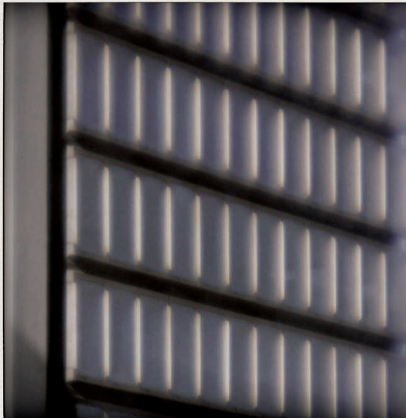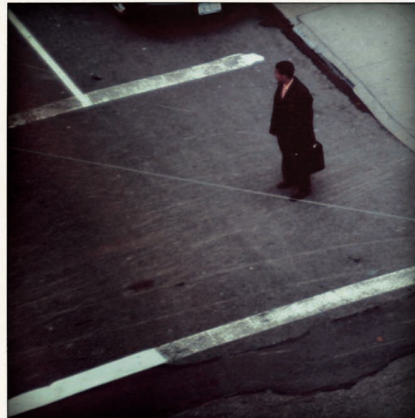# Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere

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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE EUROPEAN MEDIASPHERE

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The Dangerous and Disruptive Relationship Between Media and Information

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a personal reflection on the dialectic relationship between communication and democracy, in particular on the role of mass media in the supply and management of information. Untill recently, the normative perspective on the role of the media has stressed the central role of the media in the socialisation of information receivers, namely citizens. Their function of information dissemination – especially journalistic information, the mirror of reality – was seen as fundamental to the development of the democratic system, exposing the importance of the media's public service function. Unfortunately, today this notion has become outdated, principally because of the crisis of democracy and media responsibility. The public service role of the media has diminished, and has, to a great extent, been replaced by the development of the media's market role. This is due to the overlapping and absorbing role of the economic dimension in the functioning of the media as a form of communication.

These developments raise questions about the role of journalistic information in the evolving development of the media as information tools. Taking into consideration the fact that (mass) media messages are guided by underlying ideological and economic interests, my view on the future of the public role of media in general and journalism in particular is pessimistic. The function of the media is more and more influenced and conditioned by propaganda and disinformation on one side, and by entertaiment and spectacle on the other. Consequently, the media's principal roles – to socialise, educate and properly inform the audience – have lost a great deal of weight. In part, this is due to the structure of media ownership. According to the degree of democracy attained in a country, we

have to suppose that the public media adhere to a policy of promoting, respecting and protecting the public service of information as one of their basic aims and obligations. But for the private media, their objective of doing business assumes top priority, to the detriment of their information function. Although, normatively, the private media should also assume the same obligation of public service, this currently remains an unattained ideal. On the whole, this is a very worring fact, particularly when we note that the media are consequently failing to fulfil the function of permanent, lifelong education that supersedes the stage of formal education. For citizens, the information role of the media is paramount, because it ensures learning about and adapting to ongoing social changes, and because it is a way of acquiring knowledge about social reality.

2. SOCIAL ACTORS, SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND POWER

In my opinion, the principal problem lies in the way the leading social actors (governments of any territorial scope, political parties, pressure groups and corporations) conceive of their role as sources of information. The influence of these actors in the political sphere is substantial, but it also differs significantly in relation to the type of social power they exercise. For governments and political parties, the main objective is to obtain or consolidate power through the communicative impact of the media, although the way they use their power depends on their scope (state, regional or local) and the structure of the state (federal, autonomous or unitarian). Pressure groups, on the other hand, exert a great deal of power, both over the sphere of media and the sphere of politics, often influencing the policies adopted by public governing institutions. In a capitalist society, where control of the economy is limited, economic actors such as corporations should also be included in the category of pressure groups.

From the perspective of democracy, the information emanating from these sources has a worriyng and often negative impact, because their aim is to achieve a certain ideological or economic goal which favours a certain public or private institution, social group, etc. Although these tendencies are not new, they have become more widespread, both in scope and influence exerted.

Social movements, however, constitute a separate category. Today, social movements play an ever increasing role as a new type of institution that influences the political, economic, social and cultural environment, often focusing their activities on promotion and development of democracy by

challenging social and political options, or by anticipating changes within the political sphere. Social movements contribute to the development of democracy in all countries, since they express the worries and wishes of civil society, which very often complement the setbacks and limitations of institutionalised politics. Such understanding necessarily excludes civil society organisations which are not advancing democratic ideals and which are generally characterised by conservative, right-wing ideology.

3. Democracy and economic ideology

At present, the main ideological support for democratic systems is capitalism, with a free market economy and the defence of private enterprise in all its aspects, public and private. The alternative ideology, represented by communism, has experienced great decline.We have to be aware, however, that even countries such as China, North Korea,Vietnam, Mongolia and Cuba, which claim communism as their dominant ideology, represent an authoritatian capitalism in economic terms, divorced from communist and, indeed, Marxist, ideals.

In the Western world in particular, capitalism, with its lack or limited scope for regulation and state control, has evolved into a very dangerous system as far as democratic principles are concerned. By this I mean that it places at the heart of the only conceivable economic system the pursuit of profit and its increase, regardless of the potential costs or threats to society and the environment. I should not like to be judged as an opponent of capitalism, because we are reminded that, in the Scandinavian countries, for instance, its role, with some exceptions and limits, but with regulation, has to be considered as an ideology that can coexist with the principles of social democracy. But I should nevertheless like to emphasise that the ideology of capitalism directly affects the 'governanaza' of the democratic system. The present economic crisis is a clear demonstration of this. From a communication perspective, institutions that argue in favour of this conception of capitalism are creating their own philosophy of communication, their own ways of expression, namely their own media, their own communication systems, their own information agencies, and are, to this end, actively exploiting the possibilities for social persuasion and control derived from the new technologies of communication and information. Their main aim is the defence of their power and influence on the development of democratic societies and to steer the possible effects of social change in their favour, a fact which gives us much cause for pessimism about their idea(l)s of democracy and the defence of human rights.

4. THE CHANGING NATURE OF JOURNALISM

The reflections above on the information role of the media inevitably lead me to an analysis of the role of journalists, as they are the professionals who are essential to the production, elaboration and diffusion of information. The dominant media and political paradigm described above tend to place journalists in a secondary role, subjugated to the editorial (economic) policy of the media. At the same time, journalism has became a fashionable career in many countries and journalism studies have proliferated globally, producing large numbers of journalism graduates. These developments are somewhat contradictory since, on the one hand, research into communication in general, and into information production and journalism in particular, has generated an extraordinary ferment from which communication science has emerged as one of the most developed social sciences.

On the other hand, however, the requirements of the information market have created a practice of journalism where serious analysis of the facts respect for legal rules and conditions, and professional codes of ethics and respect for human rights have suffered a noticeable setback. This has caused clear damage to the quality of information production by a large number of journalism professionals. These developments have produced a new kind of journalist, whose work is not characterised by professional qualification. Needless to say, this kind of journalism seriously hinders democracy. What democracy needs are competent, honest and serious journalists who are aware of the importance and necessity of their work in ethical and deontological terms. However, such journalism is frequently hindered by the information media policies which are very often responsible for this crisis of journalism.

Moreover, the intellectual and ethical weakness and limited education of most media audiences also hinder the development of democracy. To a functioning democracy, infotainment may be a great danger, and many private media tend to practise it as their way of producing information and news. Infotainment further undermines the democratic potential of communicating information through its emphasis on the famous and on stars, treating them as (poilitical) opinion leaders, even though they do not have this function. From the standpoint of normative democratic theory, which I have defended throughout this chapter, there is a great risk and danger that information becomes disinformation or propaganda, defending a particular objective or cause. Unfortunately, this is an increasing

tendency in many areas of the political arena and is nowadays practised by a great number of media. Such propaganda should not be confused with advertising. Advertising as such does not present a threat to democracy, provided it is created and produced according to legal stipulations and the profession's ethical or deontological codes. However, if advertising takes over the role of a pressure group in the elaboration or diffusion of the information, its role becomes problematic. Similarly, another aspect of information production and dissemination has to be considered – the role and function of public relations and its relationship with journalism.

Public relations is an interesting form of communication, conceived often primarily to create, modifiy or consolidate the image of a person or institution. Just like advertising, public relations does not hinder democratic communication as long as the receivers are aware that they are receiving a promotional message, not a news item or journalistic information. Moreover, public relations can be a problematic form of communication as long as the receivers (the citizens) are not educated enough to be able to interpret the content and the intent of the media.

Unfortunately, this requirement has not yet been sufficiently incorporated into the agenda of the education systems. And it is precisely by emphasising the centrality of (media) education that I would like to conclude this brief overview of the basic relations between media, citizenship and democracy. I should like to point out that, to combat the serious social crisis that we are facing at present – with all its political, economic and educational implications – it is indispensable that every society assumes its responsibility in these areas. The legal system may be an useful element for acheiving this objective, together with codes of ethics and deontology, but this alone will not suffice. The leading role in my opinion is that of education, in different stages of citizens' lives, which should devote special attention to media ethics and human rights. Today, in my view, it is impossible to conceive of the development of a society without the action, presence and influence of communication systems, namely the plurality of media (both in terms of ownership and content), and without educated media audiences.