

Context Blindness:
Digital Technology and the Next Stage of Human Evolution
Eva Berger (Peter Lang, 2022)

John Fraim

“Political scientists have been quite unaware of the effects of media anywhere at any time, simply because nobody has been willing to study the personal and social effects of media apart from their ‘content.’ As a result of this culture-wide blind spot we tend to fall back on our understanding of propaganda as ‘messages we don’t like.’ ”

Marshall McLuhan
Understanding Media

Part I

The short book *Context Blindness* by Israeli professor Eva Berger represents Book 10 in a series of books in the *Understanding Media Ecology* series under the general editorship of Lance Strate, former President of the Media Ecology Association carrying on the ideas and scholarship of media theorists like Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman. Interestingly, both Strate and Berger are President and Secretary of another MEA related group, Institute of General Semantics. Both are close to the forefront of the attempt to make media ecology more relevant and understandable to the general populace today.

Berger’s key argument is that we are becoming increasingly blind to the context of our lives. This is an inability to see the big picture of things and the increasingly entanglement with smaller and smaller concerns related to content within context. Whether all of this has been motivated by a global conspiracy and perhaps a globalist (like Klaus Schwab) or is a collective state in the zeitgeist of the times is not the concern of the book as much as simply the observation context blindness is happening more and more today.

The thesis at the center of the book is that we have delegated the ability to read context to contextual technologies such as social media, location, and sensors. Delegating a major function of the mind to technology decreases a major function of the mind in the ability to assess context of situations rather than just content. Assessing just content makes a person context blind. The word is used to describe one of the major problems of autism: the inability to process information about contextual situations. Autism creates context blindness. Information about the context of the situation is not present in context blindness. Only information about the contents of the situation. And often, only about one piece of content rather than multiple pieces of content in an event or situation in life.

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This delegation involves not just outward daily tasks assigned to software. Rather the assignment of key processes of the brain to software technology. This technology increasingly employing AI technology. In the future it is not unlikely that future context will be accessed all by AI. (Some is being done now). Will humanity have evolved into some futuristic state of autism? Will the development have been caused by this delegation of mind functions (as well as others) to technology? Technology is helping with various human tasks. There certainly is a closeness of this task to accessing context for the brain to process today. In fact, an argument might be made that this is really the purpose of what's known as contextual software. Creating this context that has, in fact, been delegated to it by current civilization.

The ability to access information from several sources and define the context of situations. Just how important of a function of the mind is this? And how fast and effectively are we outsourcing it to software? This special context. This special moment in time. In simple terms, the ability of our minds to take in the context of this moment. To feel and process its various sources of information rather than have these delivered to you via constant software programming of media to break it into the content of message, pieces and making one "blind" to the overall context of this moment, situation, experience of life. One increasingly focuses on the content of the world that has not been delegated out. This is a good thing culture moves towards this general state. The battle for control of context has – for the moment – been won by the grand narrative of culture that holds authority over ownership of setting the context of culture. After all, so goes Berger's argument, it has been delegated out to their control in the first place. Culture with inventing things like Cinemascope once desired to see the big picture "context" of things. Now, it is satisfied with tiny pieces of information content appearing on the five-inch screen of a smart phone. It is message content, constantly meant to distract them from accessing the moment in time without the intervention of technology to define the context of the situation.

Of course, the idea is important and something we should all ask or at least think about with all the buzzing content of our lives, attacking relentlessly from all directions like a swarm of insects. Doing everything these pieces of information content serving to pull in more focus on it and let the information of context be farmed out. In this new space cleared of intruding technology, one should try and receive only natural stimulation with zero technology intrusion into the mind. Feeling the context of the situation is one of the new experiences that those associated with ideas like the growth of the modern market for contextually stimulating drugs such as the growing psychedelic market for experiences and drugs in culture. A good argument could be made that the modern revival of the psychedelics represents, perhaps more than anything else, an attempt to find that grounding "context" in a world where "content" (messages) has infiltrated all aspects of one's life. With an increasing focus on content the mind is drawn away from context. Delegating this function weakens it in time. Is an important part of the mind being delegated away today?

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More importantly, perhaps, will anyone know about big picture context today when culture stares down at small screens rather than looks upward and outside of screens at the world? To even be aware of this important book by Eva Berger about the big picture of culture that is something certain controlling forces in one's life wants one to be exposed to via modern media.

And then there is the ridiculous high price for anyone outside the academic world. This is an unfortunate marketing outcome as the book has a far greater audience than just academics. It might help offer a type of wake-up call to all those under the delegation of context to software and AI today and thus under software to define the overall context of one's world. I paid the price for the book on Amazon and downloaded it onto my Kindle. I pull up the book next to what I'm writing about this book. It is an important and timely book. One that attempts to bring the ideas of current McLuhan thinkers on media into notice more of the academic community. But I think it has far greater application outside the academic community.

To see this big picture in the large context of Cinemascope rather than on the tiny content on the screen of a smartphone. One could really say they were seeing the true context of our moment in time. Seeing and experiencing it ourselves instead of farming it out for software to do for us. It was a major function of the brain of homo sapiens. It saw the world without the intervention of technology. Without delegating out this important function of the mind to technology. Berger doesn't specifically say this in her important book. But certainly, the ability to access context in the world is a key function of the brain.

Yet, this delegation of context to software makes culture less and less aware that culture is becoming bling to the context of the situation, the moment in time. Much closer to what is observed as autism in current culture. Delegating the ability to process information about context to technology makes culture less and less aware of the context of situations. Increasingly, less in control of the word "context" each day and year of delegation to technology. Does each person who delegates this ability become increasingly context blind? Increasingly autistic? Might some autistic state define the state of general culture? In the next ten or twenty years?

The word "context" is one of those vague (and almost taboo) words no one discusses these days. Or ever thinks about. The word exists in various dictionaries and definitions for it come from several areas such as symbolism, psychology, philosophy and phenomenology. Among others. It relates to great thinkers about the context of life. Thinkers like Carl Jung. Or Marshall McLuhan, who first observed related this ability to see this hidden context of life as one of the great quests of culture. It represented the working out of his "Medium is the message" idea of reality throughout his life. In many ways McLuhan offered a media extension of the social place theories of Irving Goffman. Who in fact "owned" the ability to name or define social moments in culture? Would there be some grand guardian of the context of culture? Was some type of fortress called for? Perhaps it was some structure designed to keep enemies out and welcome friends in?

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But modern culture moves towards less and less awareness of the word "context" as it is bombarded with the form of "content" delivered to us each day as part of this context blindness within culture in general. The grand focus is on the content of segmentation and breaking up into smaller pieces. Not the large ideas and pieces of original context of the situation. Software will supply us with these ideas. We need not think about them. We are supplied media content to distract from being supplied context that we have delegated out to technology.

The grand evolution of media has been from mass media to segmented media. In ways, from media that delivered more a context view of the world. More of the big picture in that mass culture share a certain image or illusion. Whether it was true or not is not as important that few grand images created by mass media were shared to the general culture. Through the growing technology of television and radio.

During the past hundred years, movement of media in America (and in the world for the most part) has gone from a mass (contextual media of big IMAX picture) to a segmented (contentual media of smartphone and two-inch picture). Not another political survey. Rather a question asked by people who fight context blindness on a personal and cultural level. They are the ones who create their own anti-environments to make visible environments.

Yet anti-environments are difficult to maintain in a culture of a growing context blindness. The amazing increase of autism in modern culture has been related to several factors such as later pregnancies and certain vaccinations. But might it find more of a relationship in delegations of mental functions to contextual media? These delegations of mind functions might better explain the skyrocketing amount of autism in culture today. For instance, in 2020 researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found prevalence of autism (ASD) at 1 in 54 among children aged 8 years old in 2016, or 1.85 percent of the population of this group of children. This was a 10 percent increase from the most recent report from two years earlier when it was 1 in 59. It was the highest prevalence since the CDC began tracking ASD in 2000. Consistent with previous reports, boys were 4 to 5 times more likely to be identified with ASD than girls. The rate for ASD for boys was 1 in 34 among boys (or 2.97 percent) and for girls 1 in 145 (or 0.69 percent).

Just as context becomes blind, the modern world becomes filled with more content of messages dis-associated from context. Again, the focus on content at the exclusion of context is another aspect of autism. In effect, autism makes one unable to see the context of the “forest” for the focus on the content of individual “trees.” The virtual world has already flooded the real world with a tsunami of content that blinds the context of the world.

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The delegation of all this grand function of mind is, as one might suspect, increasingly sophisticated. Always increasing while learning constantly. Now, an AI controlled technology that brings forth increasingly the world one tells the software it wants through constant interactions with it. The greatest interactions everyday of online life recorded and indexed. And then analyzed and placed into a new perspective. Perhaps a new context.

In many ways, it all seemed like to me, at least back in those early years, like a great Virtual Reality video game. An almost totally created environment surround all of us. I wondered whether McLuhan would argue with Berger that individuals have delegated their ability to see context to technology. Are there still any pockets of resistance to this movement? People who want to keep alive the idea and belief in context of life. Something rare. We see (or are allowed to see) very little in life. As opposed to the content of life we are flooded with in a constant firehose stream of information and entertainment.

Technology will create the entire “context” of our world at this time. All brain function involved with establishing context in the world is attuned to reinforcing content coming in from many sources, multiple tributaries. Building back (better) the context of our world we have become blind to with the delegation of its creation and importance in our life to the increasingly insane direction of modern technology.

There are some people who still understand context. They have not delegated the function of creating context to outside technology. They might be cognizant of the noise of content all around. Yet, there are a few special people today who have not relinquished this important function of the brain. To those who control, these people are the dangerous ones. From all this perhaps the idea for a new Stephen King novel or Steve Spielberg movie? A crazy idea. Still, one wonders how close this comes to the truth of our present time.

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Is there some great trend in the background of the world? An invisible environment (or context) Marshall McLuhan observed in his writings? McLuhan had doubts about people being able to see the grand context of their lives. The grand mediums of the times were invisible to investigation. They were the actions and effects of outside media on people. These were new questions and ideas for me in the 60s when I first discovered McLuhan.

For me, the ideas of McLuhan always went towards seeing the context of the world rather than the content. In fact, he was the one who got me thinking about this new place or space in the world called “medium” in the mid-60s as well as the idea of “messages” within this medium. McLuhan wrote about a close association between message and medium. In many ways, they were his terms content and context. McLuhan was always an observer of the context of situations, and this was his idea that helped me to continue to see the context of situations. It is not a trait acquired all at once. Rather in my case, at the time of discovering McLuhan, as teenager, I saw a fellow artist who understood an artist. He knew about this big picture of the world. McLuhan was someone who saw this context of the world. Separated context from distracting content. Of course, the purpose of content to distract from seeing context. To becoming Context Blind.

McLuhan had defined this previously unseen space of the world for me. The idea of context and medium that contained the content of messages. A context that had been invisible for so long, to so many. It was born from another person with an artistic temperament. I was sure of this in the ideas of McLuhan. He seemed to fight more than anyone to keep the potential to see the context of life in the mind of culture. His context and content were in the form of media. His desire to provide many points of information in defining the context of life was investigated in his brilliant 1969 book *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting*. It shows many of McLuhan’s ideas related to art. But more important it relates to the context of art in studies of perspective and its vanishing point on the horizon. The idea of context is so apparent as that great unseen beast constantly pursued by McLuhan.

But beyond McLuhan's ideas about medium, messages and environments, Berger also notes the relationship between McLuhan's ideas of hot and cool media in hot and cool context of culture. McLuhan's ideas are elaborated by E.T. Hall in his 1976 *Beyond Culture*. For example, high context cultures, less is communicated by the source and more expected of the receiver in terms of prior knowledge. In low-context cultures, the source tends to spell everything out and the receiver is not expected to have prior knowledge to understand messages. High context cultures are therefore cooler and more participatory while low context cultures are hotter and less participatory.

In McLuhan's terms, low-context cultures can be characterized as hot media, a communication style which the context for understanding the message is provided in the message. High-context cultures can be characterized as cool media, a communication style where participants assume everyone has the information necessary to make sense of the message and that no explanation is needed. For example, Twitter is a medium that does not provide context within the message; there is barely enough room for the message itself in 280 characters. However, the assumption that people have the information necessary to make sense of the message is misguided. It is a cool medium in a low-context culture, an environment where trolls flourish.

Part II

One of Berger's main arguments is that the perspective of Media Ecology offers a way out of context blindness to context visibility or awareness. In this sense, it continues the work of Marshall McLuhan and his ideas about mediums and environments in the technology of the times. McLuhan said these environments were only invisible but might be made visible by the creation of anti-environments.

In this respect one might ask how people might delegate an ability to make context visible when people were generally context blind? Context blind to the constant bombardment of propaganda as Peter Fallow argues in his brilliant 2.1 book.

But McLuhan was living at the end of one technology and the emergence of another. In effect, it was the last years of mass media in the 70s before the segmented media of the 80s that came with the increase of electronic communication. It can be argued the nature of context changed with this major change in technology. The context and media had changed from one of mass inclusion to one of segmentation allowed by such new techniques like psycho-graphics, targeted advertising and cable television.

He saw the limits of the mechanical, linear world and knew it was coming to an end. He died at the beginning of the 1980s when the world was moving from the notion of a mass context to a segmented, personal electric world. The change was really a change of context or the idea of physical place in the world. One of the most important books from a media perspective to observe this change was Joshua Meyrowitz's brilliant *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. Published in the mid-80s, it was the first book to look at

the disappearing context of places in life with the replacement of physical places by electric ones of cyberspace.

This disappearance of place caused new social behaviors in culture. Meyrowitz showed how television and other electronic media created new social situations no longer shaped by place or people. He focused on ways changes of electric media rearranged “who knows what about whom” and “who knows what compared to whom.” This made it impossible for people to behave in traditional ways. The book explained how the electronic landscape encouraged the development of more “adultlike children” and more “childlike adults” as well as more “career-oriented women” and more “family-oriented men” as well as leaders who tried to act more like the “person next door” and neighbors who wanted a greater voice in local, national, and international affairs. While the emerging electric media of the 80s helped liberate people from restrictive, place-defined roles it also led to new social tensions and frustrations. Changes in electric media transformed how information was sensed and how we sense was made of physical and social places in the new electric world.

Berger is certainly aware of Meyrowitz’s work and in fact creates two chapters in her book comparing No Sense of Place to Context Blindness. In effect, she suggests Meyrowitz’s “no sense of place” of electric media of the 1980s has become “no sense of context” in the 2020s. But apart from a drastic change in technology in the 40 years since McLuhan’s passing, there was also the rise in a condition that was largely defined by the inability to see context. The condition was related to the rising rates of autism in the population not present in McLuhan’s time.

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The idea of context blindness was not invented by Berger but comes from a 2012 by Peter Vermeulen titled Autism as Context Blindness. Vermeulen had twenty-five years of experience working with autism-spectrum disorders and was someone on the forefront of research into autism and an internationally respected lecturer/trainer in the field of autism. Vermeulen believed autism was not a behavioral matter but rather a cognitive disorder. The disorder is exacerbated by a term Vermeulen used called “context blindness.”

With illustrations and case studies, Vermeulen establishes autistic people and “typical” people think in different ways. While there is nothing new in this insight, his breakthrough comes in understanding the concept of “context.” Ordinary people see a forest and quickly understand that it is made up of individual trees. Autistic people see individual trees and may never grasp the idea of “forest” at all. The author uses several situations to illustrate his point. For example, an autistic boy correctly identifies a doll, doll bed, mattress, and blanket, but says that the doll pillow is a “piece of ravioli.” An autistic man connects the name Karen to a coworker, but when a new Karen arrives he has to give her a different name. Autistic people are as capable as ordinary people of establishing connections, but they cannot sustain connectivity within a subtle and shifting contextual web. In a row of objects, most non-autistics would link an orange and a banana as being alike, whereas someone with autism might link a banana and a boomerang, and match the orange with a baseball. An autistic man may court his girlfriend by bringing her flowers late at night when she is asleep.

The difficulty of comprehension for people with autism increases because word meanings and physical settings change all the time. For example, consider that a chocolate Easter egg looks like an egg but isn't; a scrambled egg is an egg but doesn't look like one. In one example, an autistic boy at camp refuses to use the toilets because they are not white like the one at home. Vermeulen offers thought-provoking questions that provide perspective on how challenging the world can be for someone with context blindness. Are police officers who confiscate smugglers' loot committing theft? How does one know which door to open when asked to "open the door"?

Vermeulen was drawn to study the potential of "context" by the work of Uta Frith, author of *Autism: Explaining the Enigma*; he credits her as the progenitor of his research on the subject. But Vermeulen has gone further, pursuing an in-depth scientific study of context blindness and suggesting methods to help "blind" autistics overcome their disabilities. Vermeulen asserts, "Context sensitivity cannot be explicitly taught. But we can compensate for context blindness." The techniques involve expanding the autistic person's "context" to include numerous "exceptions" that can be memorized to allow for appropriate behavior when the exception is encountered.

Berger uses Vermeulen's ideas throughout her book. Might we be witnessing the next stage of evolution with the increasing occurrence of autism? As she notes, "Since context blindness - or caetextia in Latin - is one of the most dominant symptoms of autistic behavior at the highest levels of the spectrum, people with autism may indeed be giving us a peek into our human condition soon. We could be witnessing the beginning of the next stage of human evolution—Homo caetextus." In effect, through our technology, could we be driving humanity towards a condition like autism and be witnessing the next stage of our evolution?

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The book *Context Blindness* has its own context. As Berger says, it came about because of feelings of "anger, disbelief, and astonishment" at a number of incidents and the frequency of their occurrence over the past few years. This caused her to become obsessed with finding "an encompassing explanation to seemingly unrelated events." Some of the events were in her professional life and direct experience. Others were in a world, mediated by television and social media. For example, as a college professor, she was "startled by a new kind of student" who had a new definition and understanding of college and its purpose. This understanding was different from the generations before them. To Berger, their behavior "felt rude and their language and demeanor seemed not to fit the situation."

Her sense of helplessness in the face of this new world increased with the "mounting polarization worldwide, immigration crises, phenomena such as cancel culture, and cries of cultural appropriation." In addition, there was also the situation of being past-the-tipping-point global for warming and COVID-19. As she says, "Dystopian television series such as *Black Mirror*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Years and Years* felt like documentaries." The events set her on a journey to "find an explanation for the madness around me." She feels that she found the explanation in the idea that general culture today was increasingly blind to context. Was culture in fact driving itself to more of the autistic state of context blindness? Is the delegation of the ability to read context to the algorithms of contextual technologies such as social media, location, and sensors,

making modern individuals context-blind? Might this context blindness be a harbinger of the next stage of human evolution?

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Referencing the late Susan Sontag's famous 1978 book *Illness as Metaphor*, Berger observes that "Every era in human history has a defining disease, and the language used around every disease defines the response of both patients and society to that disease." In effect, as Sontag argued, every illness becomes a metaphor to describe unrelated social processes and cultural phenomena that resemble the symptoms of the disease. For example, cancer must be "fought" or "defeated," and hatred is "like a cancer."

In this way, Berger notes that autism "seems to be the most useful metaphor to describe the human condition at the start of the third decade of the twenty-first century." And, one of the most dominant manifestations of autistic behavior is context blindness, or *Caetextia* in Latin. For example, people with autism assign meaning in an absolute way related to content rather than a context-specific way. This affects abilities such as face perception, recognition of emotions, understanding language and communication, and problem-solving.

Yet not only people with autism have difficulty reading facial expressions and recognizing emotions. Berger notes a study conducted by UCLA in 2014 that found digital media decreased children's ability to read other people's feelings. "Social skills require practice," she notes, "and we had been low on this practice for a while when the pandemic struck. We were looking at our phones an average of 96 times daily in 2019 but most of our conversations in 2020 took place behind a screen." Chances are, she continues, "our ability to socialize in-person has been even further compromised. With muted screens on Zoom, we have become used to an unnatural silence and absence of conversation fillers (such as 'uh' and 'um'). Some are finding face-to-face conversations awkward and less fluid and their online behavior leaking into their real lives."

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This eroded contextual sensitivity is not limited to those with autism. Berger argues that it seems to be afflicting us all." This general affliction explains some of the lack of empathy observed over the past few years. "When we are blind to context," Berger notes "we cannot be civil, as we don't have the context (cultural or social) to serve as a guide for what is acceptable and what is not when we play a certain role in a given situation. For the context-blind, civil norms are rendered meaningless or transparent." This explains the new behavior Berger was seeing with her students.

Many other phenomena can be explained by this growing blindness to context. One is the rise of fake news. As Berger says, "Culture watchers and worriers - everyone who is concerned about the disregard for facts and the rule of emotion over reason - have been trying to understand fake news and the multiple explanations that have been provided for them." For example, research by Masha Gessen in 2016 explains fake news and alternative facts are partly explained by the desire "to assert power over truth itself." Another explanation is that fake news is disseminated faster and wider than ever with trusted media sources in decline.

For Berger, there is “strong evidence all around us that we have now slipped into an unprecedented reality in most areas of life.” One possible pathway out of this unprecedented reality is to take a more “all-encompassing grasp of our current human condition.” She suggests that this might be possible by adopting more of a media ecological perspective on context. As she observes, media ecology had its origins in the observations of Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman and developed into the study of media as environments.

In effect, context is a set of conditions involving space, time, objects, symbols, and transactions between people, culture, and reality. “The conditions enable us to predict how others will behave and their expectations of us. These situations or contexts assign us roles. They tell us who we are. Context helps us concentrate on what is relevant and ignore what is irrelevant. It helps us make sense of the world.” In effect, Berger notes, “Media ecology is context analysis.” As she says, “Media ecology focuses on the implications of technology and postulates that technological development leads to the creation of new human abilities and the weakening or even disappearance of older abilities. When skills are delegated to technology, unused skills and capacities tend to atrophy.”

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Today’s delegation of human skills to technology are present in an increasing range of areas and daily activities. For example, Berger notes, in professions like airline pilots and doctors. But Berger notes that this is nothing new since human skills have been delegated to technology throughout history. For example, the invention of writing weakened our biological memory impairing our rational thought which was further impaired with the advent of television. The contextual technologies of the digital age have delegated our sense of context and made us context blind. These digital delegations fill all parts of our lives today.

Why perform the basic arithmetic required for splitting a check or calculating the tip for a waiter at a restaurant if we can use the calculator on our phones? Why tell time by the hands of an analog watch if we can quickly look at our phones? Why remember birthdays when our calendars and social media accounts remember them for us? They even provide no-effort templates to say “Happy Birthday” quickly and move on. So, what if we gave up the pleasant feeling that once came with being congratulated by someone who remembered, or at least took the time to write it down to be reminded? Why retain the ability to give instructions if we can tell someone what to type into Waze instead? Why write cursive, or write at all, if one can type? Or talk? We don’t need any special skills to take good photographs either. Just add a filter on Instagram and ...voila!

As Berger notes, “When GPS decides what route is best and iTunes decides what song to play, humans forget how to contextualize their environment.” When we completely outsource all our skills to mobile technology, location services, sensors, social media, and AI, we stop using our mind to understand the most basic situations.” This relinquishment of control over our decisions “to contextual technology is to give up our awareness of context.” In effect, when we live so much of our social lives on social media, we forget how to behave in the real world. While “We have become really good at distinguishing nuances of emotion between a smiling emoji, a

grinning face, a beaming face with smiling eyes, a face with tears of joy or rolling-on-the-floor-laughing,” in the “physical world, our sensitivities have coarsened.”

The effect is somewhat like being connected to technology and not present at the same time. MIT media professor Sherry Turkle calls this state “tethered and marked absent” in her 2017 book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. In other words, “we may be physically present in a situation, but tethered to our mobile devices” and “mentally and emotionally elsewhere.” All of this has greatly affected our sense of place. “Before the Internet,” Berger notes, “a ‘place’ was made up of physical space and the people within it. Today, the places we physically inhabit have become invisible to us. They have ceased to provide context for our interactions because we are all physically present but have fixed our attention on the absent and the remote.”

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Certainly, the growth of the new form of electric media in the growth of the Internet since *No Sense of Place* in the 80s has continued to erode the old sense of place and now the sense of that term associated with place, context. And certainly, the pandemic influenced the delegation of the ability (and need) to understand context in the rise of media such as Zoom conferences. Yet Berger argues autistic behavior was present long before the pandemic. For example, descriptions of autistic behaviors often spoke of children sitting expressionless, constantly spinning wheels of a toy car, eyes fixed, “paying no attention when his name was called, oblivious to the situation around him.” To Berger, replacing the toy truck with a smartphone offers “an accurate description of a high percentage of the world population today.”

With rising rates of autism, researcher Juan Enriquez argues, in his 2015 book *Evolving Ourselves*, “autism isn’t so much a vestige of the past as a glimpse of what’s to come: the next evolutionary step in an increasingly data-choked world.” Berger restates a central question of the book: Is it possible technology-driven context blindness is partly responsible for the explosion of autism spectrum disorder diagnoses? Could this be a case of humans driving our own evolution with our technology?

McLuhan and media ecologists after him maintain context is the key to understanding media and defending ourselves from its detrimental effects. McLuhan explained that our media and technology function as environments fading into the background as they become routine and therefore invisible to us. Lance Strate notes in his 2014 update of Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* in his *Amazing Ourselves to Death: Neil Postman’s Brave New World Revisited*:

To bring them back into conscious awareness, there is a need to find anti-environments or counter-environments, whose bias runs counter to those of the prevailing environment, thereby providing us with a vantage point from which to objectively observe and assess our main environment and find the patterns that may allow us to escape the Maelstrom or Tempest.

To have this “vantage point” Berger notes is to have perspective. “It implies the ability to see the larger picture. To observe and assess an environment means possessing the ability to understand context.” Berger agrees with Strate’s arguments of his 2014 book: the key to avoiding technological dystopia is context. As Strate says, “We need to find “the appropriate contexts for the specific purposes we have in mind, the appropriate medium for the kinds of communication we wish to engage in, the appropriate environment for living a fully human life.”

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The book is divided into four parts. Part I titled Context Blindness in Context places the rise of context blindness in its own context by how information has been decontextualized creating new paradigms of symptoms such as emotional intelligence and soft skills. All leading humanity into the “Age of Autism.” It observes the “slow atrophy” of our ability to see things in context. Since the growth of the digital age, Berger notes that we’ve been “willfully and happily delegating many of our brain’s activities to digital technology.”

We love our technology and it makes life better - smoother, cleaner, more comfortable and more fun. But a more comfortable life comes with a price. As Nicholas Carr observes in his 2010 book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, “a more comfortable life comes with a price.” As we “cede to software more of the toil of thinking, we are likely diminishing our own brainpower in subtle but meaningful ways.” A result is that demanding technologies require new learning and in the the process of using them, the brain is stimulated and forced to change. But when things are too easy, as they increasingly are with convenience, contextual technologies, we neglect the biological need to be challenged and lose abilities. When brain skills delegate the ability to read context, brain skills decrease. Unused capacities melt away entirely.

The delegation of our biological memory to writing long before digital media is an especially clear example. Berger observes that Neil Postman in his 1992 *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, warned that Plato said “those who acquire (writing) will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful. They will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs, instead of by their own internal remembrances.” Television too has weakened certain capabilities with its emphasis on images. This has led to the deterioration of our verbal ability and the rational and coherent organization of ideas that words make possible. Berger observes that in turn, feelings and emotions have taken center stage, as they are what images evoke. Based on the logic that media take over specific skills which we then end up losing, digital media have damaged our ability to understand context. As Berger says, it is no coincidence that these latest technologies have come to be known as “contextual technologies.”

Part II titled Contextual Technology and the Context-Blind Users discussed the importance of context and situations in the world and discusses the change from Meyrowitz’s *No Sense of Place* in the change from television to social media. Here, Berger labels the new era as a follow-up to Meyrowitz as one of “no sense of context.”

Part III of Context Blindness discusses the symptoms of context blindness. Berger sees these symptoms in several phenomena associated with our modern world such as the delusions of Flat Earthers, Anti-vaxxers and Global Warming Deniers. These symptoms are also apparent in the

increasing conflicts within culture with the symptom of rising high conflict personality (HCP) expressed in tribalism, identity politics and cancel culture. Symptoms also express themselves in the growing fragility and hypersensitivity of individuals and culture expressed in the phenomena of trigger warnings, safe spaces and increases in trauma and anxiety.

The final Part IV of the book offers sources of therapy for context blindness in areas like CBT, ACT and social stories. Here is where Berger makes her argument that the discipline of media ecology, inspired by the work of Marshall McLuhan, can be viewed as context analysis. Her final prognosis is that Homo Sapiens might be turning into Homo Caetextus.

Berger ends her book on a note on a note of skepticism. The prescriptions and therapies of media ecology might work to hold back the onslaught on context blindness. But then humans might increasingly be evolving from Homo Sapiens to Homo Caetextus blind to the context of their lives.

“It may be too late,” she says.

(John Fraim John grew up in Los Angeles and has a BA from UCLA and JD from Loyola Law School. He has had a career as a marketing executive and entrepreneur and has been involved in several business ventures through his company GreatHouse and Midnight Oil Studios. He is the author of four books and many published essays, articles and short stories. His book *Battle of Symbols: Global Dynamics of Advertising, Entertainment and Media* was published by Daimon Verlag (Zurich) and his book *Spirit Catcher: The Life & Art of John Coltrane* received the Best Biography Award from the Small Press Association. He has had a long-term interest in media and symbolism and is considered a leading authority on symbolism. He is on the Editorial Board of Advisors for the journal *New Explorations in Culture and Communications*, founded by Marshall McLuhan in 1953. He is a member of the International Institute of General Semantics and the National Association of Scholars. His interest in autism comes from his membership on the board of LettuceWork, a non-profit organization that provides work for adults with autism. He blogs to his site Midnight Oil Studios at <https://midnightoilstudios.org>.)