

The Contribution of Mass Media

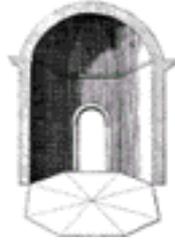
Gilles Lipovetsky

An idea has been increasingly gaining currency in Western democracies since the 1950s and '60s, namely the idea of the omnipotence of the media, a power that has become more pronounced as the influence of politics has become steadily weaker. This omnipotence of the media manifests itself, firstly, in the fabrication of individualistic tastes and desires, and secondly in the fragmentation of public space and social relations, if not the explosion (and hence the disappearance) of public space and social relations. These are the themes to which I would like to return in the hope of not rewriting the story of Pangloss. I think no one will dispute the idea that the media has played, and continues to play, a crucial role in the dynamics of postmodern individualism. The norm of private happiness, the value of pleasure, and the ideal of intimate fulfilment are diffused throughout mass culture, the press and television. Thanks to the media, the fulfilment of these desires and the love of oneself has become a socially legitimated form of behaviour, an ideal for the masses. In celebrating private pleasures and private happiness, the media have undoubtedly contributed to the decline of tradition, strict moral codes and ideological commitments. Living in the present, living for oneself and in accordance with these desires have become the legitimate norm, and in this sense the media have without a doubt contributed to the culture of individualism.

That is not all. Television is known to have played a role in the erosion of social life, in the erosion of certain forms of community life like the neighbourhood, the street, and the café, which had been important areas of social interaction since the nineteenth century. Television has put an end to people going out regularly to bars, cafés or on the streets; everyone goes home in the evening to watch the news or look at a film. The traditional

social life of men has largely disappeared, and men spend much more time with their family and in private life. Leisure culture and the media have converged in such a way that privileges pleasures enjoyed in the intimacy of the home. For the same reason, television has caused the attendance of cinema, sporting events and theatre to drop. Television has shattered traditional forms of social and public life in favour of the consumption of images within the home, and this trend will undoubtedly only become more pronounced as the number of familial receivers increases, such as video machines, internet, cable, what one can in short call 'fragmented television'. Access to information and images is becoming more and more personalized; there are greater possibilities for everyone to construct his own timetable and to escape from the homogeneity of media programming. From this point of view, the media appear to be as much an instrument for the creation of homogeneous, mass tastes as an instrument of individualization, and the privatization of life. In this context, and despite its obvious shortcomings, McLuhan's famous formula 'the medium is the message' seems to me correct.

Whatever sort of program is broadcast, it promotes the value of private life, the privatization of social life, the privileging of the individual above the collective, and therefore the promotion of individualism *à la carte*, i.e., post-modern individualism. This individualism is, however, paradoxical. Post-modern culture is a culture of hedonism and individual autonomy, but at the same time we find these individuals glued to their television screens even when they no longer derive any satisfaction from it. Choice and individual initiative are worshipped, but in France only one television viewer out of four decides which programme he will watch in advance. Switching on



the television is more a habit than a choice. Even if today one values interactivity and initiative, this individualism remains largely passive: the individual as consumer of images. Another important point: although the media contributes to hedonist individualism, it also contributes to the creation of insecurity: fears of pedophilia, fears of gaining weight, or fears of urban violence. Narcissistic individualism not only expresses itself in the cult of pleasure and self-fulfilment, but also in a collection of fears. Narcissus is both hedonistic and anxious. The media are obviously a determining force behind this phenomenon: it is through the media that we come to know about new risks, and they greatly amplify different sorts of danger.

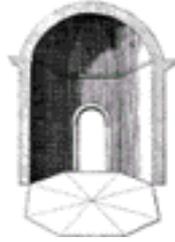
But not everything about this phenomenon of fear is mere show. I would like to insist on this point: the broadcasting of dangers can mobilize public opinion and force political powers and commercial companies to react more quickly. From this perspective, the media do not simply mask reality; they function more like an instrument which augments technological and scientific rationality and the refusal to accept fate. The media are another means of allowing individuals to react, to protest, to struggle, and therefore despite everything to be an actor in a world whose determining forces are increasingly outside our control. It is too often said that the media make citizens passive; in fact, the media also allow consumers to criticize products, to voice opinions, to exercise control again. Here the alarmism of the media contributes to people taking positions, taking active roles, and refusing to accept everything. One could also interpret the sensationalism of the media — excuse the Hegelian metaphor — as the cunning of individualist reason, i.e., a means to remobilize the choices, actions and standpoints of the individual agents that we are.

However, it is true that the media can sometimes create very exaggerated and groundless fears such as we have seen in the Coca-Cola affair or the case of gasoline in Perrier. Certain substances pose no health risk, and yet they generate anxiety

probably to a large extent due to the media, and of course it is here that it is necessary to reflect on the ethics of information and media ethics. I think that one should not delude oneself in regard to these cases. The imperative of sensationalism is the imperative to sell something and make money, and this will remain predominant in our societies, and therefore the world of the media will be marked by a double imperative: the imperative of sensationalism on the one hand, and the demands of ethics and the respect for information on the other.

The process by which the media work is not mechanical. There has been a panic concerning mad cow disease, but everybody knows that people are not going to stop eating beef. There are numerous campaigns concerning road safety highlighting the number of deaths and injuries caused by reckless or drunk driving. Whether these really change behaviour is uncertain. The same holds for campaigns against smoking targeting young people. Post-modern fear therefore has a variable geometry. It can be interpreted in terms of irresponsibility on the part of certain individuals working in the media, but at the same time it shows the limits of theorists who claim that the media are omnipotent. The omnipotence of the media is a myth like the myth of the omnipotence of advertising. In thinking about the emergence of privatized individualism, the media have often been analyzed as the destroyer of social relations, and as responsible for the disintegration of public space.

From the 1960s on, mass media communication has been presented as communication without response, as unilateral communication, which is ultimately a form of non-communication. Moreover, because the media are largely devoted to providing diversion to those withdrawn into private life, the media are regarded as one of the sources of post-modern depoliticization, of disengagement from politics and labour issues. Indeed, the sheer force of turning the political scene into a spectacle, of blurring the boundaries between politics and show business until matters of public interest become a kind of show tends to delegitimize and discredit the politico-media class. With television,



the different domains become confused, and this is said to lead to civic indifference and demotivation. I think that this is partly true, but is it anything more than that? In reality, collective commitments do not disappear. They assume some other form, with a more pragmatic flavour, less Manichean, less informed by political ideology.

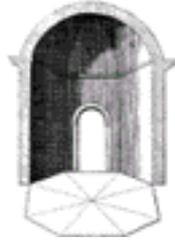
Paradoxically enough, there is a phenomenon of 'associationism' within cultures strongly marked by individualism. Four times as many associations have been created today in France than during the sixties. Military service is being phased out, but local commitments that affect everyday life and raise social issues remain firmly in place. The new age of individualism does not destroy every form of solidarity and social relationship. It reshapes them on new grounds closer to everyday experience and immediate interests, and therefore in function of limited objectives. I think that this form of engagement does not lead to a kind of retreat into the collective, because individuals are looking passionately for something to do, giving them something like a meaning of life which can no longer be found in large political movements, but are to be discovered elsewhere. I think the media have a positive role to play in this new development.

Second observation: it is undeniable that the different forms of individualism are accompanied by a dissatisfaction with militantism, and by a tendency to view politics as less than centrally important. The vast majority of citizens are little concerned with political life; they are hardly gripped by global issues, and political options do not capture their interest. There are more viewers for football matches on television than there are for political debates during election campaigns. But this does not show that there is a systematic lack of interest in political life. It rather shows that political participation has become selective. What has changed is that citizens are not motivated by a political categorical imperative, but instead by choice in function of what they consider important at a given moment. On the other hand, in comparison with the past, television permits a much

greater number of citizens to gain access to the political field. Of course, the television image tends strongly towards simplification, towards turning politics into a spectacle, towards the production of sound-bites. Image replaces ideology and the seduction of argumentation. But, thanks to television and the attractions of the media, at least everybody knows about the political debates and objections; they are now within everyone's reach. Therefore, far from causing public space to disintegrate, the media help open it up to a vast number of people by desacralizing the political spectacle.

The media are an instrument for democratizing public space: without the media, it would be a monopoly of a minority, the minority of political parties. In fact, there is no denaturalization or perversion of public space going on here. What we have is rather a restructuring of public space as the importance of political parties declines. It is a transition from a democracy of political parties to a public democracy. In post-modern societies, more and more voters change their votes from one election to another. They refuse to identify themselves with any political party. At the same time, voters are increasingly voting for a person, and not only for a party or a political programme. All post-modern societies are marked by a personalization of power: political parties do not disappear, but legislative elections revolve around certain political figures and personalities. This personalization of power is inseparable from the media, especially the televisual image. Thanks to television, a candidate can make himself known to the populace directly, without first having to deal with militant organizations. At the same time, television selects for certain types of qualities and talents. It favours those who master the techniques of communication. The age of militants and party hard-liners seems to be fading, if not disappearing altogether. With television, public space is dominated by communication experts, and by the demands of communication.

An equally important point: television provides all individuals with more or less the same



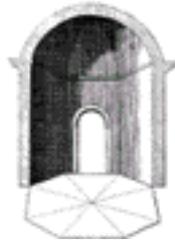
information. This was not the case when the press was largely in the hands of political parties. The media contributes to the emancipation of individuals in regard to political parties. This translates into a greater mobility on the part of voters, less fixed ideological commitments, less strong identification with family politics, a greater freedom of voters in regard to party rules and disciplines, but also greater hesitation at the moment of voting, greater electoral instability. Again, this phenomenon is inseparable from the media, which is itself increasingly independent from any political party. Instead of receiving information through some partisan channel that is constantly reinforcing the worldview of a political party, the citizen is exposed to diverse opinions and is quicker to change his own opinion. In this sense, the media do not lead to the deterioration of public space; they individualize it and place it in a state of instability, indecision and mobility.

In the face of these phenomena, many will point out that while political parties are indeed losing their power to influence, this plays into the hand of the power of the media, which controls, leads, creates opinion, and tells us how to think about things. But how powerful is the power of the media? Is it as strong as the power associated with political groups in the past? Take one example which strikes me as particularly revealing: the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. What happened there? For months and months, the press in the United States continually condemned, accused and tried to bury Clinton politically. The majority of the press were favourable towards Clinton at the start, but became more and more hostile as the details of the affair were revealed. And yet, whatever citizens may have thought about Clinton as a person, the public opinion remained remarkably stable, in favour of Clinton staying on in the White House. The most formidable media machine in the world did not succeed at changing the opinion of Americans. This extremely revealing case shows, I think, the limits of the power of the media.

There have been many analyses of the consequences and dangers of the media turning demo-

cratic life into a spectacle. But there are other dangers brewing: take the scandals involving politicians and the banking community. The media tell us to withdraw our confidence in public institutions and those who work for them. So we see the rise of scepticism, discredit, loss of confidence in politics connected to the collapse of ideologies, the incapacity of governments to deal with basic problems such as unemployment, the increase of corruption scandals which in turn encourages the post-modern mistrust of politics. The detachment of individuals from politics and the discrediting of politics can foster extreme right-wing parties such as those in France, Austria and Belgium. The media are not the cause of all this, but they can nevertheless contribute to the success of populist and extreme right-wing movements by taking away our confidence in politicians and democratic institutions. This is a serious matter, but it does not justify a purely negative view of the media, since they also serve to consolidate democracy. Even the relative success of extreme right-wing movements in Europe does not disrupt this schema.

For the first time in their history, democracies have no project other than that of liberal democracy. There are no more political parties whose programme includes the violent destruction of democracy. No political party seeks the overturning of democracy through political violence, and this is a new and radical historical development. The extreme right is not going to go away tomorrow, but I think everything indicates that it will remain a marginal phenomenon incapable of subverting liberal democratic culture like it did during the 1930s. What happened in France with the National Front will likely repeat itself elsewhere, albeit in a different way. On the one hand, the media discredit politics in a way which can support the growth of the extreme right, but on the other hand they help to limit the growth from spreading over the populace and subverting liberal democracy. Why? Because post-modern media work to undermine attachments to any particular system of thought or belief. The media instigate an allergic reaction to totalizing



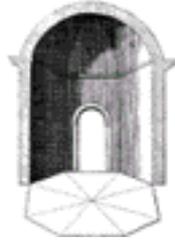
visions of the world. At the same time, they generalize the spirit of pragmatism and mobility, the taste for individual autonomy, private freedoms and living life in the present. While it is true that this does not protect us against xenophobia, it is our best protection against the fanaticism of the masses, the subversion of liberal democracy, and political violence. Spectacle, frivolous attractions, and the glorification of happiness and choice are blessings for liberal democracy, and not its undoing.

What we are seeing more and more is that the relation of individuals to politics is breaking away from the domination of political parties, and I believe the same tendency towards de-institutionalization can be observed in the new forms of collectivity in our societies, and I would like to conclude with this point. I am thinking of the sort of social movement which accompanied the death of Princess Diana, the rise of techno-raves, the million young people gathered in Berlin, the World Cup, the World Youth Day that was held in Paris, or the million young people who attended the visit of the Pope. All these movements are collective. But at the same time they are also reflections of post-modern desires, individual autonomy, self-expression and the decreasing power of the grip that institutions have over individuals. Individuals mobilize themselves without making any institutional commitment, i.e., they are operating outside any pre-programmed time, space or commandments. They mobilize themselves when it interests them, and not because it is imposed upon them by some hierarchy, tradition or organization. We can see everywhere a rise in de-institutionalized, de-contextualized behaviour, behaviour that is unforeseeable at least as far as the magnitude of the behaviour is concerned. No one could have predicted the explosion of collective joy that came in the wake of the French victory in the World Cup. It is only in civil society that such movements spontaneously arise, not within large political or religious institutions. But it is nevertheless true that these movements are inseparable from the phenomenon of media events. Collective movements and the media go together

from now on. Contemporary public space is more and more organized in function of media images and information.

It is true that the media have the effect of making public space empty, or at least certain forms of public space. But they can also contribute to the reconstitution of the collectivity into a unity, even if it is largely in the mode of a simulacra. But the collectivity itself is not a simulacra; the media do not create these collective movements by themselves. The media sensitize opinion and amplify phenomena, but do not have the power to govern and lead opinion. One example: even if all the media had decided to broadcast the world championships of table tennis or volleyball live, nothing like what happened with the World Cup would have taken place. Tastes are not manufactured by the media; the media can only expand on them. Or again, every year in France there is a 24-hour telethon ('téléton') which raises funds for cancer research; it has been a great success for the last 7 or 8 years. On the other hand, when they tried to raise money in the same way for Aids, it did not work. The media proposes; it is public opinion that disposes.

I will end with these final points. Initially, individualist modern societies were organized around the politicization of public space, around the construction of the future and constructive ideology. In a second phase, the post-modern phase, public space became organized by the media and emotional mobilization. In other words, in the second phase priority is given to de-institutionalized engagement, direct experience and the expression of sentiments in public space itself, and not just the expression of ideas belonging to one or another form of political identity. In a word, we are dealing with a culture marked by public mass emotion. After a rationalist, rigid and ideological era of public space, we now find ourselves at a new stage, a stage where public space is dynamic, explosive and emotional. All of what I have been saying leads me to depart from Popper when he defends the idea that the power of television has replaced the power of God, such is



the immensity of its power. I have tried to show very briefly that there is no omnipotence of the media, and television in particular. It is not true that it prevents children from making the distinction between fiction and reality, and no one has succeeded in proving that television is a significant cause of physical violence. To my mind, television rather seems to replace excommunication with communication, violence with seduction, and the rigidity of rationality with emotionality. In this sense, television contributes more to the pacification of democratic space than to its destruction.

We should stop demonizing the media in general, and television in particular, because they are not omnipotent and they are not the incarnation of evil. The media annihilate neither the individual nor public space; they contribute rather to the construction of a post-modern individualism and public space, which are less subjected to political and ideological machinery, and which can contribute to dynamic, post-ideological and emotionally charged social movements, movements dominated by the ephemeral and aspirations of self-expression. The media work to construct post-modern democracies in step with the individualist desires for autonomy and emotional self-expression.