



PROJECT MUSE®

Daniel J. Boorstin, 1914-2004

Harold Skramstad

Technology and Culture, Volume 45, Number 4, October 2004, pp. 922-930
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2004.0205>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/175781>

Daniel J. Boorstin, 1914–2004

HAROLD SKRAMSTAD

It may seem unusual to write about Daniel J. Boorstin in *Technology and Culture*. Neither his readers nor his academic colleagues saw him primarily as a historian of technology. The titles of his books and the great themes they explore do not have an overt focus on technology. Yet it is hard to overestimate the impact of Dan Boorstin's long and distinguished career as a scholar, thinker, and organizational leader in bringing the importance of technology into the mainstream of both historical and popular thinking.

Any one of Boorstin's major books would assure his place in the canon of important twentieth-century historians. His academic career at the University of Chicago spanned over two decades of exceptional research and teaching. But he was much more than a brilliant and original historical mind. His parallel career as a leader of two great cultural and intellectual institutions, the National Museum of History and Technology (now the National Museum of American History) and the Library of Congress, both expanded and enriched the world of the history of technology in ways that are still being discovered.

For historians of American technology, especially those who see technology as a central force in driving and shaping the American experience, Boorstin's histories and essays, especially the last two volumes of his three-volume history of the United States, *The Americans* (1958–73), were among the first to focus on such mundane things as ice making and refrigeration, the mass production of food and clothing, the “technology of haste” in building and transportation, and the emergence of print and electronic media as powerful forces used by Americans to shape their communities in new and innovative ways to meet the needs of an emerging nation always focused on the future. While Boorstin was by no means the first to identify the importance of technology in the shaping of American history, he was one of the most influential in pushing technology from the periphery to the

Dr. Skramstad is president emeritus of the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village.

©2004 by the Society for the History of Technology. All rights reserved.

0040-165X/04/4504-0013\$8.00

center of the American experience. And yet his point of view was never simplistic technological determinism. *The Americans* brims with a sense of the possibilities of an unexpected future born out of persistent technological innovation that continued to define and be defined by the broad search for new kinds of institutions and communities unique to America.

For many of my generation, reading *The Americans* was the revelation of a new way of looking at American history. Its themes and topics resonated with a growing sense that history was more than the evolution of ideas and political institutions; it was about experience. Boorstin's histories are rooted in a deep understanding of ways that the emerging technologies and institutions of everyday life in America had the power to shape and transform our world. He says it best in the introduction to the third volume of the trilogy, *The Democratic Experience*:

MEMORIALS

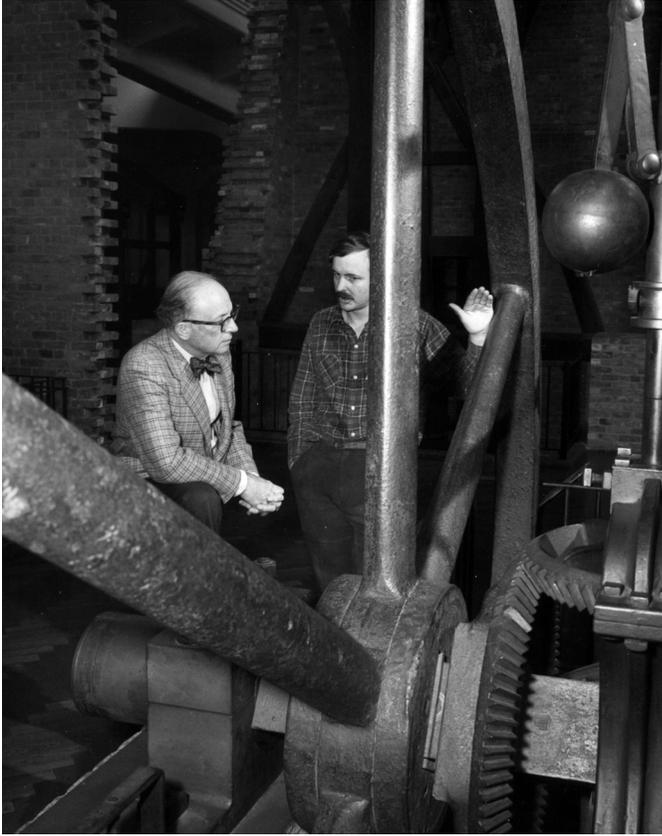
The century after the Civil War was to be an Age of Revolution—of countless, little-noticed revolutions, which occurred not in the halls of legislatures or on battlefields or on the barricades but in the homes and farms and factories and schools and stores, across the landscape and in the air—so little noticed because they came so swiftly, because they touched Americans everywhere and every day. Not merely the continent but human experience itself, the very meaning of community, of time and space, of present and future, was being revised again and again; a new democratic world was being invented and was being discovered by Americans wherever they lived.

But Boorstin's excitement for his subject did not result in an uncritical optimism. He understood technology is not an unmixed blessing, and that technological change creates loss as well as gain. Later in the same book he comments:

The old tricks of the miracle maker, the witch, and the magician became common place. Foods were preserved out of season, water poured from bottomless indoor containers, men flew up into space and landed out of the sky, past events were conjured up again, the living images and resounding voices of the dead were made audible, and the present moment was packaged for future use.

When man could accomplish miracles he began to lose his sense of the miraculous. This meant, too, a decline of common sense, and the irrelevance of the rules of thumb that had governed man since the beginning of history. Americans who could no longer expect the usual were in danger of depriving themselves of the charms of the unexpected. "Everyday miracles" added immeasurably to life, but they also subtracted something that could never be measured. Democratizing everything enlarged the daily experience of millions; but spreading also meant thinning.

OCTOBER
2004
VOL. 45



Daniel Boorstin in conversation with John Bowditch, curator of industrial collections at the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, 1982. (Photo courtesy of the Henry Ford, B91332-3.)

Attenuation summed up the new quality of experience. Attenuated experience was thinner, more diluted, its sensations were weaker and less poignant. It was a life punctuated by commas and semicolons rather than by periods and exclamation points.

In *The Americans*, as in all his books, the writing is full of force and grace. Boorstin's books were written to be read by nonhistorians, and they were. Yet they are at the same time, in the words of historian Jaroslav Pelikan, spoken at the memorial service for Boorstin at the Library of Congress in April 2004, models of scholarship that attempt "to record in one sweeping sequence the great events and movements that have swayed the destinies of man." In rereading Boorstin's work, I am struck by how little of it is dated; Boorstin's historical perspective remains prescient and his insights

relevant. Probably no other historian of his generation has left us so many memorable and quotable phrases or ideas that have since become part of our common language.

He carried his views on the importance of technology into his more broadly conceived books, *The Discoverers* (1983) and *The Creators* (1992). Here again Boorstin was able to weave technology into a more global perspective. But more important, these books are great exemplars of Boorstin's broad yet deep historical perspective. His ability to synthesize huge amounts of information and insight and then unerringly find the great thought in the minor episode was unique—and the source of a great deal of jealousy from many of his more traditional academic colleagues. As in the earlier trilogy, the perspective of *The Discoverers* and *The Creators* was one of exhilaration at sharing with readers the excitement of new discoveries and new ways of seeing the world. Getting through these books can be exhausting, but never boring. In the end, Boorstin's massive intellectual achievement in his writing was to create a sense of a world in which ideas and the excitement of ideas remained a continuously transforming force.

MEMORIALS

The bibliographic essays in both *The Discoverers* and *The Creators*, like those in *The Americans*, themselves constitute wonderful historical documents; far more than a record of the academic checking-up process, they are generous acknowledgements of his intellectual voyages of discovery and worth reading in their own right.

Boorstin's publication record alone would put him among the most important and productive historical thinkers and writers of his time. Yet to focus only on his writings would diminish the importance of his legacy. He served as a leader of two great American institutions in which history, and the history of technology, provided a vital intellectual focus, one that he worked hard to strengthen.

Boorstin had a relatively brief but extraordinary tenure as director of what is now the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution. His appointment in 1969 was controversial, to say the least, since he had no museum experience. To make matters worse, he struck a bargain with the secretariat that allowed him to work on his own book projects until noon each day, leaving the afternoon and evening for his work at the museum. To say that he was viewed with suspicion by much of the museum's staff would be an understatement. As it turned out, Boorstin provided more than a breath of fresh air as he swept into this new environment; he brought a veritable hurricane. Suddenly every intellectual proposition and organizational practice was subject to his inquisitive and probing critical perspective. Underlying all his probing, however, was a deep philosophical respect for the collecting and curatorial work of the staff.

The museum would be fertile ground for a director who saw in its exhibitions of objects a strategy for what he had so long practiced in his books: connecting individual artifacts and ideas to the larger concepts and social

OCTOBER
2004
VOL. 45

constructs that created them and which in turn were changed by them. In his own books Boorstin had a special genius for seeing the larger significance of small and seemingly isolated ideas and events. He immediately saw a direct connection between the museum's possibilities and the intellectual ambitions of his own work. Yet for many museum staff it was a very frustrating time. Not used to an intellectual environment of constant probing and questioning, or to a constant stream of new ideas demanding responses, many of the staff went into a posture of stonewalling or avoidance. For them it was better to wait out the situation, avoiding the exhausting and challenging debates that characterized the museum during the Boorstin years. But for many of us new to the museum, drawn to it by the opportunities to transform the ideas and themes that Boorstin had pioneered in his books into powerful, engaging, content- and artifact-rich exhibitions, it was an extraordinary time.

At the very root of Boorstin's thinking about the museum and its exhibitions and programs was his belief in the special relationship and interaction between American history and technology. This idea, so fundamental to his historical worldview and so well evidenced in *The Americans*, was one of the most basic intellectual threads that tied together his thinking about the exhibitions and programs initiated during his tenure as director. One of his first acts was to have the name of the museum changed to the National Museum of History and Technology, to reflect what he felt the distinctive focus and direction of the museum should be. It was to be a first step in trying to provide focus and definition for a museum that had been created in the middle 1960s more to house the burgeoning Smithsonian historical collections than to meet any distinctive purpose.

He was quick to act to correct what he saw as fundamental omissions in the museum's exhibitions. For example, the transportation exhibition focused primarily on horse-drawn vehicles (this was 1969!) and lacked a Model T Ford. Dan was incredulous. It was not long before a Model T appeared as a featured object in the Constitution Avenue entrance lobby.

Boorstin encouraged, inspired, and pushed all who were willing to take on new challenges. He threw young and willing museum staff into these new exhibition projects as partners with more seasoned curators. Major new core exhibitions on maritime history, news reporting, photography, money and medals, political history, and postal history were initiated. Special exhibitions on Rube Goldberg, mass-produced clothing, and American productivity were also developed during this period, and two major Bicentennial exhibits, *A Nation of Nations* and *1876*, had their genesis. The same focus on the connections between technological and social change shaped each and every project.

Boorstin also initiated a new process for doing exhibitions at the museum. Prior to his tenure the development of an exhibition was the responsibility of an individual curator, with support from the exhibitions staff. He

recognized early on that museum exhibitions, like films, were complex experiences that needed to reflect the full range of content, imaginative, and technical skills and expertise within the museum, and so instituted a team-based process of exhibition development that was coordinated and directed from the director's office. This arrangement, which lasted only during his short tenure, cut directly against the prevailing museum culture. Ironically, this form of the exhibition development process was rediscovered by many museums a generation later and has now become the predominant method of exhibition development among American history museums.

Boorstin also brought his unique intellectual perspective to bear on other projects designed to expand the museum's reach. I remember vividly his cultivation of Doubleday and Company for the sponsorship of a distinguished lecture series that would bring key innovators in science, technology, and business to the museum to speak. He wanted to call the series "On the Frontiers of Ignorance." Of course the Doubleday public relations people were not about to accept such a negative title, so in the end the money came for a series titled "On the Frontiers of Knowledge." The series brought a diverse array of provocative thinkers to lecture at the museum, ranging from the American designer Charles Eames to Sony chief executive Akio Morita. Boorstin pointedly introduced each lecture with comments on the importance of ignorance as a powerful stimulus in the quest for new knowledge.

One of Boorstin's additions to the museum during his directorship was also a reminder that he remained at his core a man of the book. He could not understand why the museum did not have a great bookstore to complement its great artifacts and exhibitions. There needed to be a place where books devoted to the ideas and concepts introduced at the museum could be purchased and taken home and explored. The result was a large, well-stocked store, close to Constitution Avenue, that became a valuable and well-trafficked exhibition hall of books and ideas.

Boorstin's directorship was viewed as a blessing or a curse, depending on one's perspective. For those who shared his view of the museum as a powerful and experiential teaching and learning tool, it was one of the most exciting and invigorating times of their lives, requiring them to stretch and learn in ways that they themselves could never have anticipated. For many of the more traditionally oriented staff, his relentless focus on constant dialogue and debate, his insistence on the importance of connecting museum objects to larger ideas and concepts, and his questioning of traditional museum practice caused great consternation and frustration.

It came as no surprise to many of us when Boorstin was appointed Librarian of Congress in 1975. As his intellectual horizons grew broader, so too did his organizational vision and ambition. For him the issue was not the personal power that came with an organizational leadership position, it

was the influence that he could exert in focusing and shaping the intellectual vision of the organization.

Boorstin was a fast learner, and he brought the same inquiring perspective to the library that he had exhibited at the museum. He quickly put in place a senior management team that would assure that his vision for the library would withstand the inevitable bureaucratic pressure and inertia. The administrative and leadership skills that germinated at the museum now came into full flower.

OCTOBER
2004
VOL. 45

At the library, as at the museum, Boorstin was a passionate and articulate advocate for the importance of expanding, collecting, and sharing knowledge in all its forms. When confronted with deep budget cuts proposed by Congress in 1986, he responded to the House Subcommittee on Legislative Appropriations with a fine example of his power with words:

If the announced budgetary policy is pursued for the Library of Congress, the nation's library—your main resource of knowledge and information—will quickly deteriorate. It has taken two centuries to build this institution. It can be disintegrated in a decade and destroyed in two decades. And so it will be unless the fiscal policy toward the Library is repaired and reversed.

This greatest Library on earth—a monument to our Founders' faith in knowledge, a byproduct of our faith in freedom of inquiry—will be a byword and symbol of a nation's lack of faith in itself, a symptom of a nation in terror and decline. Historians will not fail to note that a people who could spend \$300 billion on their defense would not spend \$18 million on their knowledge—and could not even keep their libraries open in the evening.

To his testimony he added his own personal power of persuasion. He found out that the Librarian of Congress was one of the few nonmembers of Congress allowed on the floor of the House and Senate. He took advantage of the opportunity and lobbied relentlessly, and in the end successfully, for substantial restoration of funds. It was one of Boorstin's and the library's finest moments.

At the Library of Congress Boorstin also had an opportunity to show off the curatorial skills he had learned at the National Museum of History and Technology. Curious about the contents of a locked safe in the librarian's office that no one had ever seen opened, he had a safecracker open the safe. Inside was an old blue box that contained the contents of Lincoln's pockets the night he was assassinated at Ford's Theater. For Boorstin the spectacles, lens polisher, pocket knife, watch fob, wallet, handkerchief, and assorted news clippings admiring of Lincoln were, like so many of the things he wrote about, examples of how the mundane could reveal so much more in the right context.

It was, and is, hard to find people lukewarm about Dan Boorstin. He had a virtual army of detractors, many of them in the academic community who felt that his brand of history was too large and too little rooted in individual scholarship based on primary sources. Other academics were simply jealous of the financial success that came from writing history that people enjoyed reading. Many professional museum curators and librarians saw Boorstin as an outsider, unable to understand their internal and professional concerns. Boorstin himself often described himself as an “amateur,” driven by a passion and excitement to know for the sake of knowing. The kind of intellectual discovery he sought could not find a fully hospitable place in the university, in the museum, or in the library, given each environment’s deeply entrenched interests. Even so, he was able to make great contributions to each. At the University of Chicago he was a champion of younger scholars who had something important to say. At the National Museum of History and Technology he was an unselfish mentor to all who were willing to discipline themselves for it. At the Library of Congress he was the librarian who did so much to democratize access to learning and knowledge.

For most of the people who were privileged to work with Boorstin, it was one of the high points of a lifetime. His self-expectations and level of discipline were incredibly high, and he expected the same from everyone else. When confronted with the reasons why a project—especially one’s own personal writing projects—was stalled or behind schedule, his usual rejoinder was “if you write one page each day you will have a 365 page book every year.” Good advice, and he generally followed it himself. The other great advantage of working with Boorstin was that you got to work with his wife Ruth, as well. For Dan’s colleagues and friends the phrase “Dan and Ruth” is one word—and an important one. Editor, intellectual helpmate, confidant, and for many a loving honorary Jewish mother, Ruth was the only person who seemed fully at home with Boorstin’s thinking and the only one who could keep up with him. A simple conversation with them on any subject could be completely exhausting. Both my wife Susan and I remember often staggering away from a conversation with Dan and Ruth, realizing that they were just warming up. To be included in their lives and their thoughts was a great privilege, and one that for us—as for many others—has been a source of rich and lifelong support. While Susan and I did not work directly with Dan and Ruth Boorstin after 1974, we were never out of their touch.

While Dan was a warm, intimate, and personal mentor to many, his great intellect and imagination were difficult to fathom. There was a part of him that was unknowable; what the mathematician Mark Kac has described as the “magician” aspect of genius. For Kac there are “ordinary geniuses” and the “magicians.” “Ordinary genius is understandable. One

TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE

can imagine working harder, studying harder, developing more discipline, and eventually becoming one of them. With the magicians it is different. Even as we admire what they have produced, the process by which they did it remains a deep, unsolvable mystery.” Dan Boorstin was clearly a magician. In rereading his essays, his histories, and in revisiting the journey of his extraordinary intellectual and administrative career, it is clear that we will not see his like again for a very long time. And while we are vastly poorer for his loss, we are vastly richer for his having been among us.

OCTOBER

2004

VOL. 45