

## *The Electronic Parrot*

Novelist Gabriel García Márquez, a former reporter as well as a Nobel laureate, writes in *Press/Politics* (Spring 1997) about the tape recorder's pernicious effect on journalism.

*The tape recorder listens, repeats—like a digital parrot—but it does not think; it is loyal, but it does not have a heart; and in the end, the literal version it would have captured would never be as trustworthy as notes taken by the journalist who pays attention to the real words of the interlocutor and at the same time values them with his intelligence and qualifies them with his morality. For radio interviews, the tape recorder has the enormous advantage of providing literal and immediate results, but many of the interviewers do not listen to the answers because they are thinking about the next question.*

*The tape recorder is the guilty party in the vicious magnification of the interview. The radio and television, because of [their] own nature, turned it into the ultimate goal, but now even the print media seem to share the erroneous idea that the voice of truth is not the journalist's voice, but the voice of the interviewee. For many newspaper reporters, the transcription of taped interviews is the proof of the pudding: They confuse the sound of words, trip over semantics, sink in grammar, and have a heart attack because of the syntax. Maybe the solution is to return to the lowly little notebook so the journalist can edit intelligently as he listens, and relegate the tape recorder to its real role of invaluable witness.*

TV network news divisions are spending as much as \$50 million a year on foreign coverage—still a tempting target for network cost-cutters.

At the same time, Utley notes, there is a lot more foreign news aimed at niche audiences. TV offers the all-news channels—CNN, MSNBC, and the fledgling Fox News—and numerous business and financial channels. National Public Radio and Public Radio International also provide extensive international reporting (at a fraction of the cost in television). Daily TV pro-

grams from Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America are transmitted via satellite to niche and ethnic markets in the United States. And then there's the World Wide Web.

So what's the problem? Those people eager to find out about foreign affairs "will be better served" by the new specialized media, Utley says. "Since they will likely be opinion makers—and voters—public discussion of foreign affairs could conceivably improve." But unfortunately, he says, the broader American public will be left out.

## *Surfing the Web for Soul*

"Raising Caen" by William Powers, in *The New Republic* (May 12, 1997),  
1220 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Before television stole their breaking news, chain ownership destroyed their local character, and bland, rootless young "professionals" took over their newsrooms, the nation's great metropolitan newspapers were the soul of their cities. Today, they are spiritually dead, asserts Powers, a *New Republic* senior editor and former reporter for the *Washington Post*. Now, some San Francisco journalists are trying to revive that spirit in a high-tech form: a daily "webzine" called *Salon*.

Powers is skeptical.

David Talbot and a handful of other writers and editors left the struggling *San Francisco Examiner* in 1995 to launch the on-line magazine. *Salon* now has about 30 employees and is backed by the Adobe Systems software company and a leading high-tech venture capital firm. In 1996, *Time* tapped *Salon* as the year's best Web site.

Daily newspapers today, says Talbot, formerly the *Examiner's* arts and features edi-

tor, “have become so corporate, so bureaucratic, so politically correct—all these things have sucked the life out of them.” The best newspapers of the past, in his view, built reader excitement and loyalty “around personality, columnists who make you feel like you’re part of that world, whatever they’re writing about.” *Salon* has tried to do that with established national names such as Camille Paglia and David Horowitz, along with less known writers such as humorist Cintra Wilson.

“Among the high-end online magazines,” Powers writes, “*Salon* seems to be doing as well as anyone.” The number of “page views” (“visits” by readers to individual pages of the webzine) recently reached three million a

month. *Salon*, according to Talbot, has 75,000 registered readers. It will need a much bigger audience to attract enough advertisers to make it a commercial success, the editors acknowledge.

Powers does not try to predict *Salon*’s financial future. But he doubts that its attempt to recapture a sense of local community can work. The newspapers of yore were physically rooted in the places in which people made their lives. *Salon*, in contrast, serves a “virtual community,” made up of people who like the publication’s ideas, slant, or sensibility. It’s just not the same, Powers maintains. “A newspaper wasn’t a club you wanted to join, it was an expression of a club you were already in.”

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

### *Philosophy Adrift*

“Trends in Recent American Philosophy” by Alexander Nehamas, in *Daedalus* (Winter 1997), Norton’s Woods, 136 Irving St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

American philosophy—which for the last half-century has largely meant “analytical” philosophy—is today in a state of confusion, with no canon, no common ground, and no “clear overall direction,” writes Nehamas, a humanities professor at Princeton University. If it is to revive, he says, it must recover its lost heritage of engagement with the larger world.

In the 1930s, pragmatist John Dewey was the leading American philosopher. For him and his followers, Nehamas notes, “philosophy was essentially a public enterprise,” concerned with “large-scale practical problems.” Then Rudolf Carnap and his fellow logical positivists arrived in flight from Vienna and Berlin, with a much narrower conception of philosophy, one that made it seem more purely “scientific.” Gradually, as these émigré scholars found university positions here, their ideas began to take hold.

Chief among these was the theory that there are only two kinds of meaningful utterances: “analytic statements” (such as “All bachelors are unmarried males”), which are true simply by virtue of their words’ meanings, and “synthetic statements” (such as “Bill Clinton is a married male”), which involve the empirical world. Strictly speaking, this “verifiability” theory maintains, logic, mathematics, and empirical science

are the only meaningful parts of language. Thus summarily ousted from the domain of philosophy was “metaphysics,” and all moral and aesthetic evaluations.

By the late 1940s, Nehamas says, under the influence of Carnap and Willard Quine, a Harvard University philosopher who worked closely with the positivists and shared their austere conception of philosophy’s proper domain, the discipline came to be widely seen as essentially theoretical. Philosophers began to don the white coats of scientists. They now distrusted common sense and ordinary language as lacking in clarity, and they had virtually no interest in the works of the great philosophers of the past, which were flawed in the same way. Philosophy, as they saw it, bore no direct relation to the larger world, and served instead as a handmaiden to other disciplines, providing advice about epistemic reliability. (Some analytical philosophers, influenced by British thinker J. L. Austin [1911–60]), did not share the positivists’ distrust of ordinary language, but rather favored close attention to its complexities and nuances. These philosophers, too, however, regarded their discipline as a “second-order” one.)

But then, Nehamas says, several profoundly unsettling developments occurred. Thomas S. Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific*