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the truth is in here...

Minds Pounded To Pulp

Ever felt disconnected? Want to unlock yourself from the rat-race? Then read on as Robert Temple lets rip at the modern trend of listening without hearing anything.

Every issue, renowned author and lecturer, Robert Temple, will be bringing us his social commentary in the *Word In Your Ear* column. Robert is the author of a number of critically acclaimed books including, *The Sirius Mystery*, *The Crystal Sun*, *The Genius of China*, *Open to Suggestion*, *He Who Saw Everything* (a verse translation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which was performed at the Royal National Theatre in London), *Aesop: The Complete Fables* (with his wife, Olivia Temple) and his new book, *Netherworld*. Two further books are scheduled for release in 2003 and 2004.

OUR MINDS ARE being pounded to pulp by too much information. It is coming from everywhere. There is no escaping it. Our brains and our nervous systems cannot cope with this. Human beings were not designed to be everywhere and every when. We are not meant to have the psychological stresses and strains imposed upon us of worrying when a child is killed in Zanzibar, a girl is raped in Burma, and there is a minor earthquake in Armenia. These are not properly our concerns. And yet they are being made our concerns in an unnatural manner. They are consuming us, these terrible things which have happened throughout history while we remained ignorant of them, and which now drown us as part of the Information Deluge.

Swamp Minds

SOME OF THE worst offenders are the satellite news channels. Unlike the standard news broadcasts, these continuous news channels stream banners and messages at us simultaneously with the voices and action on screen. I have counted as many as eight simultaneous information feeds being broadcast from the more frenetic channels, in addition to a clock display and often a stock market indicator. We are meant to take all of this in at once. Even though many people today have become skilled at coping with the immediate onslaught of several simultaneous streams of information and

can more or less take it in superficially, the inevitable result of such virtuoso sensory multi-tasking is superficiality. The human brain requires certain irreducible amounts of time to register and 'weight'

an impression if it is to be retained as a genuine memory rather than as a fleeting impression. One really wonders whether the broadcasters prefer that we do not have time to reflect upon or even to properly ingest the information deluge. Perhaps we are better consumers of goods and services, and respond better to the ads for them,

It's not too late.
You can still
assert yourself.
You can still turn
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if our critical faculties are nullified and we have already been conditioned to become passive consumers of information first. In other words, by pounding our minds to pulp with too many facts at once, the continuous news channels are softening us up and making us into the kind of jelly that the ad agencies most want - *human jelly*.

Our minds are now like soggy swamps. It is impossible to have coherent thought when you are wading through such a morass of undigested sludge. We are relentlessly besieged by facts, or by information purporting to represent facts.

We are like rich people with no family who suddenly discover that they have an enormous number of cousins, all of whom want to be helped at once. But even worse, we have multiplied the information deluge by our desire to be 'always on', and 'always in touch'. We are

surrounded on all sides by people who cannot stop talking on their cell phones even to drive or to walk, much less to eat or to defecate. Some teenagers in Europe and Asia send as many as 400 text messages a day to each other. Already more than one billion texts messages a day are sent in the world, and it is only beginning. In the USA, local phone calls are free, so text messaging is not needed, but elsewhere kids cannot afford the calls, so they text instead. But now every thought, every whim, every wisp of a daydream, is communicated to one's friends all day long, and chattered about. Space has been abolished, which is often said to be a good thing, but is it?

Motor Mouths

THERE USED TO be gaps in our relentless communicating. We used to be able to walk between buildings in the street, breathe some air, glance at the sky, catch some glimpses of other people passing by, think one or two thoughts, and have a moment's peace. But that is all over now. Now no one notices anyone else in the street, because the only 'presence' is a distant one, on the other end of the cell phone call. No one whistles while they walk anymore, no one says hello to a passing stranger. Strangers cannot therefore any long become acquaintances. And consequently, neighbourhood communities cannot come into being. For a community at a distance is no community, it is merely a Diaspora with which one has links. There is no time left to breathe, and above all, no one has time to think. For how can you think when you won't stop chattering even for a moment?

Now everybody has a motor-mouth, and when it is closed, it is only because the input channel called an ear is remotely plugged into somebody else's larynx. Data is either streaming out or it is streaming in. There is no processing anymore, so none of the data is ordered. It just sloshes around in the vast empty canister of the skull. Data cannot be retrieved because it is a swamp in there.

What is this going to do to the species we grandly call 'the human race'? Already we find that few people under the age of twenty-five can spell or count. Well, we say, maybe spelling isn't so important after all, and anyway there are spell-checkers on the computers to take care of that for us. And as for counting, isn't that just a routine task best left to electronic calculators? But all these young people who lack what were once considered the basic skills of living and



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surviving in jobs and in society are actually being *conditioned* to have contempt for *any kind of concentrated attention*. Because arithmetic takes concentration while you work out the sum, it is now culturally unacceptable. Because correct spelling requires attention to detail, why bother? Who wants to give attention to detail of any kind anymore?

Isn't Detail BORING??

THIS BRINGS US to the concept of boredom. What does it mean in today's world to be bored? Essentially, it means to be deprived of the continual stream of information and the perpetual flow of 'always-on' communicating to which so many people have become thoroughly addicted. If this flow is turned off even briefly, the addicts call the state of anxiety and emptiness which they feel by the name of 'BORING'.

Are we thus becoming a robotized society? And are there not many powerful people out there – CEO's of failed corporations and disgraced accountants come to mind as role models – who would *like us* all to be a passive herd, cows who give no trouble, or mackerel who swim in shoals and swerve when the signal arrives, and above all who pay, pay, pay, pay, and never protest?

Cell Phone Junkies

IS NOT THE passive, uncomplaining, unreflecting consumer the model for our times?

Is being a cell phone junkie truly participative? You remove yourself from your physical existence and inhabit a

communication space, so you might as well be disembodied. We may have abolished distance, but we have also abolished physical presence. We have expanded empowerment but we have destroyed embodiment.

The question now is: what is the purpose of life? Is the purpose of life to inhabit a physical body and tend to the immediate events surrounding that body in what we call space and time? Or is the purpose of life to turn existence of the kind which until now has been called 'normal existence' into one long daydream, where the fantasies of 'the voice at the other end of the phone' and 'the image from the other side of the world' takes such precedence over who we are and where we are that we in turn become mere epiphenomena of these other people and other events, and as individuals we count for nothing but mere ciphers. Everything else, the world in fact, becomes the totality, and we as people become a zero. And zeroes can be manipulated just as easily as ones and twos, but they count for less. A zero is essentially an indication of an empty space. And this is what so many people are fast becoming. Hamlet, if he were alive today, would say: *'To be a zero or a one, that is the question.'*

It's not too late. You can still assert yourself. You can still turn off that cell phone and walk down the street and look at the people passing you. They may not look back, because they are sucked into their phone calls, but at least you can look into their eyes even if they don't look into yours. Try it. Make your statement.

Honk if you want to be a person! ■