Dewey’s Cosmic Traffic: Politics and Pedagogy as Communication

Among the most impressive articulations of epistemology and ontology in terms of “traffic”—movement and circulation as both fundamental and generative—are those of the American intellectual and philosopher, John Dewey. One of the most striking of Dewey’s characterizations of this kind is quoted by our host Hartmut Winkler in his 2004 book Discourse Economy: Essay on the inner Economy of Media. It is taken from one of Dewey’s early writings, his 1891 essay, “The Scholastic and the Speculator.”

The comparison of thinking with commerce is no forced analogy. There is but one commerce: The meeting of Mind and Reality. Sometimes the meeting is of one kind and we call it Thought; sometimes it is of another and we call it Language; sometimes another and we call it Art; sometimes another and we call it Justice, Rightness; sometimes another and we call it Trade. ...There is only one economy in the universe; and of this, logic, political economy, and the movements of molecules are equally phases. (1891)

Dewey envisions a comprehensive flow and interchange; the world becomes explicable in terms of an exchange, circulation, commerce and economy. Over some sixty years, and in treatments of themes ranging from political philosophy, metaphysics, education to epistemology, Dewey develops and reiterates this notion of generative movement in different ways, use terms such as “exchange” (1925), “communication” (1925, 1927), “interaction” (1938), or “transaction” (1949).1 With each iteration, he moves further away from conventional and Cartesian dualisms (e.g., “Mind and Reality”), and closer toward a consistent and consequential understanding of “communication” or intercourse as foundational or –if his final co-authored text is indeed Deweyan-- as the “cosmic event.” For example, in mid-career, Dewey reiterates his vision of entity and action as flow and exchange that is roughly midway between dualism to his own brand of processual “realism.”

Events that are objects or significant exist in a context where they acquire new ways of operation and new properties. Words are spoken of as coins and money... As a substitute, money not merely facilitates exchange of...commodities... but it revolutionizes as well production and consumption of all commodities, because it brings into being new transactions,

1 Examples of Dewey’s use of these terms in the texts referenced are as follows:
From Experience and Nature (1925): “Communication is an exchange which procures something wanted; it involves a claim, appeal, order, direction or request, which realizes want at less cost than personal labor exacts.”
From The Public and its Problems (1927): “Democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. It had its seer in Walt Whitman. It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication.”
From Experience and Education (1938): “The word interaction... expresses the second chief principle for interpreting an experience in its educational function and force. It assigns equal rights to both factors in experience – objective and external conditions.”
From Knowing and the Known (1949): “Transaction is the procedure which observes men talking and writing, using language and other representational activities to present their perceptions and manipulations. This permits a full treatment, descriptive and functional, of the whole process inclusive of all its contents, and with the newer techniques of inquiry required.”
forming new histories and affairs. Exchange is not an event that can be isolated. It marks the emergence of production and consumption into a new medium and context wherein they acquire new properties. (1925, pp. 173-174)

This passage articulates the central significance of traffic as the term can be applied to Dewey: It is manifest as medium, not in the sense of an object or state such as a medium of exchange like coins or currency, but as an event. What makes this event similar to money is that it is an event of exchange and interchange, and above all that it is generative: It is generative of “new ways of operation and new properties.” It is also self-generative, not necessarily arising ex nihilo, but in a procreative, proliferative sense: “it brings into being new transactions, forming new histories and affairs” as Dewey says. This notion of exchange is fundamental for Dewey. It serves not only as the basis for his metaphysics, but also for epistemology and ontology.

Given the appearance and reappearance of this notion of transaction, interaction and communication across his writings, Dewey can be said to be an important and early contributor to discourses on “traffic” as an event and as a medium. His wide-ranging and gradually evolving thought offers an opportunity to see how various issues can be configured in terms of dynamic flow and circulation. These issues include the development of technical media that were profoundly reshaping nearly all aspects of everyday reality in Dewey’s time. Among these technical media are the railway and telephone, as well as the mass media of radio, film, newspaper and other print forms. As one would expect, Dewey frequently portrayed these as facilitating ever an ever-widening gyre in a larger, generative economy or medium.

At the same time though, Dewey was forced to address far-reaching critiques of communication in the political arena, which saw new media as distorting and blocking effective communication. In this presentation, I focus on Dewey’s remarks on media and circulation in both his 1927 book, The Public and its Problems, and in two early works, “The Primary-Education Fetich [sic]” and “Lectures vs. Recitations: A Symposium.” As McLuhan perceptively noted, “Dewey” was in effect “reacting against passive print culture [and thus] surf boarding along on the new electronic wave.” Through this examination, I show how Dewey is indeed, and perhaps unwittingly, riding along an electronic wave that was just beginning to well up in the first half of the twentieth century.

The early 1920’s in particular saw remarkable developments in media; for example, the rise of Hollywood (and of Babelsberg) and the establishment of commercial radio broadcasters in nearly every state in the US. This occurred along with many other developments, as Dewey himself explains:

Our social life has been almost completely changed in the last generation; the change is a transformation of the conditions under which we live, symbolized by the radio, the railway, telephone, telegraph, the flying machine and mass production, changing the United States from an agrarian and rural population to a city and industrial one. In spite of this transformation... there has been no corresponding political realignment. (1929)

All of these developments and technologies threatened established patterns of life and political participation, and politics had to be re-imagined in response to them. One prominent suggestion in this regard was offered by intellectual and political commentator Walter Lippmann. As John Peters puts it,
Lippmann “argued for the obsolescence of popular sovereignty and its replacement by expert rule.” By famously appealing for the effective “manufacture of consent,” Lippmann cast the role of communication as a one-way appeal that has as its purpose the calculated formation of public opinion. It was Lippmann’s 1925 book, The Phantom Public, that occasioned Dewey’s own book, The Public and its Problems (1927), as a response. Lippmann sets the stage in The Phantom Public by invoking a technological scenario that is more plausible today than in his own time. Imagine, he says, that

...if by some development of the radio every man could see and hear all that was happening everywhere, if publicity, in other words, became absolute, how much time could or would he spend watching the Sinking Fund Commission and the Geological Survey? He would probably tune in on the Prince of Wales, or, in desperation, throw off the switch and seek peace in ignorance. It is bad enough today [with] newspapers...magazines... movies and the radio... to be condemned to live under a barrage of eclectic information, to have one’s mind made the receptacle for a hullabaloo of speeches, arguments and unrelated episodes.

In the face of a flood of complex information and of “absolute publicity,” Lippmann sees the public as being bound to choose either a blissful ignorance or the titillation of royal scandals. The tasks of government and the commission and survey reports proper to it should be left to the experts. According to Lippmann, this information need not circulate more widely. For his part and even given his insistence on generative interchange and interaction, Dewey saw in the continued development of media as posing a similar problem:

A glance at the situation shows that the physical and external means of collecting information in regard to what is happening in the world have far outrun the intellectual phase of inquiry and organization of its results. Telegraph, telephone, and now the radio, cheap and quick mails, the printing press, capable of swift reduplication of material at low cost, have attained a remarkable development. But when we ask what sort of material is recorded and how it is organized, when we ask about the intellectual form in which the material is presented, the tale to be told is very different.

The result for Dewey, like Lippmann, is the triviality of “news,” a flow of information without context: “Without coordination and consecutiveness, events are not events, but mere occurrences, intrusions; they supply the element of shock which is the strictest meaning of sensation; they are the new par excellence” (emphasis in original). Similar statements can be found in Dewey’s other writings, for example, in Freedom and Culture in 1939: “One effect of literacy under existing conditions has been to create in a large number of persons an appetite for the momentary ‘thrills’ caused by impacts that stimulate nerve endings but whose connections with cerebral functions are broken” (p. 40).

Lippmann uses similar arguments –perhaps of a less biologicist nature-- to conclude that the “ideal of the omnicompentent, sovereign citizen” impossible, and in this sense, misleading and thus undesirable.

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2 At the time that Lippmann is writing, the Prince of Wales was the future King, Edward VIII, whose romantic life eventually led him to abdicate the throne.
various remedies, eugenic, educational, ethical, populist and socialist, all assume that either the voters are inherently competent to direct the course of affairs or that they are making progress toward such an ideal. I think it is a false ideal. I do not mean an undesirable ideal. I mean an unattainable ideal, bad only in the sense that it is bad for a fat man to try to be a ballet dancer. (pp. 28-29)

However, Dewey clearly differs from Lippmann in that he does not see the ideal of an informed and responsible citizenry—achieved through the open circulation of information—as unattainable. Dewey’s remedy for making progress to such an ideal, however, is not eugenic, ethical, populist, or socialist; nor is it strictly educational. Perhaps improbably, it is aesthetic in nature. Dewey appeals to the issue of the quality of the information being circulated through media at the time, and used to inform public opinion. He sees “a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication” (1927, p. 184; emphasis added) as providing the solution. He explains:

A technical high-brow presentation would appeal only to those technically high-brow; it would not be news to the masses. Presentation is fundamentally important, and presentation is a question of art... The freeing of the artist in literary presentation, in other words, is as much a precondition of the desirable creation of adequate opinion on public matters as is the freeing of social inquiry... Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation. (183-184)

Dewey is saying that attention must be paid to the aesthetic quality of proliferating events in the broader informational economy. Only these artistically “treated” or “processed” transactions can be effectively received by a broader public. In the course of its circulation and interchange, information must be mediated through art or by the artist in order to become available to the public. A “subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication,” Dewey says, “must take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and breathe life into it.” Dewey explains further:

Men’s conscious life of opinion and judgment often proceeds on a superficial and trivial plane. But their lives reach a deeper level. The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things, a flower, a gleam of moonlight, the song of a bird, not things rare and remote, are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought. This process is art.

Dewey’s emphasis on the political potential of art to break through routine consciousness is resonates with the politically-charged “modes of reception” identified a decade later by Benjamin in his Kunstwerk essay. However, whereas Benjamin is speaking of modes of creation and reception that are specifically conditioned by the technological reproduction, film in particular, Dewey makes no such distinction. Dewey’s favourite examples of art—in his 1934 Art as Experience and elsewhere—are all media native to the romantic period and those preceding it; music, poetry, and dance are the most prominent. The aesthetic experience that Dewey is intent on promoting is not made as clear by Dewey as by Benjamin a relationship with the technical media that would actually make it public.
A further challenge and a second distinction raised by the Dewey is not aesthetic, but rather communicative. It is the familiar value-laden distinction between oral and written. Dewey identifies this issue only at the end of *The Public and its Problems*, where he admits that it is actually “outside the scope of our discussion to look at…the reconstruction of face to face communities.” At the same time, though, he insists that it is only in the context of such communities that the political value of events of interaction can be realized.

Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth… We lie, as Emerson said, in the lap of an immense intelligence. But that intelligence is dormant and its communications are broken, inarticulate and faint until it possesses the local community as its medium.

The “winged words of conversation,” as Dewey puts it, have a vital import lacking in “fixed and frozen words” of what he calls “written speech.”

Other thinkers of a much more systemic bent show that making such qualitative distinctions in types of generative, mediatic flows is not a simple matter. Such differentiations generally require further, system-wide distinctions. A traffic system does not tolerate or recognize different rules of the road for the one type of freight as opposed to another, nor is arbitrarily limited transit (e.g., passing only from mouth to mouth) particularly meaningful when more expedient routes are available. There can certainly be different *means* or *systems* of circulation (e.g., of ship or rail, of economic or social capital), with specific points of limited contact between them, as Luhmann shows. There can also be networks that change in their efficiency and effect as the technologies of inscription and transmission themselves change (e.g. from print to gramophone, film and typewriter), as Kittler has shown. However, the economy of free flow and transaction to which Dewey appeals throughout his career at best sits very uneasily with the kinds of distinctions that he would bring to bear within it.

Before considering shortcomings further, though, I would first like to show what can be *gained* through Dewey’s approach to mediation and circulation. I do this by turning to Dewey’s discussion of technical media earlier in his career. This discussion takes place almost exclusively in relationship to education. This treatment of new media is to be found in two short articles, one from 1891 on teaching literacy in schools and a second from 1898 on the pedagogical merits and limitations of the traditional university lecture format. In both, it is evident that Dewey’s emphasis on traffic, flow and continuous circulation grants him a notable awareness of media dynamics that, as McLuhan has observed, is clearly ahead of its time. This is unmistakable in the first paper, “The Primary Education Fetish” where Dewey is unequivocal in his critique of the “false educational god” represented in the belief “that the first three years of a child’s school life should be mainly taken up with learning to read and write his own language.” Dewey is not against literacy, of course, but is arguing for a frank reassessment of its importance in the earliest years of formal schooling. He makes his case in large part by arguing that current conditions do not justify current practices: “The present has its claims. It is in education, if anywhere, that the claims of the present should be controlling.” Dewey includes the testable, open generation of knowledge in science as one of the claims of the present. He also argues in some detail about the appropriateness of “symbolic” learning at relatively early stages of a child’s physical and
mental development. But his usual description of contemporary mediatic change represents a further, powerful claim of the present: “Quick and cheap mails ... the telegraph and telephone... the universal diffusion of cheap reading-matter,” have all changed the temporal dynamics of knowledge circulation and transmission:

The capital handed down from past generations, and upon whose transmission the integrity of civilization depends, is no longer amassed in those banks termed books, but is in active and general circulation, at an extremely low rate of interest. ...The significance attaching to reading and writing, as primary and fundamental instruments of culture, has shrunk proportionately as the immanent intellectual life of society has quickened and multiplied. ()

Given these conditions in the universal economy of knowledge, Dewey advocates a de-emphasis on “abstract or symbolical” competencies specifically in the early years of education:

The significance attaching to reading and writing, as primary and fundamental instruments of culture, has shrunk proportionately as the immanent intellectual life of society has quickened and multiplied. The result is that these studies [in reading and writing] lose their motive and motor force. They have become mechanical and formal, and out of relation—when made dominant—to the rest of life.

In more advanced educational contexts —ones presupposing academic textual literacy-- Dewey’s attitude is similarly opposed to the book, and the dead weight it has imposed on the circulation of knowledge. In his second brief article on education and its media, Dewey compares the advantages and disadvantages of “lectures vs. recitations” --the latter apparently still being common in American academe at the end of the 19th century. Dewey comes down clearly in the favour of the lecture:

It has, wherever introduced, destroyed, once for all, the superstition that the text-book is the sum and end of learning; it has helped dispel those vicious methods of rote study which that superstition fostered; it has compelled the instructor himself to broaden and freshen his knowledge...

At the same time, Dewey is no sworn enemy of the printed word, only of the limitations on its dissemination presented by its fetishization in recitation, and its confinement between the inflexible boards of a codex. Dewey is writing just a couple of years after the commercialization of the mimeograph, and during a period when smaller platen jobbing presses had become common. One can imagine that the possibilities presented by these “new” media underlie Dewey’s enthusiasm:

With an increasing use of the printing press in preparing outlines, syllabuses, selections from authorities etc., it is possible that the set lecture will, upon the whole, be displaced by readings, reports, discussions, etc., the teacher guiding the study by questions, references, printed helps, etc.

Dewey’s sensitivity to implications of new media technologies and his underlying emphasis on constant inquiring or knowing activity --whether by unfettered lecturing or by freeing children from the curricular
claims of the past—marks him as unique as an educator in his time. Dewey comes remarkably close to being an unqualified advocate for one what Sybille Kraemer has termed the “postal principle” and John Peters “dissemination” in cultural and theoretical configurations of communication. These two terms refer to a “kind of transmission that can be described as asymmetrical and unidirectional. The medium” in this context, as Kraemer explains, “bridges a distance without annulling it.” Disseminating or postal transmission finds its technical exemplification in Claude Shannon’s model of sender, channel and receiver, and in western culture more broadly by Jesus of Nazareth, as John Peters shows. This is particularly the case in the parable of the sower as one who casts seeds (a message) falling on all types of ground –inhospitable, fertile and points in-between. “The meaning of the parable,” Peters explains, “is quite literally the audience’s problem... Those who have ears, let them hear! It becomes the hearer’s responsibility to close the loop without the aid of the speaker.” This is diametrically opposed to a second principle of communication, which Kraemer calls the “erotic,” which could also be termed the “hermeneutic” principle and which is very familiar in literature of education:

The aim of communication [according to this principle] is not connection, but reunification. Via communication, speakers transform heterogeneity into homogeneity, difference into identity, achieving a kind of unification as a ‘single voice.’ ...The erotic principle understands communication as a concurrence of separate halves; it annuls difference. Its normativity is derived from dialog.3 ...from the erotic perspective media constitute a form of disturbance since unification of the disjointed fractions tolerates no middle space.”

From Plato’s dialogues —and Socrates’ mistrust of writing— through to the latest classroom videoconferencing technologies, the notion of realizing identity out of difference, suppressing awareness of the medium, and transforming heterogeneous contexts into a single seamless homogeneity is highlighted symptomatically in educational literature. However, the role of hidden artifice and in this sense, deception, is often indispensable in these educational scenarios. This deception generally entails the use of non-erotic, postal communication technologies. In his chapter “the mother’s mouth” in Discourse Networks, Kittler for example shows how the expression of the erotic impulse in educational communication is achieved through a kind of technical sleight of hand. His account begins with a kind of “primal scene” of (romantic) education, one that is idealized by Froebel and Pestalozzi and other educators of young children. This is the scene of the mother teaching the child on her lap. Through her “elementary and oral dispensation,” she is described these advocates as leading the child “from natural sounds to language,” and from there to the alphabet, as Kittler explains (1992, p.31). However, in reality this is not a pure “primary orality,” a quasi-erotic unity of mother and child, but a performance on the part of the mother made possibly only through the disseminatory, postal technology of the book:

Educational tracts and primers written explicitly for mothers obliterated their own textuality for the sake of their addressees. Books disappeared in a Mother’s Mouth whose original self-exploratory experience had been instituted by those very books. (1992, p.53)

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3 To the difference between dialog and dissemination: Peters 1999, 36ff.
A similar effect is realized in the context of the pedagogically effective lecture, in which written notes or messages, postal missives of a sort, are used to support a performance that is ideally to manifest hermeneutic, erotic characteristics: To appear as unscripted, spontaneous, responsive and engaged, the dispersion of sparks producing even the illusion of a dialogue. As the famous romantic lecturer Fichte declared, what is important is not “what is printed in books for us to read” but, rather, “what has stirred and transformed our spirit” (207).

From Plato through Pestalozzi and beyond, the ideal of the spoken word and the dialogical scenario has had only very rare counterexamples in educational thought. One such example might be Luther’s initial optimism while translating the bible to the vernacular at Wartburg. A second is the Hugenot Peter Ramus, who established a flexible, “universal” taxonomic method for educational texts, and whose efforts, as Walter Ong argues, led to the “decay of dialogue” as an educational method.

I believe that it is something broadly along these lines that McLuhan is getting at in the Gutenberg Galaxy when he writes:

Dewey... is the perfect foil to Ramus in his striving to dislodge the school from the fantastic Ramist idea of it as immediate adjunct to the press and as the supreme processor or hopper through which the young and all their experience must pass in order to be available for "use."

If Ramus is the advocate of a purely postal educational method using movable type and printed diagrams, Dewey is his foil in his embrace of emergent, post-symbolic and oral forms of communication which are equally open to dissemination and circulation.

But here too, Dewey leaves the reader uncertain. Despite the strong claims quoted above concerning reading as the primary education fetish, Dewey makes it clear in his conclusion to this same article that he is ultimately advocating gradual change based on “consideration of the whole situation, and organization of the materials and methods of science history and the arts...” Dewey also does something similar in his discussion of the lecture. In describing how it could be aided by the further use of printed forms of information dissemination, Dewey favourably envisions the emergence of “a cross between the seminary [i.e. seminar] and the recitation methods.” Recitation –the mass oral dissemination of a text—is seen as being combined with the seminar –an educational form which Clark and others have the labelled “hermeneutic,” and which (in its emphasis on dialogue) comes much closer to Kraemer’s erotic than to her postal principle of communication.

A similar conclusion could be drawn in the case of the local, oral community which Dewey sees as realizing the value of circulation and interaction in the political sphere: Despite his consistent valorization of motion, transaction and interchange, in the final analysis, Dewey as a theorist of media as generative ground, withdraws his support for free flow and open circulation at key moments. At the same time, Dewey as a thinker of “traffic” also offers value, certainly to highlight potential contradictions and limitations, but also as a bold precursor –in politics, education and beyond-- to approaches of Luhmann, Kittler and others.
References

_____ (1898). “The Primary-Education Fetish.”


