
The Last Page

DISSENT has recently acquired a fax machine—not, to be sure, the very latest model, the cast-off of one of our editors who is “upgrading,” but a new machine for us nonetheless. Will this make us more efficient? Maybe so, and maybe also a little more up-to-date in our coverage of unfolding events. But I suspect that all our writers, even when they are writing about events that unfolded long ago, will simply wait a little longer before sending in their articles. There will be the same rush at the end of each quarter or, more likely, a greater rush, since the “end” will be foreshortened; articles will have to be turned around at a much faster rate.

That is certainly my own experience with the fax. The old leisurely pace of what we used to call “correspondence” has been transformed into rapid-fire communication. The new message on its curling paper (the curl is already gone, but it seemed to me nicely symbolic of the disappearing word) demands a quick answer. One has a sense of the sender waiting nervously next to the machine, fingers tapping. Often when I don’t respond immediately, I get a phone call: Didn’t you get my fax?

Of course I did; I just need a minute or two, or maybe a month, to think things over. But the whole point of the machine is to deny me that interval, to “save” my time. And then the messages multiply to fill the time that’s been saved—just as drivers and cars appear out of nowhere to clog a new highway.

The multiplication of messages has been going on for years now, but the combination of Xerox, fax, e-mail, voice messaging, and mobile phones breaks down all the barriers. There is no room left for evasion or escape; I can’t even forget a message, since my memory is mechanically prodded at regular intervals. I am besieged with information, data, advice,

requests, solicitations, gossip, arguments, invitations—all urgent, all requiring that I focus on them immediately and get back to the senders ASAP. It is as if I am on a communications assembly line that is moving faster and faster. Isn’t this what we used to call the “speed-up”? Isn’t it a form of exploitation—though for whose benefit? In any case, I have an instinctive trade-union response: slow down.

Does any one really believe that the quality of life of the professional classes has been improved by all these machines? Or of the business classes? Or of the myriads of clerks and secretaries who actually “interface” with the new technology? (Maybe this last group will soon disappear, along with the time they once occupied. Soon, I am told, all phone calls in the United States will be answered by the same mechanical, possibly female, person, an incredible labor saving device. But the six or sixteen options she or it offers require long thought, and the ensuing backup is sure to produce more jobs, of a less-and-less human sort: Can you deal with my machines?)

The machines are fun in the beginning, toys for grownups, though it is only our kids who will ever master them. And it probably makes some people feel important to be besieged with messages—the way a city besieged by soldiers is suddenly the key to military victory or defeat. But the fun will become routine and the routine more and more exhausting. And the importance will fade once everyone is similarly besieged. Imagine the men and women of the future with mobile phones and hand-sized fax machines in their pockets and a wrist watch p.c. for their e-mail: never a moment alone. When that happens, I’m calling for a General Strike.

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