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Voices in the Field The Hyperreality of Daniel Boorstin

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Abstract

Early media theorists can help us to link the past and present of media literacy to pose new questions and gain new knowledge. Historian, author and Librarian on Congress Daniel Boorstin (1914 – 2004) played an important role in increasing public awareness of the constructed nature of media representations. Connections are explored between constructed reality, technological advances, media literacy education, and the current work of media scholar Douglas Rushkoff on *presentist society*. Daniel Boorstin helped recognize the changing nature of knowledge in an image-saturated environment and influenced a new generation of theorists, scholars and educators who have advanced the field of media literacy education.

Keywords: *hyperreality, history, media literacy, present shock, pseudoevents*

As a historian, professor, writer, lawyer, librarian, curator, and social theorist, Daniel Boorstin played an important role in shifting and shaping media theory into what it has become today. Born October 1, 1914, his bold ideas made waves in the latter half of the 1900s and continue to inspire critical thought today. Boorstin's stance on constructed reality pointed towards an era, that we are now living in, in which it is easy to lose touch with critical thinking in the midst of technology and imagery. His work as a historian, primarily focusing on early American history, prompted his critical thinking about society and how constructed realities shape our everyday experiences. He was a professor at the University of Chicago for 25 years, teaching mainly history. Upon retiring, Boorstin served as Librarian of Congress until his passing in 2004, where he implemented programs to promote literacy, opened the library to the public, and hosted a slew of public events, making the library a center of intellectual activity ("Daniel J. Boorstin," 2004).

Boorstin wrote over 20 books, including a groundbreaking 1962 publication titled, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. This book revealed

Boorstin's concerns for a shifting American culture that was threatened by "the menace of unreality" (p. 57). This profound work is rooted in Boorstin's notion that American citizens were beginning to become enraptured by fabricated realities born of social construction. Carefully constructed simulations and images of reality were becoming the perceived reality of American society. Neil Gabler, in a 2012 *LA Times* article states that, "no single book has so well framed how the American consciousness was reformed from one that seemed to value the genuine to one that preferred the fake." The shift Boorstin illuminated was, in his opinion, caused primarily by the growing advertising and public relations industries. People became personalities, events became media opportunities, and campaigns became smoke and mirrors. The public bought into the "fake" illusions of reality, allowing pseudo-reality to triumph over concrete reality. Boorstin coined the term "pseudo-event" to describe over-dramatized happenings that were driven by public relations, with little other purpose than a sheer "media moment" (Rushkoff, 2012). These events and activities contributed to a false sense of reality, a "facsimile of life" ("Daniel Boorstin," n.d., para. 2).

Boorstin pointed out that pseudo-events “tend to be more interesting and more attractive than spontaneous events,” as they are more controlled, more calculated, and less “real” (p. 37). This idea of a media-constructed reality was later termed “hyperreality,” and further illuminated by scholars such as Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord.

Boorstin discussed pseudo-reality with regard to celebrity and fame, political figures and campaigns, and even tourism, among other aspects of American culture. Fame, according to Boorstin, is constructed in such a way that celebrities are well-known simply for being well-known. Applied to politics, Boorstin highlighted the Kennedy-Nixon debate of 1960 in *The Image*, explaining that the campaign events and candidates’ performances became more important to the public than their qualifications. Pseudo-events highlight pseudo-qualifications (Boorstin, 1962). While more recent media theorists attest that older media criticisms are inevitably less relevant than they were decades ago, Boorstin’s concern with hyperreality is still on the table. *The Image*, according to some, remains a classic example of an “older” media criticism that is still pertinent. In *Interface Culture* (1999), Johnson states that

“The older tradition of media criticism – Daniel Boorstin’s classic work *The Image* being the ultimate example – sees the tendency for self-reference as a kind of hall-of-mirrors effect, where the real body politics of face-to-face existence slouch toward a vanishing point of endless reflection (p. 29)

This notion of “unrealities” reflecting further “unrealities,” or constructed realities, is now commonplace in media literature. In media scholarship, the concern is constantly echoed that, due to mass media, we are never quite getting to the “real reality,” if such a thing does exist. Applying this concern to technological advances and literacy, it can be argued that new tools, gadgets, games, websites, and apps are contributing to a smoke and mirrors effect, diminishing true, “real” content.

As a fan of printed literature, Boorstin believed that technological advances in television, film, and cinema would further distance Americans from reality, particularly in the absence of grappling with written language. Books and literature, according to Boorstin, take time to ingest and to think critically about. Images, like those on television and in advertisements, were everything all at once: what you were supposed to see, how you were supposed to feel, and what message you were to take away. However “pseudo” these images may

have been or may still be, they enable the audience to subscribe to a very rushed, very realistic series of emotions and ideas. “While words take time to utter and hear,” Douglas Rushkoff says of Boorstin’s position, “the image is frozen in time – its impact immediate, and its influence decadent” (Rushkoff, 2012, “Afterword”).

In the final chapter of *The Image*, Boorstin describes threat of hyperrality to America as “the danger of replacing American dreams by American illusions” (p. 240). Media scholar Douglas Rushkoff, in the afterword he wrote for the 50th edition reprint of *The Image*, builds on the shift in American dreams described by Boorstin. He explains that we went from one dream, before images and pseudo-events and constructed realities took over, to the subsequent dream of hyperreality from which Boorstin was imploring us to wake up. Prior to the shift, Rushkoff explains, human beings were utilizing their own creativity in the absence of image factories. He describes *The Image* as an “analysis of how we were lulled to sleep” (Rushkoff, 2012, “Afterword”). According to Rushkoff, the slumber that we are now in is characterized by the inability to reach the greater narratives of humanity.

We are stuck in the present, caught up in the “now” that Boorstin warned us about. Rushkoff describes this current presentist state of society in his book *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (2013). While focusing on the present may seem like a nod to conscious living, we are living unconsciously in the sense that we are more aware of a cell phone buzzing, a pinging inbox, or an incoming tweet than of grander life schemes with beginnings, middles, and ends. We are oblivious to the story. This shift into oblivion is what Boorstin would consider a shift from “the world of language and text to the world of the image” (Rushkoff, 2012, “Afterword”). Aligning Boorstin’s notion of the “image” as a real-time moment of impact with Rushkoff’s presentist idea of the “now,” we might say that words and literature, in the Boorstinian sense, are the key to maintaining creativity, narrative, and consciousness. Boorstin’s belief that words require critical thought, contextualizing, and a deeper understanding of how a text is situated into one’s life is similar to Rushkoff’s idea that we need to awaken our creativity and open our eyes – to do more than just shallowly experience whatever sensory information is coming at us *right now*.

Examining these ideas through the lens of current trends in literacy, education, and popular culture illuminates several areas of inquiry. Are we being pulled away from critical thinking and narrative thought by the “ghee whiz” factor of flashy texts and tools? Is our digitized, present-focused state robbing us of basic

logical reasoning and problem-solving skills? Will students be able to see the long term value and applicability of their lessons? Will there *be* long term value and applicability? Boorstin is credited with illuminating the detrimental shift that was just beginning in his time. The shift into hyperreality that Boorstin described is analogous to the shift that is intensifying today: to a fast-paced, always-on culture. Like Marshall McLuhan predicted the global village, Boorstin predicted a mass-mediated disconnect from reality. Our connection to technology disconnects us from reality.

New ideas in media literacy education can serve to create connection where there was once disconnect. With strategic planning and practice, educators can enable students to think critically and to find long-term

value with tools and texts that have previously been considered shallow. Boorstin was one of the first to warn us of an impending loss of creative human qualities. By taking full advantage of the array of gadgets, texts, apps, games, and tools at our disposal, we can intertwine creativity and literacy.

During Boorstin's time as Librarian of Congress, he made a controversial order to open the majestic bronze doors of the main Library of Congress to the public, a request that was met with rebuttal by his colleagues. His response to the rebuttal captures his character and contribution to media history: "They said it would create a draft," Boorstin told reporters, "and I replied, 'Great — that's just what we need'" ("Daniel J. Boorstin," 2004).

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