

James Corbett What Hath God Wrought – The Media Matrix, Part Two

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TRANSCRIPT

Hi, I'm James Corbett of The Corbett Report, and I'm not here right now. . . . I mean, there. With you. Confused? Well, take a look at this . . .

[Steps aside to reveal James in screen] See? But, in truth, I'm not here either. What you are watching are the ghostly reflections of someone far away. I am not in the room with you, but you can see me. You can hear me. You might not think much about this, but . . . [Snaps fingers, revealing green screen set in studio] . . . it is one of the wonders of our era, and it has shaped the world in ways we can barely comprehend.

VOICEOVER: Media. It surrounds us. We live our lives in it and through it. We structure our lives around it. But it wasn't always this way. So how did we get here? And where is the media technology that increasingly governs our lives taking

us? This is the story of **The Media Matrix**.

PART 2 – WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT

There's a story about the famous Battle of Waterloo in 1815 that is not usually included in the history textbooks.

The story is that John Roworth—a trusted employee of Nathan Rothschild, the English heir of the infamous Rothschild banking family—was at the battlefield that day and, when the battle was decided and it was apparent that Napoleon had been defeated, he raced off on horseback, bearing the news across the English channel. The messenger arrived at his employers's London office a full 24 hours before the official government courier and Rothschild, always looking for a way to turn a profit, decided to use the news to his advantage. He made a show of selling his shares at the London Stock Exchange and the public, believing the famed stockbroker had received word that Napoleon had won the battle, began selling as well. The stock market plummeted and Rothschild secretly bought up the shares at rock-bottom prices. By the time the news finally reached Londoners that *Wellington*—not Napoleon—was the victor at Waterloo, the coup was complete: Nathan Rothschild was the richest man in the realm.

This story, like so many historical adventure yarns, has been much decorated in the retelling: John Roworth was not at Waterloo, for one thing, and there was no great market sell-off in the hours before the official news of the battle reached London. But the central part of the tale is true: Nathan Rothschild *did* receive early news of Napoleon's defeat and he *did* "do well" by that information, as Roworth [admitted in a letter](#) the month after the incident.

But whatever this story tells us about the world of finance, it tells us something more fundamental about something far more important: power. Knowledge is power, and, as we saw in Part 1 of this series, Gutenberg had brought that power to the masses. With the printing press, knowledge could be copied and

spread to the far corners of the globe faster and easier and cheaper than it ever had before . . .

. . . but it still had to be carried. On horseback, on foot, by train, by carrier pigeon. Information was still a physical thing and even the news of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo had to be physically transported from one place to another. But did it *have* to be this way? What if information could be communicated directly by electric current and sent across wires or through the air at the speed of light?

Enter Samuel Morse.

Morse was not a scientist or an experimenter, but a painter. He [claimed](#) that the idea for sending messages through electrical wires came to him in a flash of genius on a lengthy ship journey from Europe to America in 1832, and thus that *he* deserved credit as the sole inventor of the telegraph.

In reality, research along these lines had been going on for nearly a century. The idea of sending electrical messages through wires was first proposed [in Scots Magazine in 1753](#) and it was demonstrated numerous times over the years—most memorably by [Francisco Salvá](#), who in 1795 connected wires to human test subjects, assigned each of them a letter, and instructed them to shout their letter out when they received a shock.

Ignorant of this history, Morse had to rely on real scientists and inventors for his important breakthroughs. Like Professor Leonard Gale, who helped develop the technique of using relays to help the messages travel further than a few hundred yards. And [Alfred Vail](#), a bright young machinist whose improvements to Morse's crude prototype brought the idea into reality. Many even contend that it was Vail, not Morse, who invented the system of dots and dashes that we know as Morse Code.

Nonetheless, history is written by the winners, and Morse proved to be the winner. Getting the credit, the glory and,

more to the point, the patent for the telegraph, Morse received a congressional appropriation of \$30,000 to build the first telegraph line from Washington to Baltimore in 1844. He sent the [first official telegraph message](#) from the US Capitol to Alfred Vail at a railroad station in Baltimore. The message had been selected by Anne Ellsworth, the daughter of the Patent Commissioner with whom Morse was lodging while he was stationed in Washington. She chose a passage from the Bible fitting of the momentous occasion: "What hath God wrought!"

The passage, from the book of Numbers, is one of praise-rejoicing at the wonders that God had wrought for Israel—and ends with an exclamation mark. But the telegraph message didn't contain punctuation, and so the press misreported the phrase with a question mark at the end: "What hath God wrought?" The medium had already begun to change the message.

It's difficult for us to appreciate just how incredible it was for those who first witnessed communication from a distance with a disembodied electric ghost. In fact, it was almost impossible for people to understand this type of communication in anything but spiritual terms. Even the word "medium" evokes the specter of contact with the spirit world.

When the radio was introduced to Saudi Arabia, the country's conservative Islamic clerics declared it "the devil hiding in a box" and demanded that King Abdulaziz ban the infernal contraption. The king saw the potential use of the radio for the development of the country, but, relying on the clerics for support, he couldn't outright reject their council.

Instead, the crafty monarch [proposed a test](#): the radio would be brought before him the next day and he would listen to it himself. If what the clerics said was true, then he would ban the devil's device and behead those responsible for bringing it into the country.

The next day, the radio was brought before the king at the appointed time. But the king had secretly arranged with the radio engineers to make sure the Quran was being read at the hour of the test. Sure enough, when he switched it on and passages from the Quran were heard.

“Can it be that the devil is saying the Quran?” he asked. “Or is it perhaps true that this is not an evil box?” The clerics conceded defeat and the radio was allowed into Saudi Arabia.

We may laugh, but the Saudis were not the first or the last to mistake media technology for devilry. In 1449, Johann Fust—the scion of a wealthy and powerful family in Mainz—lent Gutenberg an enormous sum of money to start producing his famed Bible and confiscated the books from the printer when he couldn’t afford to repay the loan. When Fust later appeared on the streets of Paris, selling multiple copies of Gutenberg’s Bible, the bewildered Parisians—who had never seen printed books before and so couldn’t imagine how so many strangely identical copies of a manuscript could be produced so quickly—[arrested him for witchcraft](#).

The essence of the mass media—its ability to project the voices of people who aren’t there using electronic gadgets and wireless networks—is the essence of magic, bringing to life the scrying mirrors and palantirs of lore. But is this media technology a dark art, or can its powers be used for good?

As the new medium of commercial radio rose in the early decades of the 20th century, listeners had cause to side with the Saudi clerics in their determination that it was, in fact, a devil in a box. Listeners like those who tuned into a strange news report on the Columbia Broadcasting System on the evening of Sunday, October 30, 1938.

***ANNOUNCER:** Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt our program of dance music to bring you a special bulletin from the Intercontinental Radio News. At twenty minutes before eight,*

central time, Professor Farrell of the Mount Jennings Observatory, Chicago, Illinois, reports observing several explosions of incandescent gas, occurring at regular intervals on the planet Mars. The spectroscope indicates the gas to be hydrogen and moving towards the earth with enormous velocity. Professor Pierson of the Observatory at Princeton confirms Farrell's observation, and describes the phenomenon as (quote) like a jet of blue flame shot from a gun (unquote). We now return you to the music of Ramón Raquello, playing for you in the Meridian Room of the Park Plaza Hotel, situated in downtown New York.

SOURCE: [Orson Welles War Of The Worlds 10/30/1938](#)

Of course, this wasn't a news broadcast at all. It was the infamous "Halloween Scare," Orson Wells' radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*, which infamously caused panic among some members of the listening audience who were flipping through the dial and mistook the dramatized news "interruptions" for actual reports of a Martian invasion.

It's become fashionable in recent years to downplay the incident as a myth. There was no real scare, only a few dimwits who got frightened. The newspapers—looking for any excuse to belittle radio, its fast-rising competition for the public's attention and corporate advertising dollars—ginned up the story and sold the public on a panic that never was.

But there was something to the Halloween Scare. The City Manager of Trenton, New Jersey—mentioned by name in the broadcast—even [wrote to the Federal Communications Commission](#) to demand an immediate investigation into the stunt. In response, a team of researchers fanned out, collecting information, conducting interviews and studying reports about the panic to better understand what had happened and what could be learned about this new medium's ability to influence the public.

The team was from the Princeton Radio Project—a research group founded with a two-year, \$67,000 grant [from the Rockefeller Foundation](#) to study the effect of radio through the lens of social psychology. The team was led by Hadley Cantril, the old Dartmouth College roommate of Nelson Rockefeller who had [written in 1935](#) that “[r]adio is an altogether novel medium of communication, preeminent as a means of social control and epochal in its influence upon the mental horizons of men.”

Cantril’s report on Wells’ Halloween broadcast, *The Invasion from Mars*, [concluded](#) that such a large-scale media-induced frenzy could happen again “and even on a much more extensive scale.” This was important information for the funders of the Princeton Radio Project; their next major research project was a study of how radio could be used for spreading war propaganda, an increasingly important subject as the world slipped into the maw of World War II.

The question of electronic media’s ability to influence the public became even more important as the radio revolution of the early twentieth century flowed into the television revolution of the mid-twentieth century. Television had actually been ready to roll out as a commercial medium in the 1930s, but the Depression and then the war delayed the mass production of television sets. The first mass-produced commercial television hit the market in 1946, and it soon became one of the most quickly adopted technologies in history to that point, finding its way into the majority of American homes within a decade.

Strangely, as sociologist Robert Putnam documented in his 2000 bestseller, *Bowling Alone*, the era of television adoption precisely coincides with a severe drop-off in civic engagement among the American public. Could there be a relation? If so, what could it be?

One intriguing possibility comes from [research conducted by](#)

[Herbert Krugman](#) in 1969. Krugman—who would go on to become manager of public opinion research at General Electric in the 1970s—was interested to discover what happens physiologically in the brain of a person watching TV. He taped a single electrode to the back of his test subject's head and ran the wire to a Grass Model 7 Polygraph, which in turn interfaced with a Honeywell 7600 computer and a CAT 400B computer. He turned on the TV and began monitoring the brain waves of his subject. He found through repeated testing that “within about thirty seconds, the brain-waves switched from predominantly beta waves, indicating alert and conscious attention, to predominantly alpha waves, indicating an unfocused, receptive lack of attention: the state of aimless fantasy and daydreaming below the threshold of consciousness.”

Krugman's initial findings were confirmed by more extensive and accurate testing: TV rapidly induces an alpha-state consciousness in its viewers, putting them in a daydream state that leaves them less actively focused on their activities and more receptive to suggestion. This dream state combines with the nature of the medium itself to create a perfect tool for disengaging the viewers intellectually, removing them from active participation in their environment and substituting real experience with the simulacrum of experience.

In a word, TV hypnotizes its viewers.

NEIL POSTMAN: To begin with, television is essentially non-linguistic. It presents information mostly in visual images. Although human speech is heard on television and sometimes assumes importance, people mostly watch television. And what they watch are rapidly changing visual images, as many as 1200 different shots every hour. The average length of a shot on network television is 3.5 seconds. The average in a commercial is 2.5 seconds.

Now, this requires very little analytic decoding. In America, television watching is almost wholly a matter of what we

would call pattern recognition. What I'm saying here is that the symbolic form of television—its form—does not require any special instruction or learning.

In America, television viewing begins at about the age of 18 months and by 36 months, children begin to understand and respond to television's imagery. They have favorite characters, sing jingles they hear and ask for products they see advertised.

There's no need for any preparation or prerequisite training for watching television. It needs no analog to the McGuffey Reader. Watching television requires no skills and develops no skills and that is why there is no such thing as remedial television watching.

SOURCE: [2001 | Fredonia Alum Neil Postman On Childhood](#)

As we have seen, it was only a matter of years from the advent of commercial radio as a medium of communication until monopolistic financial interests were funding studies to determine how best to use it to mould the public consciousness. And, it seems, the television—with its brain wave-altering, hypnosis-inducing, cognitive impairment abilities—was designed from the very get-go to be a weapon of control deployed against the viewing public.

But if these media *are* weapons, if they *are* being used to direct and shape the public's attention and, ultimately, their thoughts, it begs some questions: Who is wielding these weapons? And for what purpose?

This is no secret conspiracy. The answer is not difficult to find. TimeWarner and Disney and Comcast NBC Universal and News Corp and Sony and Universal Music Group and the handful of other companies that have consolidated control over the "mediaopoly" of the electronic media are the ones wielding the media weapon. Their boards of directors are public

information. Their major shareholders are well known. A tight-knit network of wealthy and powerful people control what is broadcast by the corporate media, and, by extension, wield the media weapon to shape society in their interest.

In Part 1 of this series, we noted how technological advancements in the printing press and the development of new business models for the publishing industry had taken Gutenberg's revolutionary technology out of the hands of the public and put it into the hands of the few rich industrialists with the capital to afford their own newspaper or book publisher. The Gutenberg conspiracy had led, seemingly inevitably, to the Morgan conspiracy. But that process didn't *end* with the electrification of the media; it *accelerated*.

By the end of the twentieth century, a handful of media companies controlled the vast majority of what Americans read, saw and heard. That this situation was used to control what the public thought about important topics is, by now, obvious to all.

NEWSCASTERS: The sharing of biased and false news has become all too common on social media. More alarming, some media outlets publish these same fake stories – stories that simply aren't true – without checking facts first. Unfortunately, some members of the media use their platforms to push their own personal bias and agenda to control exactly what people think. This is extremely dangerous to a democracy.

SOURCE: [Sinclair Broadcasting Under Fire for "Fake News" Script](#)

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, this media oligopoly had cemented its control over the public mind. Combined, newspapers, television, movies and radio had the ability to direct people's thoughts on any given topic, or even what they thought *about*. The zenith of that era was reached on September

11, 2001, when billions across the globe watched the dramatic events of 9/11 play out on their television screens like a big-budget Hollywood production.

But the media was not done evolving. Technologies were already being rolled out that would once again change the public's relationship to the media. Technologies that would once again leave people questioning whether the media was a devil hiding in a box, wondering whether this new media was a tool of empowerment or control, and asking the question: What hath God wrought?

Next week: Into the Metaverse

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