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Electronic Media and Critical Thinking

Abstract

The development of civilization is in a specific way indivisible from the development of media as a means of communication through technology. This development has always depended on previous achievements as well as on societal relations and newly created human needs. After print, which helped create parliamentary democracy, civil society and the free individual, electronic media have completely occupied the realm of communication in developed societies. To understand its nature, we have to understand the context in which this phenomenon has occurred and developed. This is highly developed liberal capitalism, which, by the power of its “invisible hand”, regulates relations between human beings, turning them into addicts, primarily dependent on visual media, but also on all other constant, immediately available stimuli.

Key words: *printed media, electronic media, critical thinking, images, liberal capitalism, technology, market.*

The importance of the technology-based media had been noted a long time ago in human history. Already at the time of the Roman Empire, thanks to script and, primarily, papyrus, societal relations were regulated by written laws, even in the outermost provinces. A wide range of laws, comprising the legal system, was created in place of a rudimentary, custom-based oral tradition. The terms and categories derived from that system still constitute the basis of legally regulated relations both in Europe and in societies based on the European spirit, notably those in North America.

However, the use of the media reached its full revolutionary potential at the time of the Reformation and the invention of the Gutenberg printing press. Asa Briggs and Peter Burke correctly note that the Gutenberg printing press not only enabled Martin Luther to realise his ideas, but that it also saved his life.⁸³ Luther's ideas came to life in pamphlets, brochures and other printed matter so that his execution in the manner of that of Jan Hus would have been pointless, and probably counterproductive. The Reformation movement thus flourished, giving rise to Protestantism and the development of the German language, into which Luther translated the Bible. This development set a precondition for the creation of the German nation and the evolution of education, debates and literacy. Moreover, the phenomenon today referred to as public opinion started to emerge due to local referendums by which the people opted for either the Protestant or the Catholic Church.

Changes at the time of the Reformation, no matter how big or revolutionary they were (especially in the context of the period), nevertheless took place in the spiritual realm of religion, or dogma. In fact, literacy and education made possible the reading and understanding of religious texts, notably the Bible. The knowledge held by priests was not relevant anymore, the priest (even the Pope) no longer acted as an intermediary in the communication with God. Relevant arguments could be found in the Bible, so the Catholic Church no longer interfered by means of discussion, polemics or pamphlets, the favourite media form of the Protestants, but used images instead. Image versus text, emotions versus arguments. A brilliant defence against the strong arguments of the adversary. We know that educated Catholic priests read Aristotle and understood the relations between the values of ethos, logos and, in particular, pathos in polemics⁸⁴.

Epochal changes that motivated man to abandon dogma and start relying on reason and science took place later, during the time of the Enlightenment. The main medium of the French Encyclopedists was print. However, at that point print did not annul the old dogma, compromised by secular thinking, in order to establish a new one. In fact, the philosophers of the Enlightenment annulled dogma itself and its source, religion. Encyclopaedias, which started to be printed in that period, were the first books whose content was based exclusively on scientific knowledge. For the first time in history, man, relying on reason, relies on himself and, according to Kant, grows out of his self-

83 Asa Briggs, Peter Burke, *A Social History of Media*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK 2005, p. 63.

84 The current relevance of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is supported by the findings of the extensive studies of persuasive communications, known as the Yale Studies. For more information see: Michael Kunczik, Astrid Zipfel, *Uvod u znanost o medijima i komunikologiju (Introduction to the Science of Publicism and Communications)*, Zaklada Friedrich Ebert, Zagreb, 2006, pp. 161-171.

imposed immaturity. The Copernican Revolution would have been impossible without print⁸⁵. Man made his first independent step during the Enlightenment. But that first step, invisibly linked to the distant past, began dismantling the old structures of religion, dogma, customs and tradition. The Age of Reason, still supported by common sense, started to emerge with the help of the media, creating conditions for the industrial revolution and the establishment of civic national states. Daily newspapers with high circulation were printed in Europe and North America already at the end of the 18th century. At the time of gaining independence, the United States of America had around two and a half million inhabitants, and the brochure *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine was sold in more than one hundred thousand copies!

Everything that was taking place during the Reformation as a part of the religious conflict now took the form of a conflict of man with his own past. However, at the time public opinion was not created through the conflict of two interpretations of religion, but through the conflict between the unchangeable past and a promising future. Isaac Newton changed the perception of nature – a stone that is thrown does not fall on the ground because it has to go back to its destined place, but due to gravitation. The discovery of the laws of nature made it possible for man to use them for his own benefit. Galvani's bizarre accusations with which he aimed to discredit Volta, relying on religion and the divine origin of the world (and slightly threatening him), constitute one of the last scientific polemics that comprised the subject of religion (even though religion was irrelevant to the polemic itself).

The industrial and scientific revolutions took place at the same time as the creation of parliamentary democracy. Without a technologically perfected medium, print, none of these phenomena would have been possible. This is referenced by Francis Balle, who considers the merchant class and the media to be the main forces which deprived the then privileged class of their power and privileges, primarily in the area of knowledge⁸⁶. The media disseminated information to everyone and enabled discussions, polemics and argumentation. They created a new image of the world, based on knowledge, and made it easily available. In short, it was the media that created public opinion. Thanks to the media, we can define the common good and we can choose the best among us to defend it. The conditions were created for parliamentary democracy. The fate of liberal democracy is closely connected to the fate of the media.

This is where the praise of the media ends, but a critical discussion on the subject continues. Balle thinks that in the second phase the media betrayed the ideals for which they had fought. He wonders whether the media succumbed to the market and started to destroy the very thing they had built – the democratic order based on the respect of values, public opinion and minorities. According to Balle, too much information kills information⁸⁷. A situation in which all ideas are equal and readily

85 For the importance of print as a medium at the time of the Enlightenment and as a basis for the forthcoming industrial revolution see: A. Briggs, P. Burke, *A Social History of Media*, p. 79 and onwards.

86 Francis Balle, *Moć medija (The Power of Media)*, Clio, Belgrade, 1997., p. 11 and 12.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 13, pp. 47-62.

available in the media creates a vast abundance of information where a banal, almost meaningless piece of information consumes a relevant one. Due to the desire to please the public, which is the main characteristic of the contemporary media, the banal piece of information is highlighted at the expense of the relevant one. Balle's final thesis evidently reflects our own age, the age that we live in: the age of the electronic media.

This short historical introduction, which is just an outline of the development of the media in the Western civilisation, was necessary to place the media in general and the electronic media in particular in the context of human society. It is important to note that the media, as an invention, a technology, developed when there was a need for them and formed in a way that could satisfy that need. For instance, the famous disc from Crete, which is about 4 000 years old, contains characters of a script that never came to life because at that time there was no need to permanently record ideas and information.⁸⁸ The electronic media reached their full potential in the very places where they were created, in the developed countries of the Western civilisation, where they also became the first real media of mass communication.

The electronic media, as the mass media, if we focus on their meaning in our everyday life, represent the abandonment of what Marshall McLuhan calls a typographic culture,⁸⁹ a culture of text. The culture of text is based on reading and thinking, the activities that require memorising what is read and moving on towards the new, a new sentence, a new thought, memorising it and moving on again. In the typographic culture, critical thinking is not necessary, but the typographic culture is its precondition. Instead of by the text, ideas or rational content, the electronic media is dominated by images. Visual communication is back, for the first time since the Catholic Counter-Reformation, but this time it is a dominant, all-encompassing form of communication, easily accessible to all.

During the Counter-Reformation, but also as a part of tradition, especially in art, the image was a representation of reality, whether it represented nature, such as a landscape, for example, a portrait, or Jesus on the Cross. Every time it depicts a reality that we experience directly or create in our mind, believing it exists. It contains strong emotional values, which are the stronger the more we are familiar with the culture to which the image belongs. When we understand the context in which the image appears, we can understand the image itself, such as the Last Supper. If we are not familiar with the culture we will not be able to experience the image, or it will leave us indifferent. But another person familiar with the context of the image will be strongly emotionally affected. When we observe an image we project on it what we already know, and we understand it and experience it depending on the extent of our (previously acquired) knowledge. In other words, an image cannot tell us what we do not already know, as Sartre already established.

88 For more information about inventions and the development and reception of the technology and the media, see the brilliant book by Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, W. W. Norton & Comp. New York, London, 1999, pp. 239-264.

89 Marshall McLuhan, *Razumijevanje medija (Understanding Media)*, Golden Marketing – Tehnička knjiga, Zagreb, 2008, the chapter *Medium is the Message*, pp. 13-24.

And what can be said about the image in the context of the electronic media? This is an important question because, as previously mentioned, the electronic media made reflexion, text and the typographic culture succumb to the image. Like in the previous periods of human history, in order to be able to understand the value of the image today one has to understand the contemporary context in which it appears, and not only the context of the media.

This newly created social context started developing in the sixties, the age of radio, television, daily press and various magazines. In the second half of the twentieth century McLuhan writes about the global embrace (of the media, of course), Guy Debord about the society of the spectacle and Baudrillard about simulacra. Most philosophers are critical towards the future, recognising that the media are crucial for the understanding of the new culture. However, they do not offer a deeper understanding of the media culture and often merely describe the media and their influence (often detrimental) on the fundamental human values. However, some developments in the area of economy can shed more light on the present.

The first phenomenon is the expansion of capital into areas in which it did not function well before, the areas of culture, politics and criticism (for example, the aforementioned Francis Balle points out parallel, separate movements towards the free market on the one hand and liberal democracy on the other). Capital was certainly always present in those areas, but never fully. In the area of politics capital was a prompter, not the main actor, in the area of culture it created its own space, the space of mass culture, and it feared criticism and put up a rather weak defence against it. The poem *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg ended up in court, John Lennon for years resisted covert actions of the American secret service and the fear of communism resulted in cultural purges. In the West, the sixties were the years of conflict addressed by the police; subcultural movements were an unexpected novelty (because they were not based on programmes but on feelings) that nobody could recognize or understand. The emergence of terrorism in Europe in the seventies caused confusion. A large percentage of German citizens supported terrorists' views and many even offered them a refuge from the police. The public opinion was divided, but so were the media, in line with the real division in the society.

Just a quick glance at our time helps us see the difference. Capital is no longer a prompter, it has become the main actor, a billionaire with no experience in politics has become the president. The criticism of the inhumane society based on profit and capital is an ever-present subject in movies, series and books that become bestsellers and generate huge profit for publishers. The interpretations of the social phenomena barely differ from each other, the things that should be judged are judged unanimously along with an overblown political correctness, which regulates how and what we should think. If we cannot change the world in reality, we can change it in people's minds – it is the former political left that took over that pitiful and degrading role. The fundamental achievements of our civilisation, the legal system, the freedom of speech, the control and creation of state institutions, the participation in the main affairs of general interest, the definition of the general interest etc., all of

that, in a way that not even Adam Smith could have imagined, has been taken over by an “invisible hand” in order to facilitate our everyday life and allow us to enjoy the spectacle. The production and distribution of shoes and corn are indeed ancient and nowadays ineffective and irrelevant tasks of the self-regulating market.

The other phenomenon is even more interesting. It is called financial capital. It refers to money and securities stored in banks, insurance companies and similar institutions. Economists from previous periods were familiar with this form of capital too, only that they called it fictitious capital. Probably because it is fictitious⁹⁰. In other words, capital is a process and it proves itself as capital only in movement, investment, production and sales of goods or services. Nothing has changed in that aspect so far. In his work *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* Thomas Piketty cites an example of a central bank that has lent fresh capital to failed banks⁹¹. The problem is, explains Piketty, that this is far from a solution. That money will remain fictitious until it is turned into capital by investing in (profitable) production, in other words, when it starts moving. Only then can the economy of a country improve, depending on the profitability of the investment and other factors. Banks are nothing but storages of fictitious capital which realises its potential value by investment and movement. However, today capital regards itself as goods. These cannibalistic phenomena are called derivatives and they involve betting, gambling with diverse value packages consisting of fictitious capital according to the principle of the Ponzi scheme⁹². Derivatives do generate short-term profit, but every child that has played the “chain of luck” game could probably say something about their long-term effects. Are these phenomena related to the media?

The overproduction of shoes, cars, cell phones and medicines, as well as electronics and media content, is a consequence of market saturation, which poses a serious threat to capital. This is why capital turns to areas where it was not present before and creates new needs in the most bizarre ways. There is no difference between the latest iPhone model and the one four generations ago, except for the placement of some button and the width of the black line framing the image. Older technologically advanced computers and cell phones cannot be updated with new software and so the users are forced to buy the same, but newer devices. From a rational point of view, production becomes meaningless and an end in itself. The Danes export cookies to America, the Americans export cookies to Denmark. Tankers filled with oil transport the precious cookies in both directions. An economist has once asked: “Why don’t they exchange recipes?”. The speed of capital turnover used to be measured by the mathematical dimension of time, the faster the better. Nowadays the situation is reversed, time is measured by the speed of capital turnover. Time is what is measured by the interval between the current and the new iPhone, the current and the new application, the current and the new season of a TV show, a new model of Nike trainers, a new car model...

90 Karl Marx, *Kapital III (Capital, Volume III)*, Zagreb, 1948, p. 357.

91 Thomas Piketty, *Kapital u 21. stoljeću (Capital in the Twenty-First Century)*, Profil, Zagreb, 2014, p. 649. and onwards.

92 The amount of money that the lender or the winning gambler makes does multiply by lending and usury (and even by gambling) without the intermediation of production. However, no society, not even a capitalistic one, is functioning or can function on the basis of such a type of “production”.

Market saturation and incredibly fast changes, occurring primarily due to scientific and technological advances in all kinds of consumer products, and in media products in particular, have twofold consequences – first, they provide constant and intense sensations that fulfil the everyday life of individuals, and second, they create such a complex image of the world that we are made to feel inadequate to participate in it except as passive observers and users. The mechanical age is a thing of the past. Even the simplest peasant could plant a potato, shoe a horse or pick a plum. In short, he governed his own life, even though he was not free, being tied to the land and limited by religious and traditional rules. It should be kept in mind that if we, as individuals, such as we are, went back to the past, our knowledge would be of no use to him. We are consumers of contemporary technological achievements, but not their creators. We do not know how to create electricity, how to make a cell phone, how to produce a petrol engine or an antibiotic. We only know how to use them.

The need for constant and ever-changing external stimuli has become dominant. The members of the Frankfurt School, the above-mentioned Guy Debord and Baudrillard, talked about that need, but only in relation to the old media, namely television, print and film. But it is the newest media, the smartphone created by Steve Jobs, that made McLuhan's thesis about the extension of our senses a reality. The smartphone was the first to allow for numerous, constant, ever-present external stimuli. Images, videos, texts ... all the time and in real time. How old fashioned it sounds when we think of television broadcast, even with hundreds of channels, of having to wait for the news, a movie or a TV show, having to sit in the room with a TV set, having to wait for twenty-four hours for the next cycle of news or seven days for the new episode of a TV show, having to go to the video store to find a new movie...and being able to only dream of uploading photos or videos showing our pets!

The fact that the image is a dominant form of media content is not a coincidence at all. Emotions and the speed of perception are crucial communication criteria. Cognition and reflection are demanding activities, carrying a lower emotional value, and they last too long. The image, unlike the thought, already contains an opinion, an idea and an intellectual value. Wittgenstein's concept of the picture⁹³, which is different from reality, facts and opinions, is reduced to one thing, to the image in the literal sense of the word. The image becomes a reality, a fact and an opinion. The logic of the image, which is the basis for establishing the truth, is also, according to Wittgenstein, a part of the image. However, today in the interaction of an individual with an image no questioning, thinking or reasoning takes place. The image has become a natural, self-explanatory environment that we react to by accepting it or rejecting it. Just as an animal expects to live in a natural environment and chooses what suits its needs, so does the man of the new media choose what he wants and discards what does not suit him. He does not question the origin of the technological environment and its

93 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Veselin Masleša – Svjetlost, Sarajevo, 1978 (especially pp. 35-39). Since nowadays the picture theory has been assimilated by many different theories, Wittgenstein is often cited with different degrees of understanding. What is interesting for us here is his (tentatively speaking) cognitive theory and the breakdown of reality – fact – image – opinion – truth, not for the purpose of discussing it or agreeing with it, but for the purpose of establishing to what extent the image, in the current dominant perception of the world, has been vulgarly reduced to a self-evident pleasure.

meaning because he is satisfied with what that environment can offer him and feels completely fulfilled by it. The image of my media is the image of my world, the image of me. Never before has a medium been able to produce a one-dimensional and easily reachable, but exciting “truth” in such a fast, versatile and efficient way.

At the age of television, in the sixties, faced with the evident emergence of the electronic media, Friedrich Dürrenmatt wrote his famous play “The Physicists”. The domain of thinking is still extant, the themes are responsibility and science, man is in a new, unknown, technological space, which causes anxiety and insecurity. The possibilities are open because self-reflection still exists, the awareness of man as a subject, although lost, in the world he has built. The curtain that closes at the end of the play closed on an epoch in which the power of thought was considered an important human strength. Fictional heroes created by, for example, Michel Houellebecq, Jonathan Franzen, Elisabeth Strout and Karl Ove Knausgård, live in anxiety as in a self-evident space. Anxiety is not thematised as just one of several possible spaces; it is not even considered a subject. Dürrenmatt’s questioning would today be anachronistic and it would sound grotesque.

Thinking in general, thinking as such, is a precondition for critical thinking. The latter differs from the former only by the fact that it understands the whole and places a social phenomenon, an art work, a political fact, etc. in a historical context in which it appears as a subject. The context of our civilisation is always a historical consequence of the activity of our ancestors. Régis Debray divides the domain of human communication into communication, specific to both people and animals, and transmission, communication through history, specific only to people⁹⁴. Transmission is a condition of human progress and enables man to exist as a historical being. I would add that the understanding of transmission, not only as communication but as a meaningful movement, as human history, is a task of critical thinking.

Banking deregulation, the aggressive expansion of capital into the areas of politics, culture and decision-making on the common good, the emergence of the electronic media in their final form (additional technological innovations are less important because they are used to finalise what has mainly been completed), the creation of financial capital as an incessantly ticking time bomb with an invisible dial, these are all the phenomena that take place at the same time as the opening of doors to liberal capitalism, as conceived by Milton Friedman⁹⁵. Friedman’s idea is not the most deplorable one in the history of mankind, but it is definitely the most deplorable idea that took over the world, with the exception of extreme situations when psychopaths seized power. Natural resources are wasted in the name of their protection, freedom equals arbitrariness, entrepreneurial freedom is a guarantee of freedom in general, the surplus of value does not exist because human labour is complex, the problem of market intermediation and alienation is not discussed at all...

94 Régis Debray, *Uvod u mediologiju (Introduction to Mediology)*, Clio, Belgrade, 2000, available in summary at: <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1999/08/DEBRAY/3178>.

95 Milton Friedman, *Kapitalizam i sloboda (Capitalism and Freedom)*, Globus nakladni zavod, Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 1992.

The beginning of thinking in the minds of Milton Friedman and his followers Margaret Thatcher⁹⁶ and Ronald Reagan marks the end of thinking in general. While approximately fifty years ago the invisible hand was only taking crumbs from the table of human liberty, it has now obviously grabbed the whole cake.

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96 The extent to which current liberalism bases its power on the strength of capital liberated from the yoke of criticism, rather than on its theoretical value, is shown by the fact that the main liberalistic opinions were criticized, with great success, a hundred and fifty years ago. For example, Margaret Thatcher is remembered by her statement (which forms the basis of liberal philosophy): "There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women, and there are families". Here is what Marx responded to Thatcher about one hundred and fifty years before she made that statement: "(It is) the same as if someone said: From the point of view of society there are neither slaves nor citizens, they are all human beings. On the contrary, they are slaves and citizens outside the society. Being a slave and being a citizen are socially determined categories.", Karl Marx, *Temelji slobode (The Foundations of Freedom)*, Naprijed, Zagreb, 1974, p. 89).

Elektronički mediji i kritičko mišljenje

Sažetak

Razvoj zapadne civilizacije na poseban način u sebi sadrži i razvoj medija kao tehnološki posredovane komunikacije. Razvoj je uvijek ovisio kako o prethodnim dostignućima tako i o društvenim odnosima i novostvorenim ljudskim potrebama. Nakon tiska koji je pomogao stvoriti parlamentarnu demokraciju, građansko društvo i slobodnog pojedinca, elektronički je medij u cijelosti zauzeo komunikacijski prostor u razvijenim društvima. No, njegovu prirodu ne možemo razumjeti ako ne razumijemo kontekst u kojem se pojavljuje i razvija. To je visokorazvijeni liberalni kapitalizam koji „nevidljivom rukom“ regulira odnose među ljudima pretvarajući ih ovisnike o, prije svega slikovnim, ali i ostalim trajnim, trenutačno dostupnim podražajima.

Ključne riječi: tiskani medij, elektronički medij, kritičko mišljenje, slika, liberalni kapitalizam, tehnologija, tržište.



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