

The DEAD MEDIA Project

A Modest Proposal and a Public Appeal

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Ever notice how many books there are about the Internet these days? About 13,493 so far, right? And how about "multimedia?" There are 8,784 books on this topic, even though no one has ever successfully defined the term. CD-ROM -- is there a single marketable topic left that hasn't been shovelware'd into the vast digital mire that is CD-ROM? And how about the "Information Superhighway" and "Virtual Reality"? Every magazine on the planet has done awestruck vaporware cover stories on these two consensus-hallucinations.

Our culture is experiencing a profound radiation of new species of media. The centralized, dinosaurian one- to-many media that roared and trampled through the 20th century are poorly adapted to the postmodern technological environment. The new media environment is aswarm with lumbering toothy digital mammals. It's all lynxes here, and gophers there, plus big fat venomous webcrawlers, appearing in Pleistocene profusion.

This is all well and good, and it's lovely that so many people are paying attention to this. Nothing gives me greater pleasure as a professional garage futurist than to ponder some weird new mutant medium and wonder how this squawking little monster is going to wriggle its way into the interstices between human beings. Still, there's a difference between this pleasurable contemplation of the technological sublime and an actual coherent understanding of the life and death of media. We have no idea in hell what we are doing to ourselves with these new media technologies, and no consistent way even to discuss the subject. Something constructive ought to be done about this situation.

I can't do much about it, personally, because I'm booked up to the eyeballs until the end of the millennium. So is my good friend Richard Kadrey, author of the COVERT CULTURE SOURCEBOOK. Both Kadrey and myself, however, recently came to a joint understanding that what we'd really like to see at this cultural conjunction is an entirely new kind of book on media. A media book of the dead.

Plenty of wild wired promises are already being made for all the infant media. What we need is a somber, thoughtful, thorough, hype-free, even lugubrious book that honors the dead and resuscitates the spiritual ancestors of today's mediated frenzy. A book to give its readership a deeper, paleontological perspective right in the dizzy midst of the digital revolution. We need a book about the failures of media, the collapses of media, the supercessions of media, the strangulations of media, a book detailing all the freakish and hideous media mistakes that we should know enough now not to repeat, a book about media that have died on the barbed wire of technological advance, media that didn't make it, martyred media, dead media. THE HANDBOOK OF DEAD MEDIA. A naturalist's field guide for the communications paleontologist.

Neither Richard Kadrey nor myself are currently in any position to write this proposed handbook. However, we both feel that our culture truly requires this book: this rich, witty, insightful, profusely illustrated, perfectbound, acid-free-paper coffee-table book, which is to be brought out, theoretically, eventually, by some really with-it, cutting-edge early-21st century publisher. The kind of book that will appear in seventeen different sections of your local chainstore: Political Affairs, Postmodern Theory, Computer Science, Popular Mechanics, Design Studies, the coffeetable artbook section, the remainder table -- you know, whatever.

It's a rather rare phenomenon for an established medium to die. If media make it past their Golden Vaporware stage, they usually expand wildly in their early days and then shrink back to some protective niche as they are challenged by later and more highly evolved competitors. Radio didn't kill newspapers, TV didn't kill radio or movies, video and cable didn't kill broadcast network TV; they just all jostled around seeking a more perfect app.

But some media do, in fact, perish. Such as: the phenakistoscope. The teleharmonium. The Edison wax cylinder. The stereopticon. The Panorama. Early 20th century electric searchlight spectacles. Morton Heilig's early virtual reality. Telefon Hirmondo. The various species of magic lantern. The pneumatic transfer tubes that once riddled the underground of Chicago. Was the Antikythera Device a medium? How about the Big Character Poster Democracy Wall in Peking in the early 80s?

Never heard of any of these? Well, that's the problem. Both Kadrey and I happen to be vague aficionados of this field of study, and yet we both suspect that there must be hundreds of dead media, known to few if any. It would take the combined and formidable scholarly talents of, say, Carolyn "When Old Technologies Were New" Marvin and Ricky "Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women" Jay to do this ambitious project genuine justice. Though we haven't asked, we kinda suspect that these two distinguished scholars are even busier than me and Kadrey, who, after all, are just

science fiction writers who spend most of our time watching Chinese videos, reading fanzines and making up weird crap.

However. We do have one, possibly crucial, advantage. We have Internet access. If we can somehow convince the current digital media community-at-large that DEAD MEDIA is a worthwhile project, we believe that we may be able to compile a useful public-access net archive on this subject. We plan to begin with the DEAD MEDIA World Wide Web Page, on a site to-be-announced. Move on, perhaps, to alt.dead.media. Compile the Dead Media FAQ. We hope to exploit the considerable strengths of today's cutting-edge media to create a general public-domain homage to the media pioneers of the past.

Here's the deal. Kadrey and I are going to start pooling our notes. We're gonna make those notes freely available to anybody on the Net. If we can get enough net.parties to express interest and pitch in reports, stories, and documentation about dead media, we're willing to take on the hideous burdens of editing and system administration -- no small deal when it comes to this supposedly "free" information.

We both know that authors are supposed to jealously guard really swell ideas like this, but we strongly feel that that just ain't the way to do a project of this sort. A project of this sort is a spiritual quest and an act in the general community interest. Our net heritage belongs to all netkind. If you yourself want to exploit these notes to write the DEAD MEDIA HANDBOOK -- sure, it's our "idea," our "intellectual property," but hey, we're cyberpunks, we write for magazines like BOING BOING, we can't be bothered with that crap in this situation. Write the book. Use our notes and everybody's else's. We won't sue you, we promise. Do it. Knock yourself out.

I'll go farther, ladies and gentlemen. To prove the profound commercial potential of this tilt at the windmill, I'll personally offer a CRISP FIFTY-DOLLAR BILL for the first guy, gal, or combination thereof to write and publish THE DEAD MEDIA HANDBOOK. You can even have the title if you want it. Just keep in mind that me and Kadrey (or any combination thereof) reserve the right to do a book of our own on the same topic if you fail to sufficiently scratch our itch. The prospect of "competition" frightens us not at all. It never has, frankly. If there's room for 19,785 "Guide to the Internet" books, there has got to be room for a few useful tomes on dead media.

Think of it this way. How long will it be before the much-touted World Wide Web interface is itself a dead medium? And what will become of all those billions of thoughts, words, images and expressions poured onto the Internet? Won't they vanish just like the vile lacquered smoke from a burning pile of junked Victrolas? As a net.person, doesn't this stark realization fill you with a certain deep misgiving, a peculiarly postmodern remorse, an almost Heian Japanese sense of the pathos of lost things? If it doesn't, why doesn't it? It ought to.

Speaking of dead media and mono no aware -- what about those little poems that Lady Murasaki used to write and stick inside cleft sticks? To be carried by foot-messenger to the bamboo-shrouded estate of some lucky admirer after a night's erotic tryst? That was a medium. That medium was very alive once, a mainstay of one of the most artistically advanced cultures on earth. And isn't it dead? What are we doing today that is the functional equivalent of the cleft sticks of Murasaki Shikibu, the world's first novelist? If we ignore her historical experience, how will we learn from our own?

Listen to the following, all you digital hipsters. This is Jacqueline Goddard speaking in January 1995. Jacqueline was born in 1911, and she was one of the 20th century's great icons of bohemian femininity. Man Ray photographed her in Paris in 1930, and if we can manage it without being sued by the Juliet Man Ray Trust, we're gonna put brother Man Ray's knock-you-down-and-stomp-you- gorgeous image of Jacqueline up on our vaporware Website someday. She may be the patron saint of this effort.

Jacqueline testifies: "After a day of work, the artists wanted to get away from their studios, and get away from what they were creating. They all met in the cafes to argue about this and that, to discuss their work, politics and philosophy.... We went to the bar of La Coupole. Bob, the barman, was a terrible nice chap... As there was no telephone in those days everybody used him to leave messages. At the Dome we also had a little place behind the door for messages. The telephone was the death of Montparnasse."

"*The telephone was the death of Montparnasse.*" Mull that Surrealist testimony over a little while, all you cafe-society modermite. Jacqueline may not grok TCP/IP, but she has been there and done that. I haven't stopped thinking about that remark since I first read it. For whom does the telephone bell toll? It tolls for me and thee -- sooner or later.

Can you help us? We wish you would, and think you ought to.

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