

# The Information Superhighway, The Feeling of Absurdity, Something is Inherently Wrong, Buried in a Snowstorm...

Snow, Death, and the Bewildered Herd

By [Edward Curtin](#)

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Theme: [History](#)

*"Few people at this hour – and I refer to the time before the breaking out of this most grim war, which is coming to birth so strangely, as if it did not want to be born – few, I say, these days still enjoy that tranquility which permits one to choose the truth, to abstract one in reflection. Almost all the world is in tumult, is beside itself, and when man is beside himself he loses his most essential attribute: the possibility of meditating, or withdrawing into himself to come to terms with himself and define what it is he believes and what it is that he does not believe; what he truly esteems and what he truly detests. Being beside himself bemuses him, blinds him, forces him to act mechanically in a frenetic somnambulism." – Ortega Y Gasset "The Self and the Other"*

As I write these words, the house is being buried in a snowstorm. Heavy flakes fall slowly and silently as a contemplative peace muffles the frenetic agitation and speed of a world gone mad. A beautiful gift like this has no price, though there are those who would like to set one, as they do on everything. In my mind's eye I see Boris Pasternak's Yuri Zhivago, sitting in the penumbra of an oil lamp in the snowy night stillness of Varykino, scratching out his poems in a state of inspired possession. Outside the wolves howl. Inside the bedroom, his doomed lover, Lara, and her daughter sleep peacefully. The wolves are always howling.

Then my mind's lamp flickers, and Ignacio Silone's rebel character, Pietro Spina (from the novel *Bread and Wine*) appears. He is deep into heavy snow as he flees the Italian fascists by hiking into the mountains. There, too, howl the wolves, the omnipresent wolves, as the solitary rebel – the man who said "No" – slowly trudges in a meditative silence, disguised as a priest.

Images like these, apparitions of literary characters who never existed outside the imagination, might at first seem eccentric. But they appear to me because they are, like the silent snow that falls outside, evocative reminders of our need to stop the howling media streams long enough to set our minds on essential truths, to think and meditate on our fates – the fate of the earth and our individual fates. To resist the forces of death we need to concentrate, and that requires slow silence in solitude. That is why the world's archetypal arch-enemy, Mr. Death himself, aka Satan, aka Screwtape, advises his disciple Wormwood in C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* to befuddle people against the aberration of logic by keeping them distracted with contradictory, non-stop news reports. He tells him that "Your business is to fix his attention on the stream. Teach him to call it 'real life' and don't let him ask what he means by 'real.'" "

It is a commonplace to say that we are being buried in continuous and never-ending information. Yet it is true. We are being snowed by this torrent of indigestible “news,” and it’s not new, just vastly increased in the last twenty-five years or so.

Writing fifty-eight years ago, C. Wright Mills argued:

It is not only information they need – in the Age of Fact, information often dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it....What they need...is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves....what may be called the sociological imagination.

Today, as we speed down the information superhighway, Mills’s words are truer than ever. But how to develop an imagination suffused with reason to arrive at lucid summations? Is it possible now that “the information bomb” (attributed to Einstein) has fallen?



Albert Camus once said that “at any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face.” While that is still true today, I would add that the feeling of an agitated and distracted bewilderment is everywhere to be seen as multitudes scan their idiot boxes for the latest revelations. Beeping and peeping, they momentarily quell their nervous anxieties by being informed and simulating proximity through the ether. Permanently busy in their mediated “reality,” they watch as streaming data are instantly succeeded by streaming data in acts of digital dementia. For Camus the absurd was a starting point for a freer world of rebellion. For Walter Lippman, the influential journalist and adviser to presidents and potentates, “the bewildered herd” – his name for regular people, the 99 % – was a beginning and a wished for end. His elites, the 1 %, would bewilder the herd in order to control them. His wish has come true.

A surfeit of information, fundamental to modern propaganda, prevents people from forming considered judgments. It paralyzes them. Jacques Ellul writes in *Propaganda*:

Continuous propaganda exceeds the individual’s capacity for attention or

adaptations. This trait of continuity explains why propaganda can indulge in sudden twists and turns. It is always surprising that the content of propaganda can be so inconsistent that it can approve today what it condemned yesterday.

Coherence and unity in claims aren't necessary; contradictions work just as well. And the more the better: more contradictions, more consistency, more complementarity – just make it more. The system demands more. The informed citizen craves more; craves it faster and faster as the data become dada, an absurdist joke on logical thinking.

Wherever you go in the United States these days, you sense a generalized panic and an inability to slow down and focus. Depression, anxiety, hopelessness fill the air. Most people sense that something is seriously wrong, but don't know exactly what. So they rage and rant and scurry along in a frenzy. It seems so huge, so everything, so indescribable. Minds like pointilliste canvases with thousands of data dots and no connections.

In the mid-1990s, when the electronic world of computers and the internet were being shoved down our throats by a consortium of national security state and computer company operatives (gladly swallowed then by many and now resulting in today's total surveillance state), I became a member of The Lead Pencil Club founded by Bill Henderson (The Pushcart Press) in honor of Thoreau's father's pencil factory and meant as a whimsical protest: "a pothole on the information superhighway." There were perhaps 37 1/3 members worldwide, no membership roll, and no dues – just a commitment to use pencils to write and think slowly.

"Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?" Thoreau asked. "We are determined to be starved before we are hungry."

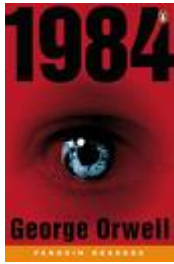
So I am writing these words with a pencil, an object, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, which haunts our present electronic world by being a ruin of the past. It is not a question of nostalgia, for we are not returning to our lost homes, despite a repressed urge for simpler times. But the pencil is an object that stands as a warning of the technological hubris that has pushed our home on earth to the brink of nuclear extinction and made mush of people's minds in grasping the reasons why.

I think of John Berger, the great writer on art and life, as I write, erase, cross out, rewrite – roll the words over and look at them, consider them. Berger who wrote: "Writing is an offshoot of something deeper"; that "most mainstream political discourse today is composed of words that, separated from any creature of language, are inert....dead 'word-mongering' [that] wipes out memory and breeds a ruthless complacency."

The pencil is not a fetish; it is a reminder to make haste slowly, to hear and feel my thinking on the paper, to honor the sacredness of what Berger calls the "confabulation" between words and their meaning. I smell the pencil's wood, the tree of life, its slow ascent, rooted in the earth, the earth our home, our beginning and our end.

Imagining our ends, while always hard, has become much harder in modern times in western industrialized nations, especially the United States that reigns death down on the rest of the world while pretending it is immortal and immune from the nuclear weapons it brandishes. Yet the need to do so has become more important. When in 1939 Ortega y Gasset warned in the epigraph of a most grim war coming to birth so strangely, as people

acted “mechanically in a frenetic somnambulism,” he was writing before nuclear weapons, the ultimate technology.



If today we cannot imagine our individual deaths, how can we imagine the death of the earth? In a 1944 newspaper column George Orwell made an astute observation: “I would say that the decay of the belief in personal immortality has been as important as the rise of machine civilization.” He connected this growing disbelief to the modern cult of power worship. “I do not want the belief in life after death to return,” he added, “and in any case it is not likely to return. What I do point out is that its disappearance has left a big hole, and that we ought to take notice of that fact.”

I think that one reason we have not taken notice of this fact of the presence of a huge absence (not to say whether this disbelief is “true”) is the internet of speed, celebrated and foreseen by the grandmaster of electronic wizardry and obscurantist celebrator of retribalized man, Marshall McLuhan, who called the electronic media our gods whom we must serve and who argued that the extensions of human faculties through media would bring about abstract persons who would wear their brains outside their skulls and who would need an external conscience. Shall we say robots on fast forward?

Once the human body is reduced to a machine and human intercourse accepted as a “mediated reality” through so-called smart devices, we know – or should – that we are in big trouble. John Ralston Saul, a keen observer of the way we live now, mimics George Carlin by saying, “If Marx were functioning today, he would have been hard put to avoid saying that imaginary sex is the opiate of the people.”

Saul is also one of the few thinkers to follow-up on Orwell’s point. “Inexplicable violence is almost always the sign of deep fears being released and there can be no deeper fear than mortality unchained. With the disappearance of faith and the evaporation of all magic from the image, man’s fear of mortality has been freed to roam in a manner not seen for two millennia.” Blind reason, amoral and in the service of expertise and power, has replaced a holistic approach to understanding that includes at its heart art, language, “spirit, appetite, faith and emotion, but also intuition, will and, most important, experience.” People, he argues, run around today in an inner panic as if they are searching for a lost forgotten truth.

Zygmunt Bauman, the brilliant sociological thinker, is another observer who has noticed the big hole that is staring us in the face. “The devaluation of immortality,” he writes, “cannot but augur a cultural upheaval, arguably the most decisive turning point in human cultural history.” He too connects our refusal in the west to contemplate this fact to the constant busyness and perpetual rushed sense of emergency engendered by the electronic media with its streaming information. To this end he quotes Nicole Aubert:

Permanent busyness, with one emergency following another, gives the security of a full life or a ‘successful career’, sole proofs of self-assertion in a world from which all references to the ‘beyond’ are absent, and where existence, with its finitude, is the only certainty...When they take action people think short-term –

of things to be done immediately or in the very near future...All too often, action is only an escape from the self, a remedy from the anguish.

McLuhan's abstract persons, who rush through the grey magic of electronic lives where flesh and blood don't exist, not only drown in excessive data that they can't understand, but drift through a world of ghostly images where "selves" with nothing at the core flit to and fro. Style, no substance. Perspective, no person. Life, having passed from humans to things and the images of things, reduced and reified. Nothing is clear, the images come and go, fact and fiction blend, myth and history coalesce, time and space collapse in a collage of confusion, surfaces appear as depths, the person becomes a perspective, a perspective becomes a mirror, a mirror reflects an image, and the individual is left dazed and lost, wondering what world he is in and what personality he should don. In McLuhan's electronic paradise that is ours, people don't live or die, people just float through the ether and pass away, as do the victims of America's non-stop wars of aggression simply evaporate as statistics that float down the stream, while the delusional believe the world will bloodlessly evaporate in a nuclear war that they can't imagine coming and won't see gone. Who in this flow can hear the words of Federico Garcia Lorca: "Beneath all the totals, a river of warm blood/A river that goes singing/past the bedrooms..."?

If you shower the public with the thousands of items that occur in the course of a day or a week, the average person, even if he tries hard, will simply retain thousands of items which mean nothing to him. He would need a remarkable memory to tie some event to another that happened three weeks or three months ago....To obtain a rounded picture one would have to do research, but the average person has neither the desire or time for it. As a result, he finds himself in a kind of kaleidoscope in which thousands of unconnected images follow each other rapidly....To the average man who tries to keep informed, a world emerges that is astonishingly incoherent, absurd, and irrational, which changes rapidly and constantly for reasons he cannot understand.

Jaques Ellul wrote that in 1965. Lucid summations are surely needed now.

Here's one from Roberto Calasso from *The Forty-Nine Steps*: "The new society is an agnostic theocracy based on nihilism."

Anyone who sits silently and does a modicum of research while honestly contemplating the current world situation will have no trouble in noticing that there is one country in the world - the U.S.A. - that has used nuclear weapons, is modernizing its vast obscene arsenal, and has announced that it will use it as a first strike weapon. A quick glance at a map will reveal the positioning of U.S. NATO troops and weapons right up to Russia's borders and the aggressive movement of U.S. forces close to China. Hiroshima and Nagasaki make no difference.





Hiroshima in the wake of the Bomb

The fate of the earth makes no difference. Nothing makes a difference. Obama started this aggressiveness, but will this change under Trump? That's very unlikely. We are talking about puppets for the potentates. It's easy to note that the U.S. has 1,000,000 troops stationed in 175 countries because they advertise that during college basketball games, and of course you know of all the countries upon which the U.S. is raining down death and destruction in the name of peace and freedom. That's all you need to know. Meditate on that and that hole that has opened up in western culture, and perhaps in your heart.

"If you are acquainted with the principle," wrote Thoreau, "what do you care for myriad instances and applications?" Simplify, simplify, simplify.

But you may prefer complexity, following the stream.

The snow is still falling, night has descended, and the roads are impassable. The beautiful snow has stopped us in our tracks. Tomorrow we can resume our frantic movements, but for now we must simply stay put and wonder.

Eugene Ionesco, known for his absurdist plays, including *Rhinoceros*, puts it thus:

In all the cities of the world, it is the same. The universal and modern man is the man in a rush (i.e. a rhinoceros), a man who has no time, who is a prisoner of necessity, who cannot understand that a thing might be without usefulness; nor does he understand that, at bottom, it is the useful that may be a useless and back-breaking burden. If one does not understand the usefulness of the useless and the uselessness of the useful, one cannot understand art. And a country where art is not understood is a country of slaves and robots.

Ionesco emphasized the literal insanity of everyday life, comparing people to rhinoceroses that think and act with a herd mentality because they are afraid of the solitude and

slowness necessary for lucid thought. They rush at everything with their horns. Behind this lies the fear of freedom, whose inner core is the fear of death. Doing nothing means being nothing, so being busy means being someone. And today being busy means being “plugged into the stream” of information meant to confound, which it does.

I return to the artist Pasternak, since the snowy night can't keep me away. Or has he returned to me? I hear Yurii Zhivago's uncle Nikolai speaking:

Only individuals seek the truth, and they shun those whose sole concern is not the truth. How many things in the world deserve our loyalty? Very few indeed. I think one should be loyal to immortality, which is another word for life, a stronger word for it ....What you don't understand is that it is possible to be an atheist, it is possible to not know whether God exists, or why, and yet believe that man does not live in a state of nature but in history....Now what is history? It is the centuries of systematic explorations of the riddle of death, with a view to overcoming death. That's why people discover mathematical infinity and electromagnetic waves, that's why they write symphonies. Now, you can't advance in this direction without a certain faith. You can't make such discoveries without spiritual equipment. And the basic elements of this equipment are in the Gospels. What are they? To begin with, love of one's neighbor, which is the supreme form of vital energy. Once it fills the heart of man it has to overflow and spend itself. And then the two basic ideals of modern man - without them he is unthinkable - the idea of free personality and the idea of life as sacrifice. Mind you, all of this is still extraordinarily new....Man does not die in a ditch like a dog - but at home in history, while the work toward the conquest of death is in full swing; he dies sharing in this work. Ouf! I got quite worked up, didn't I? But I might as well be talking to a blank wall.

I look outside and see the snow has stopped. It is time to sleep. Early tomorrow the plows will grind up the roads and the rush will ensue. Usefulness will flow.

But for now the night is beautiful and slow. A work of art.

*Edward Curtin is a writer whose work has appeared widely. He teaches sociology at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. His website is <http://edwardcurtin.com/>*

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