Needed: a “Post-Post” Formulation

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I do not disagree that we are in a postdigital age. I disagree that we are first entering it now. Indeed, as I have pointed out in my writing and speaking since the early 1980s (when I first went online with my 8-bit Kaypro computer and a 300-baud modem), but most prominently, in my 2003 book *Real Space: The Fate of Physical Presence in the Digital Age, On and Off Planet* (Levinson 2003), we are intrinsically biological, in our bodies and of our bodies, every time we go online or do anything digital. This is because the process of doing anything digital does not transform our bodies into something digital. To the contrary, our heart still beats and pumps blood, just as whatever it is in our physical brains that generates thoughts and words continues to work apace.

The question, then, is why scholars and the educated public tend to flock to phrases like “post,” which herald that we are now truly beyond something. This tendency is not limited to postdigital. In the 1970s and 1980s, when television was king, many articles were written and read lamenting that we were in a post-literate world. In our current age in which fake news plays such a major role, not just in concocted lies that masquerade as news, but in deliberate attacks on the legitimate press as “fake news” by people including Donald Trump as a strategy for undermining the public’s confidence in the press (see my *Fake News in Real Context* (Levinson 2016–2018), for more), you see the phrase “post-truth” bandied about in academic and learned media circles. But as long as we can denounce something as truly false—whether a news story or a claim that legitimate news is false—we are living in an age in which truth is as major and essential a factor as it always has been. After all, you cannot know or assess if something is false without a measure of truth with which to evaluate that statement or news.

None of this means, to be clear, that everything we do, including our news and digital media, does not change and evolve. As Donald T. Campbell argued in his path-breaking “Evolutionary Epistemology” (1974), our knowledge and ideas evolve in a mode analogous to biological organisms. That mode is Darwinian—falsity is removed from our aggregate of knowledge once

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identified, just as traits that do not work in the biological world are eliminated via the death of the organisms that have these traits. As I have pointed out many times beginning with my doctoral dissertation in 1979, *Human Replay: A Theory of the Evolution of Media* (Levinson 1979 [2017]), the same can be seen in our development of technology. Color photography by and large supplanted black-and-white, because we after all see in colors in our biological world (unless we are color blind). Digital media themselves were invented and spread across the world because they are better servants of our imagination (a biological property) and its penchant for wanting any and all communication instantly, than any of the earlier analog media.

The biological, in other words, has been in the driver's seat of technological evolution, from the very beginning. And that includes the digital. Further, this means that it is even incorrect to say that the biological has been reasserting itself in our digital age. Biology has been calling the shots with the digital from the outset. What has changed is that the digital has become more seamless in its integration with the biological. Buckminster Fuller wrote back in the 1930s that if we wear eyeglasses, there is little difference, as far as our brains are concerned, between our eyes and eyeglasses. We see through both of them, at the same time. Our eyes and eyeglasses become one, from the perspective of our brain (Fuller 1938). Nowadays, if we order a taxi via Uber, or food via Grubhub, we are commanding the physical world, which consists of biological beings, to do our physical and biological bidding. The digital part of this process, with our fingers moving over the screens of our phones in seconds, happens so fast and effortlessly that it is easy to forget that there is an enormous and profound digital structure underlying these rearrangements of the physical world. Is that postdigital? No, it is only a receding of the digital in our immediate awareness because we have gotten so good at making the digital inobtrusive. But this low profile is an indication not of the diminution of the digital, but of the increase in its power. Just as eyeglasses, when they are doing their job, are barely noticed by the brain. Fuller even had a name for this perfection of function via shrinking of form: the “dymaxion principle.”

So I have a proposal. I know that no amount of my remonstrating is going to convince some people that we are not in a postdigital age, or that “post” adjectives are inapt. So let me go with the flow, and suggest that what we could use in the scholarly world, in sophisticated circles of commentary, is a recognition of the value of a “post-post” point of view. We should strive for a perspective that does not require the sugar fix of concluding that we ever leave any profound aspect of our cultural lives behind us. Instead, we invent ideas, embody them in technologies, and continue to integrate and employ them in our lives into perpetuity, as we and they evolve and they continue to change form.

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