

## Information and Ersatz Reality: Comments on Albert Borgmann's *Holding On to Reality*

Eliseo Fernandez  
Linda Hall Library

Albert Borgmann, *Holding on to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*, University of Chicago Press, 2000.

This book is Borgmann's third and his latest book-length contribution to the philosophy of technology. Although no acquaintance with the author's previous work is required, readers can best appreciate the full import of its contributions by first placing it within the development of his ongoing project. Specifically, this latest installment is Borgmann's conscientious effort to communicate his views on the role of technology in contemporary life to an increasingly wider audience. These views have been continuously developing from Borgmann's central insight, the so-called "device paradigm," articulated in his first major work, *Technology And The Character Of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry*, published in 1984.

The expression "device paradigm" refers to a cluster of ideas about some typical mass-produced artifacts, the "devices," and on the devices' effects on the fate of traditional situations and practices of a very special nature, which the author calls "focal things." These are things and situations with the power to endow our individual existence with a sense of meaning and purpose, a power to root our lives within the wholeness of nature and community.

### **The Nature of Focal Things**

Borgmann presents examples of focal things with great subtlety and eloquence, bringing to discourse phenomena which, by their very nature, tend to resist conceptual expression and elude the light of reflection. One of the author's favorite examples is the practice of running. Borgmann shows how this endeavor brings relevance and meaningful connection to some unique characteristics of places and landscapes — characteristics that would otherwise remain concealed from the detached observer. Moreover, these characteristics reveal themselves to the runners by means of their enduring engagement with the natural environment, as they respond to the obstacles and challenges they repeatedly encounter.

Focal things are endowed with what Borgmann calls “commanding presence:” a peculiar power to challenge and make demands upon us, and address our capacity for effort and engagement with the world. Old-fashioned artifacts that need attendance, such as a wood-burning stove; as well as traditional activities that fulfill basic human needs (e.g., sewing, gardening, playing musical instruments, sailing, cooking, etc.) likewise are shown to display these powers. These practices and activities embed the means-to-ends relations of purposive action within a rich, growing, and continuous network of connections to nature and community.

Furthermore, focal things are constantly bringing these connections to disclosure and they are not readily separable from them. They lead us to develop our character, expectations, and skills in response to the demands and satisfactions they throw into our path. They also help us weave together the diverging strands of our life and to tie them firmly together to those of other individuals, and to the life of our communities.

### **The Nature of Devices**

The sharply contrasting characteristic of devices, on the other hand, is precisely their capacity to simplify and separate the processes that relate means to ends. Their peculiar efficacy renders invisible not only these instrumental connections, but also the device’s overarching links to the encompassing spheres of nature and culture. Devices seduce us by offering automatic gratifications of our wishes, unmediated by skill, patience, or effort. The undisciplined, habitual employment of devices leads to a centrifugal drift into isolation and fragmentation, both within our inner life and within the life of our communities. Borgmann is especially persuasive in his detailed descriptions of these processes and of the ensuing mood of emptiness and overall disorientation so often brought about by the unreflective use of such modern devices. Watching television with no particular purpose in mind is an example familiar to most everyone.

### **Placing Borgmann’s Latest Work in Context**

In his two earlier books, *Technology And The Character Of Contemporary Life* and *Crossing The Postmodern Divide* (1992), Borgmann applied this unique perspective to the ethical and intellectual dilemmas of modern life and traced the stages of their historical development, through the scientific and industrial

revolutions to the current “postmodern” situation. *Holding On to Reality*, however, has a different format and intention. The focus is instead on the relationship between our openness to different forms of information and the ways we experience reality. Borgmann attempts to disclose these connections through an inquiry into the nature of information and of the technologies based on its technological manipulation and transmission. This idea in turn is interwoven with a detailed historical survey of the concept of information itself and its uses, from pre-literate times to the present. The whole exercise is simultaneously the vehicle of a sustained and impassionate exhortation on the moral and cultural consequences of falling prey to the lure of devices as well as their uncritical or thoughtless use. Before attempting to assess the achievements of this original and complicated scheme, let us briefly review its basic outline.

### **The Central Structure of *Holding On to Reality***

Following a brief Introduction, the book contains three major parts, each one divided into five chapters. These parts are followed by a 10-page conclusion, a long and well organized collection of endnotes, and a solid index of key terms and author names interfiled.

Part one is entitled “Natural information: information about reality.” It traces the history of the concept of information, its relations to the notion of meaning, and the origins of literacy. Part two is entitled “Cultural information: information for reality.” Via detailed, historical examples, this section traces the development of various ways in which information is embodied in structures and performances within such diverse cultural fields as literature, mathematics, architecture, and music.

Part three is “Technological information: information as reality.” Here information is viewed in the context of its exploitation as a resource by modern technological devices. This part includes, among other topics, the role of the personal computer in contemporary life, and such computer-driven novelties as Internet communication and the creation of “virtual reality.” It begins with a consideration of some atomistic models used by scientists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their application in the measurement and representation of information (through the work of Shannon and others). The second chapter in Part three offers a brief account of Boolean operations and how they are enacted by gates and switching circuits. A very sketchy explanation follows of how these things lead to the creation of programs and computers, which in turn develop into powerful

information mills. Notably, the three final chapters present an incursion into new philosophical territory. Some of the main ideas advanced here concern the powers that information-processing devices are able to exert upon us by manufacturing something like an *ersatz* reality. “Virtual reality” is the obvious example, being an ostensible attempt to create a surrogate world.

### **Ersatz Reality**

Borgmann goes on to explore more devious yet less obvious ways in which the use of information technologies acts to distance us from experiences that grant “solidity” and “weight” to our sense of reality. The recalcitrant autonomy of things, their resistance and opposition to our will and to other things – even their very opacity to our understanding them – serve as a sobering demarcation between ourselves and the world, between fantasy and reality. This quality is notoriously absent from the world of cyberspace. We are enticed into exploring an overwhelming array of possible experiences, rich in sensual content and novelty but ultimately lacking in permanence and solid embodiment.

### **Hyperinformation**

Borgmann’s conclusion, entitled “Information and reality,” is no mere summary of the preceding chapters but a piece that could well be read as a separate essay. The book’s main concerns are restated in the light of some special aspects of the effects of modern technology. They include the distressing encroachment on traditional forms of information by what Borgmann calls “hyperinformation,” and its links to such apparently remote topics as the current devastation of urban and natural environments, and our unfulfilled needs for communal celebration.

### **A History of Information**

The overview just given touches only on the main highlights of the book and falls far short of doing justice to the abundance of details, observations and insightful commentaries we find interspersed through its narrative. The complex structure of this work makes it very difficult to assess its general value independently of the different types of readers that it may attract. For those who are not familiar with Borgmann’s previous publications, it may prove an excellent point of entrance to his general outlook on technology and the social and ethical dimensions of technology’s grip on our world. Those interested in information and its history would find it rewarding to read through this highly selective and

rhapsodic narrative. But the idiosyncratic selection of these themes, no doubt dictated by the philosophical and ethical points they are intended to illustrate or support, detracts from the value of this book as an introduction to the history of information.

### **In Conclusion**

On the philosophical side, and in comparison with previous works by the author, this reviewer finds the book rather disappointing. The treatment of one of the central issues of the work, the nature of information and its relation to natural and conventional signs, is somewhat confused and disconnected. Semiotic action and physical causation are not clearly distinguished or are even conflated. The whole discussion seems completely innocent of the facts and distinctions propounded by modern semiotics, from Locke to Peirce, and to current practitioners, like Ransdell, Collier or Dipert. Borgmann may have unstated reasons to reject their views, but it seems strange to write a historical development of these topics without even mentioning such seminal thinkers as Peirce, Cassirer or Susan Langer.

Finally, the book is most successful in achieving what is probably its most important goal, to persuade us out of our passive acquiescence to the dictates of technology and to confront us with the impending dangers of the present course. Borgmann's sincerity and depth of conviction shine through his fluid, engaging prose and lay claim to a moral response from us. Much like the powers of his "focal things," his exhortation addresses what is best in us and challenges us to come forward and join him in the task of forging a new, balanced relation to technology. For the sake of all of us, let us hope we do not disappoint him.