

Marc Raboy

**AGENTS OF DEMOCRATIZATION
OR AGENTS OF POWER?
THE CONTRADICTIONARY ROLE
OF MASS MEDIA IN THE WEST**

**Introduction:
Media, Democracy and Power**

As the organizers of the Minsk colloquium correctly stated in their program statement, each of the social subjects that interest us — public opinion, media, power institutions — can be effectively used as institutions of either democracy or totalitarianism, as the history of the 20th century has demonstrated.

As we come closer to the dawn of the 21st century, the contradictions inherent in the role of each of these, with respect to the democratization process, becomes increasingly obscure.

In my paper, I shall focus on some of the contradictory aspects of mass media operations in the Western context¹, with particular emphasis on Canada — a country of contradictions if there ever was one! I do this, because that is the situation with which I am most familiar; but I do it also in the awareness that our countries are often being held up nowadays as models to emulate by the emerging democracies in Eastern Europe. My concern, therefore, is that my East European colleagues be as fully conscious as possible of the pitfalls in which democrats in the West are often swallowed up — pitfalls I characterize as lying «between the market and the state».

In the most general sense, it is important to realize that our media systems are not the utopian institutions of freedom and democracy that they are supposed to be, according to the tenets of liberal discourse. «Public opinion», to take one example that

¹ *Enzensberger H. M.* Constituents of the Theory of the Media // *New Left Review*. — 1970.

concerns the organizers of this colloquium, is an ambiguous notion at best. Although it is deemed to be one of the fundamental mechanisms and guiding principles of political life in Western democracies, public opinion is, according to a recent article by a Quebec communications scholar, «a legal fiction expressed as a statistical fiction». It is at one and the same time a check on authority, a legitimation of political domination, an instrument of the exercise of power and an object of manipulation¹. A vast literature in the West attests to the various problems associated with the use of public opinion polls and their impact on governments, political parties and voters at election time, for example.

The media of mass communication — press, radio, and television — are among the most important institutions of modern society. The media shape the way we see the world. They structure public debate, placing certain items on the public agenda at the expense of others. They provide information, and disinformation, that privileged sources want to see circulated. Most of the time, most of what most people know about life beyond their immediate communities comes from the media.

Media are institutions of power. The democratic revolutions of the 18th century recognized this and held up the notion of a «free press» as crucial to the liberation of humanity from the yoke of despotism. The bolshevik revolutions of the 20th century recognized this and saw the press as an agent of the party and the state in the class struggle that would culminate in social equality². It is important that we recognize this, and that we recognize as well that in both the models of «East» and «West» these ideals have been betrayed. Media have served as institutions of power, period, their emancipatory potential hijacked in the interests of economic and political elites. In the West, the performance of the media during the 1991 Persian Gulf War illustrated this conclusively³.

¹ Tremblay G. *L'opinion publique // Communication publique et societe.* — Boucherville, 1991.

² *Communication For and Against Democracy.* — Montreal, 1989.

³ *Reporting the Gulf War //Media Development.* — 1991, October (special issue); *Medias, societes et democratie // Le Monde diplomatique.* — 1991, May.

The Persian Gulf War: A Case in Point

Media coverage of the Gulf War must be placed in its historic context¹. During the single year 1989, the global mediatization of political crises reached saturation point. Live television coverage of the different manifestations of the pending collapse of the iron curtain suggested to the viewers of the world that «the civic function of televised information (is) precisely to go beyond appearances and reveal the real nature of a society»².

With the outbreak of the Persian Gulf crisis in August 1990, people expected the kind of coverage they had become accustomed to in Berlin, Beijing, and Bucharest. The audience was primed. The technology was in place. But there was a major difference: information here was subject to pre-media control.

In the crises of 1989, the global media were tacitly supportive of the forces provoking the crisis. The contrary was the case in the Gulf War. Proliferation of images in one case, silence and blackout in the other. Even so, can we really claim that «being there» through the eye of the camera provides meaningful information, usable in the exercise of democratic citizenship? For local populations perhaps. If publics were to be informed of pending political choices, rather than after the fact, their intervention could perhaps influence those choices. As it is, we are generally allowed to see only that which we can no longer do more than absorb. This is consumerism in its purest form.

In the case of the Gulf War, television audiences were reduced to unabashed voyeurism. Journalists were, in the best of cases, witnesses. CNN's famous announcement of the start of the bombing of Baghdad was a virtual exercise in *non-communication* (to parody Lasswell): it could not communicate with any degree of accuracy who was bombing,

¹ Raboy M., Dagenais B. Media and the Politics of Crisis // Media, Crisis and Democracy. — (Forthcoming).

² Ramonet J. La television loin des fronts // Le Monde diplomatique. — 1991, February.

what, with what means and to what effect¹. Yet CNN set the standard.

Never before did an international event generate so much media coverage — and so little information — so much media criticism — and so little understanding. Almost immediately, the role of the media became the story — in some respects even «bigger», more controversial, than the story of the war itself, as if to say: «We know we have little input to policy processes; but we *feel* like participants because of our consumption of media. Perhaps if we take a critical approach to media, we can feel we are helping to make policy as well».

The speed with which media coverage of the crisis shifted from the story itself to the «media-in-the-story» was truly stunning. The war period of January 16 — March 5, especially, produced an outpouring of hundreds of press articles and countless audiovisual reports about the media. If the media were unable to cover the war, they made up for it by covering themselves.

Critics concurred that the missing ingredient of the war coverage was the war itself. Coverage was of the *crisis*, in the abstract. If nothing else, the Gulf War demonstrated once and for all the communicative incapacity of television and the continued importance of print media, especially independent ones however small and marginal, as means of reflective information. Critical readers could put together a reasonable picture by carefully reading some of the elite mainstream press as well, but television «informed» only in the crudest sense, giving viewers nothing to hang on to: «Overinformation led to disinformation. The avalanche of news, often unprocessed, broadcast 'live and in real time', made viewers hysterical with the illusion that they were being informed».

Management of information in wartime is 150 years old. But never before were we able to give ourselves such an *illusion* of being informed. In this respect, television coverage of the Persian Gulf War was purely ideological in the Althusserian sense of ideology as «a representation of the imaginary relationship of

¹ Ibid.

individuals to their real conditions of existence»¹. During the Gulf War, the Western media become not a forum for public discussion of policy issues, but a means of massaging the public with reassurances that the authorities had the crisis well in hand.

The tendency was thus for most people to think as they were told, prompting one Canadian critic to remark: «This represents a historic triumph for propaganda; it no longer needs to bother suppressing or distorting inconvenient facts»². Significantly, the strongest criticism *in* the media was leveled *at* the media. Characterizing the press as «a clique applauding the American generals and politicians in charge», and television as «the most egregious official lap dog during the war», Anthony Lewis wrote in «The New York Times» that government control and censorship alone could not explain the media's performance: «We glorified war and accepted its political premise, forsaking the independence and skepticism that justify freedom of the press»³. Lewis Lapham, meanwhile, wrote in «Harper's Magazine», that the bulk of the war coverage «was distinguished by its historical carelessness and its grotesque hyperbole», concluding that «a servile press is a circus act, as loudly and laughingly cheered by a military dictatorship as by a democratic republic»⁴. How far is this from totalitarianism?

The Limitations of the Western Model

The Gulf War drove home the emptiness of Western media news coverage, especially television, as well as the extent to which media spectacle has substituted for public participation in political life. The Western media's role in promoting uncritically the official government positions on the Gulf War showed that the free-market model is not necessarily an «alternative» to monolithic state or party-controlled media. The difference, however, is that the latter has now been universally

¹ *Althusser L.* Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses // Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays. — New York, 1971.

² *Salutin R.* Thoughts of a Gulf War Watcher // This Magazine. — 1991, May.

³ *Lewis A.* «To see ourselves...» // The New York Times. — 1991, May 6.

⁴ *Lapham L.* Trained Seals and Sitting Ducks // Harper's Magazine. — 1991, May.

discredited. It is important, in this context, that we pay even closer attention to the serious *structural* limitations of the former.

The main limitation is rooted in the inadequacy of the market mechanism for dealing with the sphere of communication and culture. The market may very well be more efficient than the planned economy for bringing shoes from the factory to the consumer, but the media deal in ideas, not shoes. The first problem with market-oriented media is that they turn information into commodity, packaging and presenting it with its eventual consumption in mind. The well-established myth of «objectivity» in journalistic reporting, for example, is only partly rooted in the natural biases of all reporters and their tendency to reproduce the ideology of the corporations that employ them. Far more insidious is the fact that market-oriented media must seek to maximize the size of their market, and must package their product with this in mind. The intercorporate connections between media and the state ensure the rest.

When media are subjected to the market principle, the consumption of media products becomes just another form of consumption. The rampant sensationalism that is found in Western media is the result of the need to create ever more spectacular formats to capture and titillate audiences. Information as spectacle becomes part of the entertainment industry. It has nothing to do with helping citizens make rational judgments about their society. In this respect, extending the example given earlier, it is instructive to compare the Western media's treatment of the August 1991 coup in the Soviet Union with that of the Gulf War of only a few months earlier.

In sharp contrast to the Gulf situation, Western media coverage of the unfolding of the failed coup in the Soviet Union in August 1991 was rich and expansive. By comparison to the Gulf War, there were three important differences in the circumstances surrounding the Soviet event: first of all, Soviet authorities were unable to control the flow of information and the media enjoyed easy direct access to oppositional forces and important arenas of action (like the streets of Moscow). Second,

Western media audiences in this case did not need to be called upon to support policy decisions of their own leadership and could be unproblematically addressed strictly as spectators. Finally — and no small point as far as the media institutions were concerned — no one was going to argue with their trumpeting that the Russian Revolution was good news this time around. To the Western media, the events in the Soviet Union make for good, noncontroversial entertainment and provide an ideological bonus as well.

Market-based media produce audiences which are then leased to advertisers for a fee. This is particularly the case with television, where in many cases, program content is provided free of charge. The Canadian political economist Dallas Smythe has referred to this as the «free lunch» that broadcasters provide to recruit people into becoming part of the «audience commodity»¹. The main difference between advertising and other types of programming is that advertising explicitly has something to sell. It is therefore significant to take note of the fact that with the increasing commodification of culture, the line between advertising and the rest tends to blur, and in fact, many corporate advertisements are far more costly, sophisticated, and entertaining than the programs that they purport to support.

As Western media corporations become increasingly transnational and vertically integrated, the possibility of bringing an «independent» media product to market becomes nearly impossible. American media critic Ben Bagdikian has documented the growing concentration of corporate media power over the past twenty years. At present, he wrote recently, six giant enterprises are in the process of consolidating a worldwide monopoly. Some of these — Maxwell, Murdoch, Bertelsmann — while not exactly household names, are well known in professional circles in many countries as the foreign carpetbaggers who buy up and transform with an eye to the bottom line and little regard for the communities they serve.

¹ *Smythe D. Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness and Canada.* — Norwood, 1981.

Conglomerates operate on the principle of «synergy», maximizing corporate benefits by interweaving the activities of their various entities. In the case of communication conglomerates, media are used to promote the products of the different branches of the enterprise. Thus, for example, a story that began life as an article in a newsmagazine or a novel might lead to a film script, then be recycled for a television series, with a sound track featuring a singer whose recordings are made popular by the entertainment press and repeated play on radio stations. The film will play in theatres, then on cable television and eventually rent through video-clubs; the TV series might spin off tee-shirts or children's dolls...

In today's context, it is possible for all of these activities to take place under a single corporate banner. The corollary of this is that access to the market is blocked to independent creators, and severely limited even for popular and commercially successful small undertakings. Think of this as the McDonaldization of culture — especially at a time when the transnational communications conglomerates are drooling at the prospect of entering the newly «freed» markets of central and Eastern Europe.

The Canadian Context

Let me illustrate by briefly describing the *ownership* structure of the Canadian media system.

With the exception of the national, publicly-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and educational television services currently operated by government agencies in four provinces, Canadian media are controlled by about 30 corporations, varying in size and diversity. (See Table 1.) This figure is misleading, however, considering that the linguistic duality and regional diversification of Canada masks the real extent of corporate concentration, which is more pronounced in particular regions and linguistic communities. In Quebec, for example, 11 corporations control the majority of the market in virtually every sector. (See Table 2.)

Table 1.

Canada's major media corporations, 1990¹

RANK	NAME	REVENUES	SECTORS
1	Thomson	6,258,715	N, O
2	Quebecor	2,433,726	N, M, O
3	Southam	1,828,629	N, M
4	Maclean Hunter	1,536,000	M, TV, C
5	Rogers	1,130,779	TV, C
6	Torstar	933,211	N
7	Hollinger	774,891	N, O
8	Vidéotron	421,864	TV, C
9	GTC	415,631	M, O
10	Astral Bellevue	286,226	C, O
11	Power	233,072	N, M, TV, R, O
12	Standard	232,954	R
13	Télémedia	222,993	M, R
14	CanWest	212,418	TV
15	Western International	204,304	TV
16	CHUM	181,698	TV, R
17	Baton	175,719	TV
18	CFCF	162,572	TV, C
19	CTV Television Network	145,147	TV
20	Cogéco	116,009	M, TV, C, R
21	Shaw Cablesystems	111,905	C
22	Moffatt	75,742	TV, R
23	Reader's Digest	48,326	M
24	Canadian Satellite Comm.	40,082	TV
25	Radiomutuel	33,042	R

N = newspapers (daily + weekly);

M = magazines;

C = cable;

TV = television;

R = radio;

O = other interests (f.e. advertising circulars, film production, non-media enterprises etc.)

¹ Sources: «Revue Commerce» (June 1991); «Report on Business Magazine» (July 1991).

Table 2.

Market share of principal communications groups
in Quebec, 1988¹

GROUP	% MARKET SHARE, BY SECTOR					
	daily newspapers	weekly newspapers	magazines	radio	TV	cable
Power Corp.	27.3	4.0		2.8	1.4	
Southam	15.9					
Maclean Hunter			10.3			
Quebecor	39.9	25.4	35.6			
Hollinger	15.4	10.4				
Vidéotron					56.3	56.1
GTC			11.8			
Télémedia		14.5	16.0	20.1		
CFCF				2.5	28.9	13.1
Cogéco		15.1		9.0	4.9	11.7
Radiomutuel				14.8		
TOTALS	98.5	69.4	73.7	49.2	91.5	80.9

Market share refers to: total circulation in the case of print media; total advertising dollars in the case of radio and television (not including public television); total number of subscribers to basic service in the case of cable companies.

¹ Sources: «La concentration des marchés dans les secteurs des communications au Québec et au Canada depuis 1980» (Québec, Ministère des communications du Québec, 1989).

