

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Plato, or by his real name Aristocles, is a famous Ancient Greek philosopher. Just as we are recently experiencing a transition to the digital age, there was a transition from oral culture to literate culture during Plato's lifetime. While epics and anecdotes of kings and sages were memorized and passed on from generation to generation, the 24-letter phonetic alphabet, which was used approximately 300 years before Plato, enabled these works and many more to be archived without the need for memorization.

At that time, philosophers like Socrates were the last representatives of oral culture since it was not necessary to memorize to convey epics, poems and anecdotes. Although Plato fulfilled an important task of transferring the oral culture archive to the written culture, he still brought criticisms of this new culture in the dialogues in some of his texts. Particularly in one of his works, the part in which Socrates tells Phaedrus about the dialogue between the ancient Egyptian god Theuth, who invented letters and the great king Thamus is quite interesting [1]:

“At the Egyptian city of Naucratis, there was a famous old god, whose name was Theuth; the bird which is called the Ibis is sacred to him, and he was the inventor of many arts, such as arithmetic and calculation and geometry and astronomy and draughts and dice, but his great discovery was the use of letters. Now in those days the god Thamus was the king of the whole country of Egypt; and he dwelt in that great city of Upper Egypt which the Hellenes call Egyptian Thebes, and the god himself is called by them Ammon. To him came Theuth and showed his inventions, desiring that the other Egyptians might be allowed to have the benefit of them; he enumerated them, and Thamus enquired about their several uses, and praised some of them and censured others, as he approved or disapproved of them. It would take a long time to repeat all that Thamus said to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts. But when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or

inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.”

Thamus' criticisms of the alphabet are very similar to the concerns of today's intellectuals about social media. The reason why the criticism against young people in ancient times repeats in the digital age is simply because of the different lifestyles and expectations of digital natives and digital immigrants. In the future, history books will possibly write that one upon a time the digital immigrants have criticized the digital natives' widespread use of 'emoji's that are similar to pictographic inscriptions that Egyptians used five thousand years ago.

In 1685, almost 150 years after Gutenberg introduced the printing to Europe with his mechanical movable-type printing press, a French scholar and critic Adrien Baillet wrote the followings at the beginning of his multivolume work, ‘Jugemens des sçavans’ [2]:

“We have reason to fear that the multitude of books which grows every day in a prodigious fashion will make the following centuries fall into a state as barbarous as that of the centuries that followed the fall of the Roman Empire. Unless we try to prevent this danger by separating those books which we must throw out or leave in oblivion from those which one should save and within the latter between what is useful and what is not.”

We may find it difficult to understand Baillet's concerns in the digital age that we live now. However, Baillet may have worried that immediately after the Renaissance and the European Reformation, the uncontrolled flow of information could lead to disinformation, blocking the developments known as 'Enlightenment' and 'Modernization'. Indeed, we have similar concerns with Baillet regarding online disinformation sources today. Especially, one of the most serious obstacles that we have faced recently is the flow of disinformation about the COVID-19 outbreak and the vaccines on social media.

Invented by Sony in 1979, the Walkman was considered one of the important technological developments of that period. Individuals would be able to listen to music wherever they wanted without disturbing others by plugging headphones into the cassette player they could carry even in their pockets. In 1984, shortly after the invention of the Walkman, a Japanese researcher named Shuhei Hosokawa examined the socio-cultural effects of the Walkman on society and his results were published in an article called 'Walkman Effect' [3]. The criticism that the later studies raised was that the device created the "Walkman Effect", which brought along many problems such as isolating users, encouraging narcissism and rude behavior, and increasing social distance by reducing interpersonal contact and interaction.

However, the Walkman has not affected interpersonal interaction as radical as its successor ipod and its derivatives i.e. iPad and iPhone. Hence, criticisms of the Walkman could be considered as the pioneering examples of criticism towards the digital world. Evolution of iPod in the early 2000s resulted the born of a revolutionary smart phone, aka iPhone. People then had opportunity to perform all kinds of information exchange anywhere, any time. It was possible to transfer any kind of data including voice and vision between the devices. The only thing that could not be transferred was perhaps the emotions, that problem was also solved with the emojis that all generations quickly adapted though.

When we go back to 1980's again, we realize the criticism of television as well. Especially, American educator and critic Neil Postman argued that television reduces politics, news, history and many other serious subjects to entertainment in his famous book written in 1985 [4]. Contrary to Baillet's 300 years old criticisms of the printing press, Postman

was blaming television as the disinformation source of the 80's. According to Postman, television was undermining the sublime mission that the printing press had solemnly carried out for centuries. Again, it was also a similar accusation against the social media that we blame for disseminating disinformation.

Unsurprisingly, the Cambridge Analytica scandal erupted in 2018. Many information and documents that emerged later pointed out that intense disinformation flow on social media has been impacted UK Brexit campaign and US Presidency race in 2017. Shortly after the elections, a column titled "*My dad predicted Trump in 1985 – it's not Orwell, he warned, it's Brave New World*" was published in The Guardian on February 2, 2017 [5]. The writer of that article, Andrew Postman was the son of Neil Postman. He linked the result of the US election to his father's foresight:

"The central argument of *Amusing Ourselves* is simple: there were two landmark dystopian novels, written by brilliant British cultural critics – *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell – and we Americans had mistakenly feared and obsessed over the vision portrayed in the latter book (an information-censoring, movement-restricting, individuality-emaciating state) rather than the former (a technology-sedating, consumption-engorging, instant-gratifying bubble)."

The last paragraph of Neil Postman's Foreword in his book was actually summarizing the problem:

*"What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us for information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that who we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared that the truth would be drowned in a sea of irreverence. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil liberations and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions." In 1984, Huxley*

added, people are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In Brave New World, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell was right.”

The criticisms Postman made for television in the past are totally valid for today's social networks. Social media giants can easily keep people under control with virtual happiness, as originally predicted by Huxley in his book 'Brave New World'. The fact that the serious online political surveillance scandals such as Cambridge Analytica incident and the recently emerged Pegasus espionage software did not attract enough attention of the societies probably indicates that the culture of surveillance has begun to get used to it.

In the novel, Huxley talked about a drug called Soma, which was given freely to make the citizens virtually happy so that they do not experience sadness or tension when they were alone in the evening. It was a drug that did not have any significant side effects other than causing drowsiness when taken in excess. During the early years of desensitization of social media users, they have been allowed to create their own virtual worlds. Afterwards, users were offered free and addictive online games and mobile applications to spend a significant amount of time on social networks. During the first decade of the world's largest social network, for instance, a substantial number of people raised chickens in virtual farms, planted things in the fields, baked beautiful cakes in bakeries, and made delicious teas and coffees in coffee shops. Some people were setting up their alarm clocks before going to bed, so that they could wake up at night to water their virtual trees so that those beautiful trees would not dry out, but give more fruits. Not many users realized, however, that they allowed the creators of those lovely games to collect almost all of their personal data, even if they were offline.

Hence, non of the social media users questioned, “Why does a simple farming game want to access my phone book, location, SMS, messages, timeline?” until the Cambridge Analytica scandal outburst.

The games that social networks provided free of charge to its users were perhaps the virtual soma pills of the social network. Over the time, when the farming-style games were not enough to make their

users happy, Soma pills were also diversified. With the help of artificial intelligence, the moments when the users were unhappy were detected and it was ensured that they received more likes and comments from the people they followed in order to make them happier to stay online for a longer period of time. In this way, it would be possible to collect wonderful data that would increase revenues from the advertisers while artificially motivating their users with more followers, likes and appreciation.

Welcome to the Brave New World!

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