11. Further notes on maladaptive strategies

11.1. Organizational consequences of dissociation: laissez-faire

Let us look briefly at some implications of the above for social and organizational life. Krugman’s data confirm the mass of indirect evidence that an habituation process is the primary response to television. Firstly this means that the characteristic slow wave response will not have completely disappeared for some days after the habituation experience. After a night of watching television it is entirely possible that the variety of stimuli you make contact with the next morning will be received and treated by your nervous system as was the information coming through the set. You go to work distracted and you do not perform in a purposeful, analytic manner. There is a spread of effect from leisure into work, school, family life, community, business etc.

Our picture is one of television as a ‘malignant tool’; one that has been ‘used to contract, eliminate, or replace human functions’, ‘reducing the range of choice and motivation.’ (Illich, 1973, p. 85). We must ask then, for what or for whom it has been a tool, and our answer to this question has been elaborated in 9.1. But a tool can grow out of man’s control and while television is the telecommunications tool for a mature bureaucratized society its effects may well produce the mirror image of bureaucratic organizations: laissez-faire.

‘Finally, the whole system came crashing down in one last paroxysm of dolls and guns. Reality was left in ruins and Possible, stripped of all its dolls, reverted to a barren wilderness where chaotic improbabilities reigned supreme.’ (Herbert, 1973, p. 3).

We have looked at various ways in which control and co-ordination have been attenuated or destroyed.

1. Internal to the individual, by the neurophysiological effects of television,
the individual's own conscious functioning is impaired; and the integra-
tion of sub-structural, affective and cognitive functions has been dis-
organized. Purposeful activity has been reduced.

2. Man has been cut off from man by the rewarding pleasure centre stimula-
tion which effectively puts each individual into his own box.

3. The escape to secondary reality is breaking down the controlling and co-
ordinating role that the private (public) citizen used to perform in his own
community affairs. The era of the 'so what' response has effectively cut
communications between traditional customs and mores, the official
sources of law and order, and the man in the street.

Therefore, in the laissez-faire situation, control is located entirely within the
individual and the here-and-now. Television has contributed to and rein-
forced this by its deteriorative effects on intra-individual control and its
interpolation of a secondary reality. It has further shortened the range of
vision (Emery et al., 1974, p. 22).

These three points make clear the structural nature of laissez-faire. While
the structural relations between individuals are tenuous at best within a
bureaucratic society (Emery and Emery, 1974) the dissociative superficiality-
increasing effects of the telecomm revolution have weakened the strong struc-
tural ties between the individual and the higher levels of societal management.
In laissez-faire it is each man for himself. ‘Our era is distinguished by much
public discussion of patriotism, security, prosperity, parenthood, social wel-
fare, community values, law and order, to singularly little real effect. So much
so that it is clear that all such talk is only camouflage to obscure a guilty, but
relished, private indifference, a massive withdrawal from public life and from
de facto responsibility for any of these matters.’ (Pawley, p. 114).

This further break in relations means ultimately that there can exist no
longer an organized goal. All goals and purposes become individual. Laissez-
faire is the organizational form of individualism without responsibility. Paw-
ley quotes (p. 65) a saying: ‘It is a shocking thing to have happened and
eventually someone must take responsibility for it.’ This is the language of
guilt and failure mixed with the hope of a personal evasion of responsibility,
the classic Western pattern of scapegoatism.’

Laissez-faire is an absence of persisting organization and represents random
process, the ‘collapse of community’ (cf. Pawley, p. 103).

To say that laissez-faire approximates random process, both within the
individual and his normal forms, is to say that within the process there are
hidden some assumptions about the environment in which one is operating.