

though most of these young men later said that the experience was good for them, researchers found that these veterans were worse off in terms of employment status, educational achievement, and income than nonveterans from similar backgrounds. Other troubled young men, admitted to the military between 1976 and 1980, were later found to be no better off than comparable nonveterans.

Results from early-childhood intervention programs are a little more encouraging but still inconclusive, Wilson says. Most optimism about Head Start, for example, derives from the modest success of a single model preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan. In another somewhat encouraging experiment, the federal Infant Health

and Development Program intervened in the lives of 1,000 prematurely born children, sponsoring home visits by counselors and special classes. After three years, the youngsters had higher IQs and fewer behavioral problems than others born prematurely.

The lesson of these scattered experiences seems to be that intervention works best when it is deep and long-lasting. Which leads Wilson to a radical proposal: Why not provide public subsidies to allow the poor to send their children to public or private boarding schools? The well-to-do have always had this option for the upbringing of their children, he argues, and it would be in society's interest to extend it to the poor as well.

PRESS & MEDIA

Are the Media Obsolete?

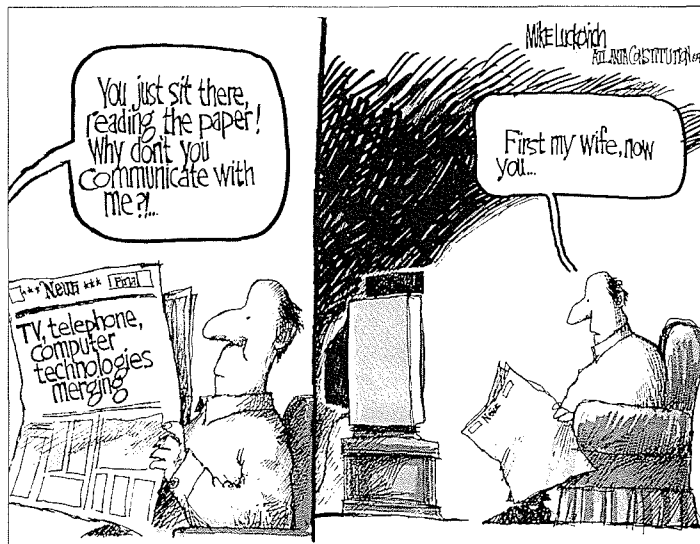
"The Mediasaurus" by Michael Crichton, in *Wired* (Sept.–Oct. 1993), 544 2nd St., San Francisco, Calif. 94107–1427.

Michael Crichton, author of *Jurassic Park* (1990) and other novels, should recognize a dinosaur when he sees one, and he thinks he has one in view. "To my mind, it is likely that what we now understand as the mass media will be gone within 10 years. Vanished, without a trace," he declares.

Since the American Revolution, the news media have enjoyed a monopoly over information, Crichton writes. "They have treated information the way John D. Rockefeller treated oil—as a commodity, in which the distribution network, rather than product quality, is of primary importance." A complacent industry has failed to recognize that technological advancement has forever altered the nature

of its product, information.

With technological tools such as C-SPAN, e-mail, and computer networks, today's consumer has direct access to high-quality information of personal or professional interest, and demand for such access is growing rap-



The coming world in which (if Crichton is right) newspapers and other mass media will be obsolete may be less than an information paradise.

idly. The front-page editor and news anchor, Crichton says, are like the old-fashioned telephone operator: "If you've ever had the experience of being somewhere where your call was placed for you, you know how exasperating that is. It's faster and easier to dial it yourself."

Attempting to maintain their audience, the news media use catch phrases and glitzy graphics, endlessly repackaging information as merely another form of entertainment (designed chiefly to get people to look at advertisements). But "news isn't entertainment—it's a necessity," Crichton writes. Information now has value, which is why consumers are willing to pay extra for things such as on-line computer services.

Crichton thinks this technological revolution will have a profound impact on the character of public debate in America. Today, the news media vastly oversimplify complex issues and polarize political debate. On the computer networks that already exist, according to Crichton, the level of debate is far more nuanced and sophisticated. The spread of these networks will end the news media's monopoly and gradually create a more informed public. "I will have artificial intelligence agents roaming the databases, downloading the stuff I am interested in, and assembling for me a front page, or a nightly news show, that addresses my interests," writes Crichton. "How will Peter Jennings or MacNeil-Lehrer or a newspaper compete with that?"

The Bad News Bias

"Bad News Bears" by Robert Lichter and Ted J. Smith, in *Media Critic* (1993), P.O. Box 762, Bedminster, N.J. 07921.

Watching almost any batch of network television newscasts in recent years, one would come away feeling that the nation's economy was poised on the brink of ruin.

In fact, contend Lichter, codirector of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, and Smith, associate professor of mass communications at Virginia Commonwealth University, the standard TV news portrait of the

economy is grossly distorted. Their case rests on two studies that examined more than 17,000 network news stories aired since 1982. Between 1982 and 1987, according to a study by the Washington-based Media Institute, more than 85 percent of the 5,300 economic news stories that had a discernible "spin" had a "negative tone," even though these were good—and at times spectacularly good—years for the U.S. economy. Indeed, the networks seemed to grow gloomier as economic conditions improved. The ratio of negative to positive stories on the economy increased from five to one in 1982 to seven to one in 1987.

The bad news bias continued into the 1990s. Analyzing 2,100 sound bites aired between October 1990 and May 1993, Lichter's organization found that 86 percent came from naysayers. The networks turned even good news into bad. When housing prices rose during the 1980s, they focused on people who were priced out of the market; when prices began to drop in the 1990s, the cameras turned to homeowners whose equity declined.

On television, the authors note, "the complexities of economic affairs are often reduced to simple and familiar stories about villains, victims, and heroes." Rather than report on, say, the complex economic realities of the computer industry—much less hard economic data—network news focuses on a single laid-off IBM worker.

The simplification and melodrama of economic reporting foster the illusion that the average citizen is somehow a victim of careless government policies. The networks' critical eye is nonpartisan. President George Bush may have lost the 1992 election in part because "many people thought [economic] conditions were worse than they were," as political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset observed, but the same overwhelming network negativism has afflicted his successor.

Lichter and Smith think that this relentless carping springs from journalists' assumption that never-ending prosperity is "a kind of birthright enjoyed by every American." Any departure from this norm produces charges of failure and malfeasance as well as "demands that someone set things right." Prosperity, as