MASS COMMUNICATION

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Summary

Since the nineteenth century expressions like "mass society", "the age of industry" are used to describe not only developments in Europe and America. Modern popular democracy with its extension of the vote first to all adult male citizens, then more and more to women as well, brought about new forms of organisation and communication in politics. The new era of democratic mass communication created purveyors of slogans. Their slogans were taken up by the masses and declared to be political principles. In order to distinguish between demagogues and useful information, new skills were essential. Media literacy is the skill to draw from media messages an informed and critical understanding of the messages received, and of the nature of the mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques. While the arts were always accessible to small or large groups, and artists aspired to be known by many, the mass media have brought about a quantum leap in the potential size of audiences. The invention of printing, of course, at the beginning has tremendously increased the opportunities both of writers to address a larger audience and to free themselves from the good will of private sponsors of their work. A problem which became more

prominent in the time of film, television and the Internet, is the growing dependency of human beings on virtual worlds. The emergence of the World Wide Web as a mass communications medium has, in a few short years, changed the way we think about publishing, data transmission and First Amendment freedoms. We have begun to live in a "distance society", which means that we encounter communication partners with other cultural backgrounds and living in other social nets than we do. Today's generation is fascinated by the Internet's ability to deliver news and images over the Internet with the help of a personal computer - and the user now has complete control of the "programming." This has enormous effects on the way we will live in future.

1. From Communication "In Real Life" To Communication In Mass Media

John Hofsess once said: "The demi-world of journalism is like the fun house of mirrors that one finds on carnival midways. In one reflection you are too fat. In another you are absurdly thin. In another reflection you appear to have an elongated neck; in another, a flat head. In still another image you have next to no body. Yet there you are, standing in front of these bizarre reflections, fully-formed and bearing little resemblance to any of the images before you. The difference is, however, that, unlike the fun house of mirrors, the distortions of the media are rarely a joke."

While there are undoubtedly many serious and honest journalists and many newspapers and other mass media which attempt to research and transmit news with the utmost integrity, there are structural elements which make news in whatever medium less than transparent. Many newspapers and other news media are allied to governments, parastatals, political parties, interest groups, or are owned by private owners with affinities to such interest groups. While objective reporting is the ideal to which most news media subscribe, they can never be free of such subjective bias. In countries with a free press the very variety of news media will compensate for the bias of individual publications, and in the age of the Internet those readers who have access to the world wide web have an even wider access beyond the publications available to them locally. However, since most people rely on relatively few media for their news, be it the locally available television station, radio or newspaper, the potential freedom of information is much reduced in practice. (see *Media*)

1.1 Media Literacy

While most users seem to take to the modern media quite "naturally", usage of media does not imply that the users are able to use them critically and that they are able to distinguish between useful and useless, objective and biased information. It takes great skill to read between the words and the images, and to understand how the message is manipulated, which views are excluded, and which opinions are emphasised. Media literacy is the skill to draw from media messages an informed and critical understanding of the messages received, and of the nature of the mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques. More specifically, it can increase understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organised, and how they construct reality. Media literacy in the age of the Internet, when media users can potentially become media producers, also includes the ability to create media products. There can be little question that the media produces

intriguing effects on its consumers' cognitions, values, identities and behaviours. The greatest concern for many students of media is the influence of media violence on aggressive behaviour and the portrayal of certain life styles on the morality of the population.

1.2 Interference by the state

An important factor in media communication is state interference, whether it is censorship of whatever form, prepublication censorship, restrictive regulations, or blockages in the access to government information or other vital information. Even countries which pride themselves on the absence of censorship sometimes succeed to eliminate unwelcome news from most of the public media. During the final American assault on the Iraqi lines during the Gulf War there were no photos, no reports, just rumours that tanks with bulldozer like shields in front of them rolled over Iraqi trenches, simply burying thousands of troops in earth and sand - what went on was allegedly considered too cruel in its sheer mechanical efficiency, so that these images would perturb public opinion too much, and therefore a total censorship blackout was strictly imposed. When Jean Baudrillard made the claim that the Gulf War did not take place, this statement could be read in the sense that such traumatic pictures that stand for the reality of this war were totally censured.

Modern humanity, living in a world of media, and relying for media on most of the news, even about events happening relatively close by, tend to diminish the ability of people to form judgements on reality by first hand inspection. Such a decoupling of the inner world from the outside world is possible wherever the flow of information is largely through such media as television which create an alternate reality. The public world is dislocated into telematic networks, which are the new streets and squares where people meet. Baudrillard's phantom world of simulated simulations lets us ask with him: "Was Tienanmen Square a media event?" Partly, no doubt: but it remains true that students there were put down by old-fashioned terror, while the attempt to inundate China with faxes and radio broadcasts was blocked by conventional forms of political power. Codes and information then are not yet the only methods of control; there are still today forms of control like open exploitation and naked violence in "real life". But the expression "in real life" is becoming more and more problematic under conditions of postmodernity. What is our "real life" if the information which we process daily is overwhelmingly provided by the media?

News stories, as they are disseminated by news media, do not only contain the facts of the case and the surrounding circumstances, but interpretations, as well, that have given the facts a particular shade and colour. In other words, the moulders of public opinion attempt to convince us what an event is supposed to mean in terms of politics and culture. With few exceptions, the mass media and popular press generally have a specific interpretative narrative running through all the stories and commentaries. The uniformity of this interpretation, which one can observe when one switches from channel to channel on television, demonstrates just how much the mass media and many in the intellectual community are consciously or unconsciously following a certain line and how influenced they often are by the "spin" given to events in the briefings and handouts supplied by various government agencies. The reporters, intellectuals, and

political analysts who dominate those mass media often buy into the "party line" of the government establishment.

The crucial difference between establishment mass media and the Internet is that, while there are many voices on the Net just as ill-informed as most journalists, nevertheless the Internet is the one place where the truth may be told at length and in depth without interference by editors and producers. Many examples could be cited of how major news media mishandle stories in which all of the pertinent facts are available and yet nothing close to the truth gets told.

1.3 Virtual worlds: Living in a world of fantasy

One of the problems which was discussed even at the time of the printed book, but which became even more prominent in the time of film, television and the Internet, is the growing dependency of human beings on virtual worlds, be it in their fantasies while reading literature, be it in images which replace or reinforce such fantasies. In the worst case such dependencies can be structurally like drug addictions. Printed literature and the media provide us with ideas and stimulation, independent of our own organic changes of our thinking processes between effort, strain and pauses. The fact that artificial light makes the night into another day destroys natural rhythms. The sociologist Simmel saw the fact that money could buy anything at any time and that communications early in the twentieth century were already continuous in their impact, that the postal services transmitted messages at regular interval, and the telegraph and telephone created instant messages, so that communication was no longer bound to time, as an indication that the impulses and irritations of the individual no longer needed to heed any natural rhythm, as a characteristic of the modern age. Modern culture has not only conquered space, but time as well. Divisions of time no longer rule our life with the same certainty which they used to. To what degree such changes in our perceptual surroundings have dangerous consequences for our physical and mental health is still a matter of debate.

Perhaps people turn to television as a substitute for real experience. One could argue on the one hand that the more individuals' watch television the less likely they report their lives as being exciting. Here, in addition to arguing that those watching large amounts of television are indeed living more boring lives, one might also claim that televised stories make viewers compare their lives with those on the screen, which may be more exciting and glamorous than their own. But one could also argue that those who live unexciting lives watch more television in order to add excitement to their existence.

2. Globalization of Communication

The information society, which got a boost by the invention of the Internet, has increased the pace of globalization which started with colonisation and the invention and use of steam driven cargo ships, the telegraph, radio, telephone, television and fax services. (See also *6.23.3.1. Mass Culture, popular culture: 2. Globalization and commercial mass culture*) However: while the world is drawn closer together as far as its technology is concerned, there are still very deep differences in culture between various parts of the globe, and even where a small urban elite seems to be totally

integrated into the world wide network of global lifestyles, most of the badly paid workforce and the poor peasants of many countries are as far from globalization as ever. In fact most Third World inhabitants experience the current phase of globalization as merely the last phase of colonialism. So far globalization has not brought about a significant reduction of the cultural, religious and ethnic differences. The wall between East and West in Berlin may have fallen, the Chinese Wall may have merely symbolic value nowadays, but the spiritual walls which separates Western nations from much of the Third World are as high as ever.

It is true, however, that in a very real way events at the stock exchange in New York have consequences across the globe, and multinational conglomerates, richer than many small nations, have spun their web far and wide. Political catastrophes in East Asia influence the quality of life of workers in Detroit. Since the nineteenth century expressions like "mass society", "the age of industry" are used to describe not only developments in Europe and America. Colonialism in the nineteenth century at the latest has brought into reality the concept of world politics, the insight that whatever happens of importance in the farthest regions of the globe has an influence everywhere else. No nation can entirely isolate itself from the global structure of communication, politics and economy.

With modern media and communications we have begun to live in a "distance society", which means that we encounter communication partners with other cultural backgrounds and living in other social nets than we do. The one who is our neighbour on the net is no longer socially similar to me. Global communication can lead to the vivid experience of difference. As yet we have not developed a social code and forms of behaviour - like politeness, physical distance, privacy - which would regulate such forms of communication. While we still attempt to live in the new world according to old rules, we become aware more and more that the old patterns no longer work. However, because of the global communication networks it has also become easier to form networks to resist a globalization that would merely reinforce the current global power structures. (see *Globalization and contemporary societies*)

3. Mass Communication in Religion

From the very earliest times priests had their problems with the tendency of the masses to follow popular prophets like Jesus. In an early version of the gospel of St. John in the »Papyrus Bodmer II« the Pharisees exclaim: "Have you let yourselves be led astray? Has anyone among the government or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this mass, which knows no law, this rabble damned by God." Thus the high priests of all religions, Christian, Muslim and Hindu priests alike, exercised great influence over the fanatic religious masses and were unwilling to share this control with unauthorised teachers and prophets.

Debates about the nature of religions have agitated large masses of people from early on in history, and if the nature of these debates has changed, the intensity of them has remained at the same high pitch. Debates about the religious and ethical aspects of sexuality, abortion and war rage today as much as they raged in past ages. The findings of science, such as Darwin's theory of evolution are opposed by creationists, and the

time scale established by geologists is opposed by fundamentalist Christians. Globalization, modern global life styles, and the progress of science, have started violent debates in Muslim societies about many issues.

Such debates were and are of cardinal interest to millions of people, whether it is the debate between various Christian sects about the true nature of Christianity, or the debates between the various forms of Islam about the true meaning of the Q'uran. Such debates very often mobilise large crowds, who do not always argue with words.

An early example of such mass debates which had a long lasting effect on the Christian churches was the public polemic between the presbyter Arius and bishop Alexander of Alexandria. Arius used a rational exegesis of the Holy Bible and the categories of Aristotelian philosophy in a popular manner, and demonstrated that Christ could not be of the same essence as God, because he was not eternal, but had to be a creature, created by God. This rather esoteric philosophical point so excited the masses of the town that they paraded through the city and sang: "There was a time when Christ was not, and he was not before he was created." The melodies used were those of currently popular secular songs. Serious philosophical debates soon turned into all kinds of hooliganism. His opponent, in the end victorious, was Athanasius rather than the bishop, who unlike the bishop had mass appeal, although he was not a sharp philosophical thinker.

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Biographical Sketch

Peter Horn studied German and English at the University of the Witwatersrand. In 1971 he graduated Ph.D. from the University of the Witwatersrand with a thesis on "Rhythm and structure in the poetry of Paul Celan", and was offered the chair of German at the University of Cape Town in 1974. From 1987 to 1990 he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and from 1993-1994 Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University. He was president South African Association of German Studies (1989-1997), president of the Institute for Research into Austrian and International Literary Processes (Vienna) (2001-), on the executive committee of the Elias-Canetti-Gesellschaft, the National Executive of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) (1991 - 1992),the National Executive of the South African Writers' Association. Besides he was Honorary Vice President of the National Union of South African Students (1977-1981), Trustee of the South African Prisoners' Educational Trust Fund (1980-1985), and a member of the Interim Committee of the Unemployed Workers' Movement (1984/5). In 1974 he received the Pringle Prize of the South African English Academy for an essay to the concrete poetry, in 1992 he received the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa (Honourable Mention for *Poems 1964-1989*), and in 1993 the Alex La Guma/Bessie Head Award and in 2000 the Herman Charles Bosman Prize for the short story collection *My Voice is under Control now*. In 1994 the University of Cape Town granted him a Honorary Fellowship for life. Two of his volumes of poetry and numerous other publications by him were banned for possession during the Apartheid regime. His poems are anthologised in most major anthologies of South African poetry, and more than 100 have been published in journals. He has published numerous contributions to academic books, learned journals, and reviews and review articles.