Media

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"Medium" is, in many ways, an old word. Strictly speaking, a "medium" is a means of transmission. In the past, people thought that the universe owed its unity to the medium known as the ether. And that air and water were also media. Thus, a medium of transmission - or of communication - is a neutral agent. However, we can easily see that, despite its apparent existence as an "object", the very nature of the medium determines the type and quality of information it transmits.

Modern use of the term implies a means of communication. Although we use "medium" nowadays to mean books or newspapers, it has taken on a much broader significance since the introduction of long-distance communication using technology - or telecommunication. Telegraphy was the first truly modern means of communication, quickly followed by the telephone, radio, television, cable and satellite transmission, and of course the Internet. All these developments have taken place over the last 150 years, and most of them during the last century, while Internet only during the last decade.

As technology improved, each new generation of communication media has brought a set of utopias for the creation of public fora permitting participative interaction amongst informed citizens and use of their right to free speech. All these new communication media have led, at the same time, to disputes over various societal positions, depending on whether they were proffered by states, the market or the civil society. Historically speaking, the struggle for freedom of press, and for freedom of speech that this implies, has inspired and participated in the great democratic battles against censorship and for human rights and the abolition of slavery, etc. These struggles have greatly contributed to the development and foundation of our democracies and of the principles and laws which currently dominate the issues relating to the right to information and communication. Similarly, we have been able to create a common space for communication in which various forms of media and media institutions can co-exist.

Today, we believe that communication media are the principal tools for mass communication, whether press, radio or television, in their public, private or community forms. They offer mechanisms which allow the mass distribution of information, facilitate the construction of social consensus, the construction and reproduction of public positions and of certain levels of interaction, especially in the case of new independent, alternative and community media. [1]

The role and place of media in society

Reflection on means of communications has traditionally focused on the capacity of media institutions and communication technologies to play a role in the introduction of democracy in societies, in the creation of a public arena in which individuals can take part in public affairs, in the materialisation of a national and cultural identity, in the promotion of expression and creative dialogue. It is for this reason that debates on the different forms of censorship and on ownership of means of communication have always featured in working programmes. On the other hand, the questions raised by market forces and the State tend to focus on finding out how to use the media to open a way to publicity, how to generate financial profits for shareholders and how to make use of tools for propaganda and for social and political control.

In almost all national situations, it is thought necessary to have a certain kind of governmental intervention - or regulation - which will allow communication media to play one or other of these roles. As soon as the production and distribution of means of communication require a higher level of organization and resources than those which artists or individual creators working in relatively small groups can provide - that is to say, as soon as the means of communications can be industrialized - the State will usually take up the responsibility for a certain form of structural organization, either directly, or through a delegated authority.

This can take various forms. In the free market model, the State creates an environment in which companies owning means of communication can have complete freedom to operate commercially; access to the market in sectors such as broadcasting will always be basically controlled by the distribution of transmission frequencies, while the newspaper industry remains open to anyone who has the resources to own and manage a newspaper or magazine. In the authoritarian model, means of communication are considered an extension of the State's authority. The public service model emphasises the creation of radio and television services for serving the public, financing of non-profit-making media in the community, and various restrictions on ownership of commercial media (limiting the number of distribution outlets that any private company can control or prohibiting foreign ownership of means of communication). In fact, in many, if not most, societies, means of communication function according to a mixed model, based on a combination of two or more of these systems. In most cases, there is a regulatory agency which dictates and controls the rules at the national level.

Today, everyone agrees that market forces dominate, that they impose market values and market conditions on means of production and of broadcasting, with important consequences for content and the very nature of information. While new and complex issues are emerging, relating to concentration of media, standardisation and paucity of content, worldwide imbalance in information flows and a lack of cultural diversity, the

regulatory role of States, at the national and international level, inevitably requires a redefinition of the public service of access to information.

Further, the recent digital revolution is beginning to make the media rethink their own definition and redefine their role in totally new terms by placing them squarely at the heart of an "Information Society", while still having difficulty in determining what it is.

The relationship between the communication media and the Information Society does in fact create a somewhat paradoxical challenge. On the one hand, mass media (press, radio, television) are going through a process of ownership concentration and of horizontal and vertical integration in the areas of sound and image, thanks to the introduction of digitalization. On the other, Internet, and digital formats in general, is creating individual and democratic access to communication and interaction, thus allowing new developments in new alternative or cooperative methods which simultaneously affect traditional mass media.

The relationship between "communication" media and the "information" society appears therefore in the form of a contradictory dissociation which is difficult to explain without reference to the very definition of the Information Society project itself, or to the context in which players are building the Information Society, or to the challenges which technological progress is creating.

The current situation: globalized means of communication

An analysis of the current situation in the communication media, particularly during this era of globalization, illustrates the new challenges relating to their role in a shared knowledge society.

First, it must be noted that, in the context of neo-liberal globalisation, "digital" information has become just another piece of merchandise, which circulates in accordance with the rules governing the market of supply and demand.

According to this argument, the media are not selling information to citizens, they are selling citizens to advertisers. Thus, content becomes a distortion of reality, reinforcing stereotypes and clearly reducing diversity in broadcasting content. As an example of the results of this deregulation process over the last 30 years, we can refer to the declaration - cited all too often - made by the Chairman of the USA regulatory authority during Ronald Reagan's presidency in 1980. In his enthusiasm for deregulation, he declared that television was like any other domestic appliance, a sort of "toaster with images". And as toasters cannot be regulated, why should television be regulated? It is true that privatization and liberalization, which go hand in hand with globalization, have rarely created more varied or pluralist media. [2]

The sudden arrival of the Internet revolution and the digital age, with their potential for easy profits, has drawn into the information sector a plethora of industrialists from a wide variety of domains - electricity, computers, arms, construction, telephony, water. They built huge empires which took over the media and absorbed, both horizontally and vertically, the information, culture and entertainment sectors, which in the past were distinct domains, into their expanding conglomerates for which knowledge and content became a new product.

These multimedia conglomerates influence every aspect of cultural, social and political life. However, their own dynamics have transformed mass media, which no longer function as a force for opposition. Mass media (radios, newspapers, televisions, Internet) have been reorganized according to a global, rather than a national, vocation. The concentration process has led to a large amount of media spectrum being held by very few people across countries and continents. This is why global media can no longer act as a force for opposition within in any one country.

The major groups are: Vivendi Universal, AOL Time Warner, Disney, News Corporation, Viacom and Bertelsmann, General Electric, Microsoft, Telefonica, France Télécom. Today the real power lies in the hands of these conglomerates which have more economic power than the majority of governments. [3] The absence of major media conglomerates from the WSIS debates illustrates this reality only too well.

Concentration of media ownership means, for example, that the five major US conglomerates control almost all radio and television stations in the country. What is important, in the media sector, is not so much the number of television channels, but plurality of sources and of owners. This situation creates a simplified message for mass consumption. As a result, there appear to be limits on the right to information and that right is itself now being challenged. On the one hand, the end of State monopolies in Southern countries and in Europe has increased media plurality, although there is concern about the decreasing legitimacy of the traditional media. On the other hand, deregulation encourages another form of monopoly, since the laws on freedom of the press, which were established to limit the power of the State, are now inadequate for guaranteeing that information and communication are considered a public good. As Ignacio Ramonet has pointed out, although freedom of speech is guaranteed in Northern countries, the right to be well informed is now being challenged by concentration in the media.

Finally, these conglomerates do not distinguish between the three traditional forms of communication (written, oral, and image), so that the Internet, and telecommunications in general, is a new and powerful medium that includes cultural activities, sporting and entertainment activities, and communication and information activities. In this way, it becomes every time more difficult to distinguish between the different industrial sectors of information from those of mass culture and entertainment. The large world conglomerates have acquired the dimensions of multimedia and sell their products in multiple formats other than the traditional radio, television and newspapers: films, videos,

compact discs, DVDs, leisure parks, cinemas, theatres, sporting events.

The development of worldwide 24-hour news channels, such as CNN, is being imitated by other American and world channels, including the BBC, with great success. The manipulation of information on the one hand, and the resistance put up by Southern countries on the other, have led to the emergence of new channels, such as Al'Jazeera, an Arab channel which seeks to put an end to the campaign against Islam. More recently, we have seen the launch of Telesur, based in Venezuela, to counter "American propaganda" about Latin America. These initiatives echo questions raised by the MacBride Commission at the end of the 1970s and the disappointment of non-aligned countries and of their hopes for the "New World Order for Information and Communication" proposed by Unesco. [4]

At the same time, they reveal the capacity for adapting traditional media to new technologies and their determination to remain massive distributors for the production of social and political consensual thinking.

New media. Their appropriation by communities and citizens

The impact of new means of communication in the Knowledge Society is linked to the possibility of greater appropriation by those who use them, whether as individuals or as a community or active group. Since the 1970s, traditional mass media have been in crisis, with radio, press, and television, little by little, abandoning minority and local issues.

In this context, technological innovations encouraged the development of projects for collective communications. During the 1960s and 1970s, throughout the world, we began to see the development of projects for videos and for local and community radio stations in opposition to the hegemony and limitations of traditional media, thanks to the revolution caused by transistor radios, FM transmitters and video. This was also the heyday of "pirate radio stations" in the United Kingdom and "free radio stations" in France, of "community television channels", and of radios and video clubs involved in communication on development issues. [5] These social movements use appropriate technologies to develop projects which run counter to the crisis in representation of existing political systems and which encourage resistance to the major means of communication. They inspired counter-information programmes and interactive social communication run by communities from community radio stations, for example in rural areas. [6]

These new players multiplied media outlets and created national, regional, and finally international networks which later flowed onto the world political scene and intervened in political arenas. [7]

The arrival of the Internet had an important impact on traditional media, as we have already seen, but it also reinforced alternative and community media, such as community radio, television and newspapers, encouraging social processes for interactive communication and multimedia exchanges, produced by digitalization of messages and of "telecentres". Internet opened up an innovative space for exchanging information which did not make use of the media conglomerates' networks. It thus contributed to providing a tangible dimension to the civil society's global social movement at the ¬international level. Free circulation of information via the Internet proved to be particularly important for a number of important movements: the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas in 1994-95; creation of the French network movement, ATTAC, at the end of 1998; development of freenet networks on the Internet and of independent media centres, such as Indymedia, which were particularly effective during the 1999 WTO Summit in Seattle. Among recent movements, we should also mention use of the Internet for channelling alternative information and organization of the citizens' movement in response to the Aznar Government's announcements in Spain, after the bombs at the Atocha Station in Madrid in 2004. Similarly, the French Media Observatory, CMAQ in Quebec, Pulsar in Latin America and Simbani in Africa are all part of a tendency to use ICTs for creating alternative networks and media for the circulation of information and for monitoring developments. [8]

On the other hand, the development of iPod and of blogs, amongst other technological innovations, which complement use of the Internet, has encouraged the creation of new means of communication and new experiences in community journalism which are meeting with considerable success, not only in the United States and developed countries, but also in the struggle for freedom of expression in Southern countries.

Among these new alternative means of communication, we should mention the unexpected development of virtual communities, from the perspective of greater individual appropriation at the local level as well as at the international level. [9] Here we should mention a number of social movements and citizens' Internet networks [10] including: Globalcn, Mistica, Vecam, Comunidad Web de movimientos sociales. [11] As Manuel Castells has already said, the arrival of these networks can be seen as a new form of social morphology, based on the interconnection and flexibility of the new topology which permits circulation of statements which in turn generate new meanings and consequences for social and civil action.[12] This resulted in the existence of social movement networks, community networks and of cyber-communities which discuss topics of world interest, such as protecting the environment, and promotion of women's rights in the organization of the 4th World Women's Conference at the UN (Peking, 1996) and of the World Women's March in 2000.

The development of alternative media, via the network and due to the use of new technologies, is nevertheless facing huge challenges, including the problems of over-supply of information on the Internet. Studies have demonstrated [13] that if, prior to this situation, there were barely a few media outlets in each locality, there are now millions of accessible sites. In fact, 50% of Internet traffic visits 0.5% of Web sites. Thus, the wealth of information has led to a reduction of interest and the question of credibility of information is now a fundamental question.

The media's roles and responsibilities.Regulation at the heart of the debate

What role should the international community play in facilitating a process of democratization of communications in the complex relationship between the media and the Information Society?

With the arrival of globalization, due to a variety and a combination of reasons - some technical, some political, economic or ideological - national politicians were both less disposed and less able to intervene in the area of activity of the means of communication. At the same time, there emerged, at the international level, a number of cumbersome formal (such as international commercial agreements) and informal mechanisms, which limit the capacity of national governments to influence this sector. In the neo-liberal era, the international media milieu is a new frontier where the rules are made up from day to day; as in all frontier situations, the rules are established by those in the strongest position to meet their particular needs, while the weakest sections of the community just have to survive as best they can in a situation they have not created.

Further, leaving aside the UN's international agencies such as the ITU, which have a mainly technical role and which are sponsored by the large media corporations, there are no venues or institutions for debate and decision-making on questions relating to information and the media, as was the case with Unesco.

In this context, WSIS offered a unique opportunity to discuss the question of the media in the Information Society.[14] The noticeable absence of large media corporations at the preparatory meetings and the Geneva and Tunis Summits has unfortunately meant that this debate has not taken place and suggests that the results will not be very satisfactory. Nevertheless, WSIS will give the various social players who do attend this fundamental event an opportunity to state their positions.

For some - including certain governments and important international agencies, such as the International Telecommunication Union and the World Trade Organization - the media are no more than an empty shell through which information circulates. From this

perspective, there is no point in debating human rights or freedom of expression at the World Summit on the Information Society. For those who consider that the term "media" refers first to content and second a conduit, such an affirmation is a bit like judging a book by its cover.

Another aspect of this debate relates to regulation. The advocates of media deregulation base their arguments on the principle that television, as we have discussed earlier, is not more than a "toaster with images". Those who defend self-regulation for the media industry or shared regulation in which industry and government participate, are more sensitive to the importance of content, but they attribute a predominant role to the industrial groups which the large media organizations represent.

The totally different, people-centred, view of the media sees the role of people in society as facilitators and intermediaries in the public debate and in individual and collective empowerment. From this perspective, the media must be allowed freedom of expression, but also must accept certain obligations, such as the necessity of respecting human dignity. Here access and accessibility - i.e., the capacity to use means of communications to send and receive messages - are also key questions. This vision also recognizes the ambivalent nature of contemporary mass media, as agents of the social status quo and as potential agents for change. Emphasising the social role of the media justifies the limits that society places on them, for example restrictions on ownership of the media, rules on cable and satellite broadcasting, obligation to broadcast public service messages, right of reply, etc.

The new forms of communication and the creation of interactive and cooperative communication platforms also imply recognition of the new common goods of information, a redefinition of what we understand by a "public service" of information and communication, and a review of intellectual property regimes. Thus, debates about the media always emphasize the importance of a broader international debate on the right to communicate.