

# Andrey Mir's The Viral Inquisitor and other Essays on Postjournalism and Media Ecology

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## **A Review of Andrey Mir's *The Viral Inquisitor and other Essays on Postjournalism and Media Ecology***

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### **1. Introduction**

Andrey Mir (2024) in his book *The Viral Inquisitor and other Essays on Postjournalism and Media Ecology* (ISBN 978-1-7773589-3-8) honored me by mentioning my books *The Alphabet Effect* (Logan 2004) and *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan* (Logan 2010) in a favorable way and acknowledged, along with Martin Gurri, my influence in developing his essays. Although this represents a conflict of interest, I still want to review his book and point out some of the important and remarkable insights that Mir has made to our understanding of digital media. As the reader of my review will discover, however, I still have some criticisms of some of Mir's positions. With this warning here are my thoughts about Andrey Mir's very important book, which I highly recommend to the readers of this review.

### **2. My Rave Review of Andrey's Book of Essays**

In Andrey's book he makes a distinction between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" (Mir 2024, 78). I am a digital immigrant as I only started using the Internet when it went public in 1996 when I was already 57 years old. Andrey is much more a "digital native" than I am but claims that he is not totally a digital native as he was already 27 when he first encountered the Internet. Personal computers that emerged 20 years before the Internet I was already 38 years old when I began using a personal computer with the emergence of Apple 2 in 1977. My other previous digital interactions were making use of and programing the mainframe computer at MIT as a grad student but this experience and the use of my Apple 2 did not entail the dialogic character of email and the Internet. Andrey, on the other hand, started using personal computers at a much younger age than me. I believe this accounts for his ability to develop the very deep insights that you will find in reading his collection of essays in his book, *The Viral Inquisitor*.

Although Andrey Mir is a classical media ecologist and can be considered a member of the Toronto school there is an aspect of his scholarship that is unique, namely his rich analysis of the impact of the new media on newspapers and journalism. Mir claims that as a result of newspapers losing their advertising revenue base to social media, they had to reinvent themselves in what Mir describes as post-journalism, a term that he coined. Newspapers now rely, according to him, on the revenue from subscriptions rather than the advertisements that navigated to social media. Another interesting insight that Mir develops is to describe the role

social media played in the emergence of Trumpism. His treatment of these topics alone makes his book a must read.

Another important aspect of his analysis is the way in which he examines the impact of digital media in the context of all the other forms of communication that preceded it so that his essays in this collection provide the reader with more than just his insights into the nature of digital media but a deeper understanding of media and their impacts in general. He also explains why digital media are so different from the other forms of media that preceded it.

With the recent birth of my latest grandson I passed on to his mother Mir's (2024, 82) advice of when not to introduce digital media to kids:

No rattle, coloring book, or adventure novel can compete with a digital device's instant reward. If newer media are introduced into a child's life before older media, they disturb the "evolutionary logic" of a child's sensory, mental, moral, and emotional development. If a child learns how to use a touchscreen before reading, the touchscreen's appeal and speed of reward will likely make this child a less able reader and a less diligent individual in general. It will be impossible to redirect the child's attention back to the book afterwards.

Another important insight of Mir's (2024, 116 & 122) is his discussion of malinformation, the wrong truth and its impact on today's politics:

By accepting the concept of "misleading truth," democratic society departs from its foundations.

The point is that the term "malinformation" openly admits the malevolence of some truth in a system that is allegedly designed to fight untruth. This is a symptom indicating that the epistemological shift from absolute truth to negotiated truth is near completion. The political turmoil we see is only a surface-level manifestation of this shift. The cultural consequences will be much deeper. The next generation will not challenge or bypass the absolute truth; they simply will not know what it is.

### **3. My Critiques of or Disagreements With Certain Positions in Andrey Mir's Book of Essays**

And now for some of my critiques or disagreements with Mir to establish my credentials as a reviewer and not a mere promoter or champion of Andre's collection of essays to which I readily and shamelessly admit to.

Mir (2024, 126) wrote:

When Deep Blue, the chess supercomputer, defeated the best human players in 1997, and AlphaGo defeated top Go players in the 2010s, the programs, basically, stopped learning from humans and began playing against themselves, learning from the game and inventing game logic unknown to humans. If it has not stopped at the level of the best human performance, where will it stop then, if at all? Our co-evolution with media is approaching the last product that media can give us: a copy of us. But we already can see that technologies can evolve much further than just simulating humans. So what does the technological imperative ultimately lead to?

The example that Mir cites to provide the above conclusion is by citing A Chess Playing Program. But Chess is a rules-based activity. Human creativity such as creating a new scientific principal or theory, inventing a new form of technology, creating a work of art (painting, literature, poem, sculpture, musical composition), a new philosophy, or any other creative human thought activity that is not constrained by a set of rules.

Mir (2024, 126) wrote:

Imagine a human mind connected directly to AI – this is exactly what Musk's Neuralink will eventually become. In such a hybrid, the user will merge with the environment through this ultimate medium – the mind "neuralinked" with the AI as a networked entity.

This user, however, may or may not happen to be human. As AI is now trained to provide us with our various replicas and gradually learns to replace us, the ultimate user of the ultimate medium can be AI itself, without needing to wait for Neuralink's success. Actually, AI *has to become* the self-user.

I disagree with these assertions of Mir that "AI *has to become* the self-user" as it posits that the AI device has a will of its own. An AI device operates as it is programmed by its users and has no will of its own, it has no emotions or desires as was described by Braga and Logan in two of their articles: "The Emperor of Strong AI Has No Clothes: Limits to Artificial Intelligence (2017)" and "The Singularity Hoax: Why Computers Will Never Be More Intelligent than Humans (2021)."

There is another assertion by Mir that I find problematic, namely his assertion that:

AI may not necessarily be a program or an app; in fact, AI should not be a program. The true AI will extend itself to the entire Internet, similar to humankind extending itself from being just one of the species to populating and reshaping the entire planet (Mir 2024, 126).

I would critique this assertion as I cannot see how an application programmed by humans could develop a will of its own and “figure things out.” Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say the users and developers of AI will figure things out using their AI tools to extend it “to the entire Internet”? Mir redeems himself when he later wrote:

“Technologies have their own moving force – the pursuit of better performance, which easily replaces the alleged need of AI for agency and self-consciousness (ibid. 127),” which I totally agree with along with this following remark of his

This is a side effect – or the “goal” – of the technological imperative, the driving force behind media evolution. The technological imperative substitutes for agency or will in media development. Media evolution strives for the perfect, ultimate extension of whatever it extends (ibid. 127).

So my criticism is that some might take the remarks you made literally before you made this qualification of your remarks.

#### **4. My Conclusion**

I wish to end this review, that despite some of my minor critiques, with the assertion that Andrey Mir’s book, *The Viral Inquisitor and other Essays on Postjournalism and Media Ecology*, is an important addition to the media ecology literature with many important insights and I urge readers of this review to buy it and read it.

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