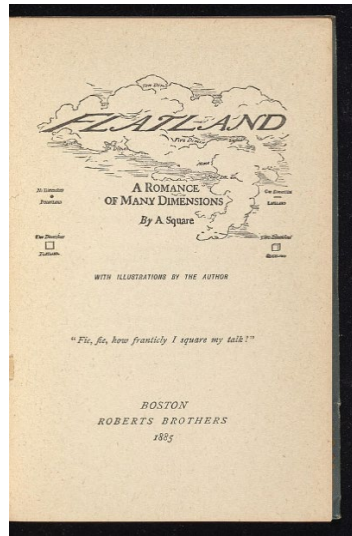


MEDIA'S *FLATLAND*¹



Flatland, first published in 1884, is a novella that explores the two-dimensional world of Flatland, inhabited by *flatlanders* – geometrically shaped individuals where societal hierarchy depends on the shape's complexity. The story focuses on Square, a narrator and protagonist who wants to know about other dimensions and is introduced to the concept of a third dimension by an enigmatic visitor from Spaceland. Throughout his book the author critiques (Victorian) society and explores the nature of dimensions and perceptions of the world and humanity. Abbott's masterpiece, his social commentary, philosophical and theological thought³ are particularly relevant for understanding the vast media landscape. That is to say, media's landscape became a *flatland* in which geometrical figures cannot comprehend plurality, complexity or multidimensionality of human persona and the world (outside the material world and outside media outlets). Given the considerable passage of time since the beginning of the internet and platforms like Facebook, we can now assert that much of the media intentionally cultivates impulsive and sensationalistic narratives often fuelled by hatred in their ever-scandalous flatland(s) where there is no space for genuine dialogue. For example, the

¹ *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by Edwin A. Abbott (headmaster, theologian, priest and author) was first published in 1884.

² <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flatland-USA-0006.jpg>

³ As a religious man with a well-developed traditional sense of morality, Abbott clearly did not subscribe to the prevailing scientific view of knowledge, and he more than once pointed out the dangers of letting one side of the personality completely dominate the other. Abbott was a teacher who extolled balance, and *Flatland* reduces to an absurdity the single-minded tendency of choosing either the totally rationalistic or the totally intuitive.

Flatland: A New Introduction by Thomas F. Banchof, Princeton Science Library edition, 1991.

aforementioned Facebook, now a more ‘outdated’ form of mass communication, was initially imagined as a friendly space for ‘friends’ which however over time became a space of gathering of ‘unknown friends’ (frequently never met in person), place of tribalism and often hate-speech masked as opinion and wrapped in a blanket of moral righteousness, and finally exclusion thanks to the button ‘unfriend’. Since these early beginnings, more media outlets and communication platforms developed, implemented on the phones, to the extent that now we have deep or dark internet, which allows chosen members, often minors, to interact in the ways hidden from those who are not part of the certain group. In that sense, media not only took over real life experiences and human interactions but endangered physical and mental health and safety, creating ‘addiction’ reflected especially with the younger generations. ‘One-click’ brings not only popularity but produces financial gain, ‘status’ in digital community and visibility. This of course rapidly reshapes thinking and understanding of economy, job-market, community, solidarity, society and – ‘otherness.’ Everyone, so to speak, sees mass media as a source of income, and anyone stands the risk of becoming the ‘foreign other’ if they do not comply with the predominant narrative or ideology.

In that sense, one could argue that the dark side of media (with social and digital media platforms) is that it succeeded in that in which many dictatorships failed: ‘to divide and conquer’ the population on a more global scale. Hannah Arendt’s seminal work on totalitarianism⁴ provides stages of totalitarianism and the important elements that constitute each of those stages. This includes *isolation* and *alienation* that fragment or atomise society in which close community bonds are broken; *ideology* as a weapon in mobilising the *masses* – ideology that creates ‘one truth’, reinterprets history, shapes or replaces reality thus creating ‘tribal thinking’ and justifiable violence; *propaganda* and *control* re-enforce ideological domination and precede the destruction of plurality, after which comes repression and terror, and finally the total domination.⁵ Mass-media create and thrive on *isolation* and *alienation* through the cultivation of the online same-minded groups driven by their own, often extreme ideologies, thus atomising the society further. Propaganda, falsity, and tribal thinking encourage and control the behaviour of the ‘masses’, which becomes increasingly effortless by advancements in technology.

⁴ See Arendt, Hannah: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1976.

⁵ Arendt: Ibid.

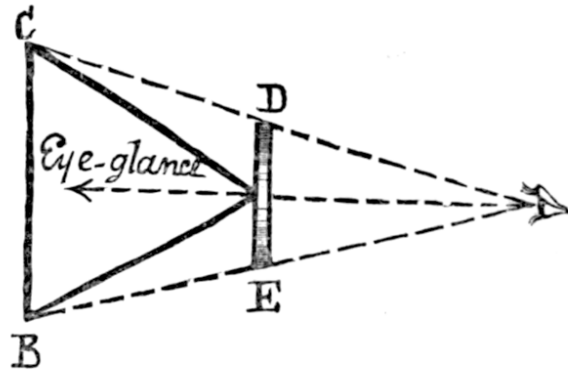


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While mass media outwardly provide platforms for contesting different historical, cultural and political narratives, they are more frequently deployed as a ‘battlefield’ of competing ideologies where truth is overshadowed by a truth of specific often violent online communities. That leaves us with some disturbing questions of what happened with free media, investigative journalism, dialogue and free speech that serves the advancement of humanity (what is freedom?), knowledge vs. opinion, and objectivity, which should not be confused with personal experience, and cannot be limited to the subjective opinion of one group that is not grounded in factual reality (but rather in falsehood, in the Arendtian sense). The ripple effect of mass media presenting themselves as ‘free’ is hatred, polarisation and call to violence against the ‘foreign other’ which is a result of the ‘uniformity of thinking’ of one group or the other. Mass media polarise, target and form identities online manipulating and turning communities and people against each other – ‘us versus them’, presenting the world as ‘black and white’ – as *flatland* – from which there is no escape. While mass media need to be regulated (by law rather than by individuals or financial groups) it is important to bear in mind that for now, the world requires more persons like “Square” (as the protagonist from the above novel). We need those ‘squares’ who can contemplate on multi-dimensional reality and plurality, on truth versus falsehood and self-delusion, establishing real human connections, even with those in disagreement. This is for now the only way of escaping the echo-chambers of internet lodges full of smoking mirrors in the circus created by mass media. The world is diverse, and diversity should not lead to its polarisation, *au contraire*. Because of diversity of cultures and people media cannot be ‘global’ as this would mean uniformity and narrowmindedness by default (and it would have to exclude someone). However, the loudness and everydayness of mass media circus serve to provide an illusion of ‘global media’, which the least reflect ‘universality’ and diversity of human history, cultures and experiences. The isolation and mass thinking are becoming a dangerous trend, and

⁶ Flatland’s Flag – Generated by AI.

it all started a decade or so ago, with one click... 'unfriend.' The flatland needs Squares, but of course the 'Squares' risk to be excluded because they see multi-dimensionality, however without the 'Squares' the world (and not just the media space) risks to become a literal flatland.



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⁷ [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flatland_\(first_edition\)_page_23a.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flatland_(first_edition)_page_23a.png)