different and a potentially more pernicious impact on human communication than all technologies that preceded them. It is possible to be critical of many current technological arrangements, indeed of technology as a category, and not to share these assumptions. Unfortunately for the strength of the arguments of many modern critics of technology, these assumptions are easily proven false, at least as presented here.

In his introduction, Michael Hyde, Professor of Communications at Northwestern University, calls for a non-partisan discussion of technology. He says we should allow it to speak to us on its own terms, as though it had a voice other than our own, or someone's own. Technology is always a human arrangement of nature for the sake of some imagined useful purpose, that is, on behalf of what are perceived to be the interests of some persons. This is true even though technologies inevitably have consequences, and regularly very harsh ones, not anticipated in their design.

By refusing to consider the human origin of technology as the interested creation of particular persons, the authors of these essays are hard pressed to make clear what is different and more threatening about current communication technologies. There has been an "intensification" of technology, according to Hyde, but it is not clear what that term means. The notion of a vaguely linear acceleration of history is not substantial enough to distinguish the different ways in which language, print, and electronic media—to take not the only examples, but certainly the most obvious—affect the character of human dialogue.

Because these are very short essays, it is possible to summarize each one and to show how key examples used to support particular arguments fall into traps set by the assumption of autonomous technology. Perhaps the best essay is by Edward Godwin Ballard,

who conceptualizes man-machine interaction as a variety of dialectic. Since the only intrinsic end that can be specified for dialectical development, according to Ballard, is convergence toward homogeneity in the structures of the events that compose development, it is hard to say whether in time men become more mechanical or machines become more human. (Whether it means to say that machines, expressions of human imagination as they are, are essentially mechanical is never fully explained.) Since the dialectic that characterizes man-machine interaction is also a feature of other human creations, language, art, even children, the trick, not achieved in this collection, is to specify the peculiar situation of machines in the partnership between human creativity and the always imperfect and incomplete state of human knowledge. Ballard does offer an excellent argument against the attribution of intentionality to machines. If a machine is described as aiming at a goal, he says, it means that it is geared to reach a given coordination of its parts in time and space with certain objects. But a coordination of its parts with indefinitely many objects exists at any moment, and there is no way to know which of these object coordinations the machine was aiming at especially. The goal is ascribed by the human observer.

Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. argues that communication with machines is less creative than communication among people. His chief example is playing chess with computers. This is not a good example, however, since no one plays chess with a computer, after all, but with a program written by other human beings. The mediated structure of this event is not very different from reading a book written by another human being in lieu of having a live conversation. The conclusion that things are getting worse can hardly be justified until differences in indirect human communication through the agency of a printed page and through the agency of a computer program can be more tellingly differentiated. Johnstone argues that one of the most pernicious aspects of new communications technology is its capacity "to put human beings on hold." It is again unclear how the effects of new media differ essentially from older print technologies, which, in permitting no immediate response, also put readers on hold. From a different perspective, human beings are also placed on hold when they cannot apprise themselves of matters of concern to them that are going on or have gone on at some distant remove of space or time. Media take users *off* hold in these circumstances.

Using face-to-face dialogue as the simplest and purest case of communication, Don Ihde offers preliminary observations for a phenomenology of mediation. A medium, he says, is a material artifact experientially used to convey expressive activity. Clothing and makeup are certainly material artifacts that mediate face-to-face communication, but Ihde apparently means to restrict himself to machinery-like artifacts, though he does not say precisely why. Media, he argues, distort the space-time character of prototype or original communication. Our ancestors, practitioners of as thorough an oral tradition as the history of human communication has to offer, used material artifacts (knives, cups, spoons and other ritual memory objects) to recall people and events from "time out of mind" and to tell stories about them, a distortion of original space-time as great as any offered by television. If there are differences in the mediation of different media, they have not been established here.

Having argued that whatever alters face-to-face communication is bad, Ihde concludes that electronic media are worse than print media because electronic media deceptively duplicate aspects of face-to-face communication. It is a contradiction to assert both that it is bad for media to distort in-person dialogue, but that it is worse partially to restore some its elements. By Ihde's original criterion for judging the value of mediated experience, print ought to be worse than electronic media.

The last two essays are not philosophy, properly speaking. Sociologist John O'Neill, the other non-philosopher in the group besides Editor Hyde, offers an impressionistic account of some aspects of popular culture that is long on sensation, short on analysis. He advises that an adequate theory of political subversion requires a model of political economy as a communicative process, an idea that has been developed by others elsewhere. Calvin Schrag's essay warns that a university should not be confused with its equipment. The mysterious process of education is not technical in character, the expression of a will to control, but a maieutic process of midwifery. This is an intelligent essay but for a confusion that applies to the others as well: the assumption that history used to be nice. Schrag presents the early university as unpoliticized and unbureaucratic. As H. F. Kearney and other historians have told us, the English university was politicized and bureaucratic by at least the sixteenth century, a period far

enough back to qualify as pre-technologically modern in the sense argued in these essays.

On the whole, no systematic theory of communications or its relationship to technology is advanced in this collection, except for the idea that mediated communication is probably bad communication. Since all communication is mediated in some fashion, and since it is not true that this is a recent phenomenon, or only recently a phenomenon of exaggerated dimension, it would be helpful to see philosophers translating their unease with modern technology, particularly modern communications technology, into analyses of greater rigor.

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