

# Media and Information in the US since World War II

## *From the “Electronic Fireplace” to the “Electronic Cottage”:*

### *A Perspective on Communications Innovation since World War II*

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Since 1945, the American mediascape has been reshaped twice, first by TV, then by the PC. Accelerated communications innovation refashioned Americans into passive consumers of commercials and avid consumers of novelties. Network-dominated television transformed American society, imposing its domination by gobbling up a large slice of the advertising pie and forcing older media to adjust to the new diet. In more recent years, however, network TV's share has been cut by cable and satellite, and it is now losing out to interactive multimedia. Throughout the postwar period, it has become increasingly clear that the media represent an “environment,” the consequences of which must be understood in light of a growing body of communications theory. Marshall McLuhan's work is particularly important in any analysis of the social and psychological impact of this evolution.

Making sense of communications innovation since World War II requires tracing the sources of changes and, especially, examining the role played by the government as financier, as regulator/deregulator, and as

adversary/accomplice of the “Fourth Estate.” The turn to interactive multimedia is occurring in both the national and international spheres and the building of the “electronic superhighway” raises certain questions of direction. Accessible alternative routes must be considered. In addition to exploring these aspects of a complicated reality, the present article is also intended as a broad introduction to several interviews in this issue of *Sources*, and especially to those of Herbert I. Schiller and of Mark Crispin Miller, two major media critics whose works span the last three decades.

### The origins of post-war electronics communications

Although the first close alliance between scientific research and military science was formed during the First World War, this relationship was not fully consummated until the second world conflict. In the United States, one crucial aspect of the full-scale war-economy, which started in early 1940, was the advent of “Big Science” and a boom in electronics and communications. During WWII and under the control of the War Production Board headed by a former executive of Sears & Roebuck, “various procedures were devised to allow businessmen to combine patriotism with high profits.”<sup>1</sup> A close relationship developed between the military and electronics manufacturers which was to extend well after the return of peace, especially with the realization that war had not ended the threat of war. As a result, the War enormously inflated industrial capacity, the predominant share of the huge military budget going to large corporations. By the end of the War, three quarters of the world’s invested capital and two-thirds of its industrial production were in the U.S.

The cold-war period consolidated the scientific-military collaboration as there were tremendous political and economic advantages for corporate and military leaders to oppose early reconversion to a peacetime economy. The paranoid and at times threatening post-war rhetoric of the Soviet Union also helps explain the launching of a cold war which allowed the military budget, and therefore corporate military contracts, to remain at war-time levels. In 1954, at the end of the Korean conflict, the Department of Defense’s (DOD) share of the federal budget amounted to close to two-thirds.

During the 1950s, military funding and contracts linked to the space program already represented two-thirds of research and development (R&D) of the major electronics companies. But the much publicized “missile gap” and ensuing space race—the Sputnik and the creation of the NASA—further stimulated military spending and boosted technological innovation.

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1. Walter LaFeber and Richard Polenberg, *The American Century: A History of the United States since the 1890s* (New York: John Wiley, 1975) 254.

The creation and rapid militarization of the National Communications System (NCS) took place in 1963 during a period of cold-war confrontation. The Secretary of Defense became the Executive Agent of the NCS: 80% of the communications circuitry was owned or leased by the DOD.<sup>2</sup> The "organic fusion" of the electronics industry and the military establishment became ostensive with the "Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association" (AFCEA) whose permanent director, David Sarnoff, also head of Radio Corporation of America (RCA), referred to as a "closely interwoven" community of interest.<sup>3</sup> This closeness explains the important decision-making role played by the military in communications structures largely dependent on their financing.

During the 1960s, defense expenditures still supported over 95% of employment in aircraft and missile industries and 50% in radio and communications. From 1955 to 1991 the American government spent more than \$1 trillion on arms R&D,<sup>4</sup> a large share of that being in communications.

Thirty years ago, McLuhan wrote:

*Real total war has become information war. It is being fought by subtle electric informational media—under cold conditions, and constantly. The cold war is the real war front—a surround—involving everybody—all the time—everywhere. Whenever hot wars are necessary these days, we conduct them in the backyards of the world with old technologies.*<sup>5</sup>

The following year, in *War and Peace in the Global Village*, he added that "all the significant discoveries that have been made about the natural world have been inspired by the real or imaginary military needs of their epochs."<sup>6</sup> Whether it be in satellites, in computers, or in numerous other sub-fields in the electronics industry, civilian applications represent, most often, spin-offs of technology developed for military or strategic uses. This is what Armand Mattelart called the "pentagonization" of communications.<sup>7</sup>

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2. Herbert I. Schiller, *Mass Communications and the American Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971) 44.

3. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 56-57.

4. According to a February 5, 1992 article by William Board in the *New York Times*, quoted in Schiller, *Information Inequality. The Deepening Social Crisis in America* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 62.

5. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam, 1967) 138.

6. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (New York: Bantam, 1968) 69.

7. See Armand Mattelart, *Multinationales et systèmes de communications : les appareils idéologiques de l'impérialisme* (Paris: Anthropos, 1976) 129.

War-related industries, which acted as accelerators of technological innovation, also acted as catalysts for social change:

*As the creator of wealth and opportunity for all, war has put peace to shame in our time. War has provided higher education and higher consumer standards for more people than peace ever did. [...] Accelerated change and planned obsolescence constitute the basic principle of an industrial power-economy built on applied science.<sup>8</sup>*

Today, the DOD continues to receive over \$200 billion a year of public funds. It still represents the biggest spender and consequently the heaviest influence on R&D in communications systems. These State-military disbursements of public funds represent the major motor in shaping American—perhaps even Western and global—post-war society. To what extent can these communications technologies be considered politically or otherwise “neutral”? To what extent can technology itself be considered as an instrument of “liberation” or of “domination”? Perhaps the answer lies in the purposes for which, and in the way in which, they were developed,<sup>9</sup> in the importance granted to the newest technology which is almost invariably presented as an instrument of liberation. (Even the atomic bombs were supposed to make wars obsolete!)

Here we are confronted with a McLuhanesque dilemma! Does the technology—the medium—in fact condition the message? Might its original purposes have an impact on the way in which the audiences are targeted to receive, interpret, and use the message? To imagine that the actual forms of communications technologies have no impact on the messages they vehicle is to accept a basic tenet of the “neutrality” of technology ideology. As the National Rifle Association says, “guns don’t kill, people do!” According to this view, from the military to the marketing strategies and applications, one need only change the message and target differently. Commenting on a November 1949 *Fortune* magazine article offering “A Key to the Automatic Factory” and which pointed out that “the computers that direct guns might also direct machines,” McLuhan writes:

*How persistently the face of murderous violence associates itself with know-how! It is hard to say why the public target of such a factory should be any happier than the recipient of a bomb or shell. And it has long been plain that the executives of production and selling have been thinking in military terms, smashing public resistance with carefully planned barrages followed by shock troops of salesmen to mop up the pockets. It will take more than a change of*

8. Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951) 128.

9. See Georges Menahem, *La science et le militaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1976).

*vocabulary to eradicate this lethal aspect of know-how, for it is not easily separated from its origins or its uses. The public may smile at the suggestion that it need be perturbed at being the target for a barrage of corn flakes or light bulbs. But this industrial ammunition has the character of exploding the brain cortex and making its impact on the emotional structure of society.<sup>10</sup>*

But then isn't mass commercial ad-edit-infotainment indeed a "veritable carpet bombing of individual consciousness"?<sup>11</sup>

### **Legal and regulatory control over the media**

The commercial framework for electronic media was defined during the New Deal when Congress passed the Communications Act (1934) which replaced the Federal Radio Commission with a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) whose members, appointed for 5 years, were chosen by the President with Senatorial approval. They are responsible for all electronics communications except those of the Federal government or for intra-state communications. They deliver and renew licenses for all radio and television stations, but this function has long become a mere formality.

Some claim that the FCC's ineffectiveness is related to its financial dependence on Congress which votes its budget, and to the Commission members' closeness to the major media organizations they are supposed to control. This is a perfect illustration of the "capture theory" according to which members of federal agencies become too closely attuned to the wishes of the industries they are supposed to regulate.

Throughout the post-war period, the FCC has arbitrated the demands of technological innovations, every step being followed by often bitter competition between electronics manufacturers. Thanks to their heavy involvement in defense work and to an influential lobby, Bell Labs, for example, largely benefited from the FCC's enforcement of the Bell monopoly as they profitably transferred their war research, in particular in radars, to telecommunications and to space communications.<sup>12</sup> The FCC

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10. *The Mechanical Bride* 34.

11. Samir Amin, quoted in *Information Inequality* 141.

12. The monopoly enjoyed by AT&T, at times bolstered by the FCC's post-war rulings, as well as its heavy-handed lobbying, drew a lot of criticism. To many, AT&T, with its phones you could not disconnect (official company policy), was perceived as a sort of Big Brother. See Steven Lubar, *Infoculture. The Smithsonian Book of Information Age Inventions* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993) 39-40. In 1982, after many years of efforts and millions of dollars of investment, the Justice Department finally won its antitrust suit against AT&T and succeeded in breaking it up. However, it should be pointed out that a few hundred major U.S. companies had actively lobbied for this break-up which also gave AT&T certain strategic advantages: through joint ventures, it gained access to international and computer markets.

has been responsive to other powerful conglomerates such as RCA and has put a hold on several important innovations in order to protect their interests. Equally responsive to the intense lobbying of network broadcasters and of their influential sponsors, the FCC deliberately put a brake on the development of both cable and satellite television until 1972.

Laws and regulations that affect media content concern issues of confidentiality of sources and of privacy, in particular in the database information, or questions of copyright, increasingly complex with the development of multimedia and in particular of the Internet. Some regulatory restrictions still limit media holdings and programming while others require a minimum of accuracy in dealing with controversial issues. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is responsible for monitoring advertising.

Congress votes the laws, but it is often under the pressure of the media holders' powerful lobbies. Some of the most influential represent AT&T, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).

The NAB code deals with programs and advertising, but codes of ethics of different media are often unenforceable, mere good intentions far from the harsh realities of marketing strategies. Furthermore, the courts have generally been reluctant to hold media organizations accountable on the grounds of negligence for inciting people to violent acts claiming that a "copycat," direct cause-and-effect relationship between exposure and subsequent acts is difficult to prove.

The Justice Department is charged with enforcing the law and with interpreting the Constitution as concerns communications media. Since the nineteenth century, corporations are legally considered "persons" entitled to all the constitutional protections granted any ordinary citizen, including those of the First Amendment—freedom of speech—which also apply to corporate speech, including advertising. They are also covered by the Fourteenth Amendment—due process—thus further protecting their property.

But corporations, and especially large media organizations, have a far louder voice and enjoy more resonance than the ordinary citizen. They are large businesses often owned by even larger organizations within conglomerates, which are funded by advertisers for other large corporations. As a result, since the deregulation of the 1980s, the social responsibility theory of the media seems irrelevant as they clearly choose profit over public service.

Media conglomerates are based on the skillful utilization of the systems approach to entertainment and to the mass media which consists in selecting one medium to promote and reinforce activities in another. Multimedia tie-ins, as exemplified in the absorption of movie theaters by

the big film companies or in the association of movie companies and paperback publishers, enable companies to control the whole process, from production through distribution. Today, every big studio is a conglomerate that belongs to an even larger conglomerate.

Since 1980, the aggressive acquisition policies and the concentration of ownership of the major media conglomerates, which represent vast financial empires, have benefited from a very favorable legal climate, from the deregulation of economic activity, and from the privatization of public functions. In *The Nation* (June 3, 1996), Mark Crispin Miller provides a very revealing—some might say alarming—guide to “our contracting media cosmos, [a] new order [which] started to get obvious in the spring of 1995 [with] ABC sucked into Disney, CBS sucked into Westinghouse, and Ted Turner’s mini-empire slated for ingestion by Time-Warner.” And a flurry of transnational mergers has also taken place since 1993.

### **An adversarial relation to the state?**

The role of the media’s regulatory agencies, the Constitutional rights granted to major media conglomerates, and their apparent immunity from antitrust action, belie any kind of persistent adversarial relation between the government and the media organizations. One major reason is that politicians are public figures whose interests are often close to those of media outlets. Since Franklin Roosevelt, perhaps even since the heyday of yellow journalism, American politicians have clearly understood the importance of favorable press coverage. This need was even more evident when elections became major media pseudo-events.

The first televised political campaign was in 1952. With the advice of a major advertising agency, General Eisenhower resorted to oversimplistic yet forceful formulas ( $K_1C_2$ : Korea first, then communism and corruption), and to his consumer ideology drawn from Sears & Roebuck’s “wish book” as he smiled his way through a picture-perfect television campaign. The Republicans also adapted to the powerful new medium by airing the first “polispots” and by careful scheduling (avoiding preempting the people’s favorite programs, for instance).<sup>13</sup>

In the 1960 election, John Kennedy, advised by a relatively unknown San Francisco advertising agency, emphasized looks and a few key formulas. He also attached importance to the staging of events, to live ceremonials such as his investiture and inauguration speeches. Through such pseudo-events, Kennedy was also flattering the journalists, making them, in particular the major democratic media, almost extensions of the

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13. The 1952 republican campaign is also memorable for the broadcast of Nixon’s remarkably manipulative “Checkers” speech.

White House staff. At times this had unforeseen consequences, such as when leading newspapers agreed, at the President's request, not to reveal the plans for the Bay of Pigs' invasion. Kennedy's "live death," and even more his funeral, were the last great media homages to the first television president. They also confirmed the primacy of television over the other media.

The adversarial relationship with the executive reached its climax under Nixon as a showdown between the republican President and the Eastern establishment's democratic papers. After several years of stubborn and successful muckraking, the press had to abandon the climax of Watergate's final episodes to TV which transformed Nixon's demise into a "riches to rags" docu-drama mini-series. Since then, and in spite of recurring incidents, this adversarial relationship is largely a myth which contributes to the media's credibility. In fact, the media mostly retains its privileged relationship with—some might even say its deferential attitude toward—the government.

Under President Reagan, another TV president, executive manipulation was raised to a veritable art form. During his 1984 campaign based on television—with one appearance on one specific subject scheduled for every single day of the campaign—advertising formulas became the model for political speech.

This type of manipulation still proved remarkably effective under George Bush, as witnessed by the management of the press during the Gulf War and other foreign conflicts. Both republican presidents proved masters at creating events intended to rouse the public against the enemies of the state (and, by extension, of the citizen) by personalizing complex international conflicts (Noriega or Khadafy, and later Saddam Hussein). In the process, they helped rid conservative politics of the Vietnam syndrome.

When it comes to foreign news, the government remains the agenda-setter and reporters usually rely on government public relations (PR) feeds. This is unsurprising since the most powerful PR organization in the U.S. is undoubtedly the government whose PR budget far exceeds the cumulated news gathering budgets of all the major American media put together.<sup>14</sup>

The government's main PR message since WWII has been (besides the advocacy of a marketing society) anticommunism, what Herbert Schiller refers to as "the fabrication of fear."<sup>15</sup> The government has been quite successful in getting the commercial media to amplify these views,

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14. Today, in the U.S., some 155,000 people work full time in PR, more than the 130,000 journalists. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is one of the largest and most influential professional organizations. Among other activities, PR might deal with publicity or media relations and, of course, with lobbying: there are over 5,000 Political Action Committees (PACs) in Washington, D.C.

15. Herbert I. Schiller, *Culture Inc. The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1989) 155.

thus also promoting the type of economic policy and budget priorities favorable to defense contractors and to major corporations.

### **"Grazing" on the commercial media**

PR, closely tied to propaganda, had, of course, made important advances during the world wars. In its effect on political discourse, television quickly became a major PR tool. Politicians and other public figures realized that it transformed the events it broadcast by altering the participants' behavior, by creating an agenda of pseudo events, and by defining newsworthiness (pictures please!).

Through the 1950s, elections, sports and game shows all demonstrated that TV was the ideal stage for dramatic, competitive, live events, thus capturing the essence of the American spirit and allowing for the identification of the American folk with its celebrities, stars and—best of all—heroes. The American public avidly watched series and sitcoms, theater performances, "live" ball games, some news and public affairs pseudo-events. But, above all, they saw innumerable commercials for the products of sponsors of the shows. By the end of the fifties, the average television was on for five hours a day and almost 90% of American households owned TV sets. The television industry had become, along with the military, the prime driver of the electronics industry.

The relationship between the development of television and that of the suburbs was quasi symbiotic. New mass media were helping shape mass society, organization men and homemaking women. Influenced and concerned by the effectiveness of war-time persuasion and propaganda, early media theorists developed the "target" or "bullet" model of mass media influence in which the audience simply receives and presumably accepts the message. Lazarsfeld's studies of the social effects of the media carried out during the late forties and fifties helped him develop the two- or multi-step flow theory, with opinion leaders and "interpretive communities" acting as relays between the mass media sources and individuals in the audience.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1960s, television became the principle and the most credible source of news for most Americans. It was a development encouraged by the highlighting of special or dramatic events such as the Kennedy-Nixon debates (90% rating) or the coverage of the Kennedy assassination (96%).

Today, these TV images shape our political heritage, from the major political pseudo-events of the fifties, through the Kennedy saga and the Vietnam trauma of the sixties, to the space shots. Our personal histories

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16. Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Communications* (New York: Free Press, 1955).

are punctuated by memorable and emotion-laden images which do not necessarily help us understand what is happening: Jackie and Little John at JFK's funeral; a captive Viet Cong executed by the Saigon chief of police (1968); the first American step on the moon; a naked Vietnamese girl running from her napalmed village (1972).

Media theories of the 1960s discovered selective attention or exposure, perception, and retention. The effect of the media very much depended on the individual's thoughts and behavior, also on his or her prior judgments. Critical theorists of the period, who used theoretical approaches drawn from various fields, rejected the "linear model" of the "who-says-what-to-whom-through-which-channel" communications diagram as failing to examine the power relations and hidden ideologies of media content and institutions. They maintained that the economic interests of the owners of the media tend to determine, or at the very least to influence, media content.<sup>17</sup> The social-learning and cultivation theories emphasized the impact of the media on encouraging imitation, while the catharsis hypothesis argued that TV allowed people to "get it out of their system," to fantasize in the media. But audience surveys raise questions of representation, response rates, and genuineness of answers. These problems are accentuated by the "spiral of silence": people often tend to abstain from expressing their opinions if these are considered unpopular, in particular by the media itself.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it often proves difficult to map causal relationships between media content and individual behavior. In any case, the influence of the media is not (to adopt an old formula) in telling us "what to think," but in telling us "what to think about."

The current generation of powerful images shows an interesting evolution of sources: secret service tapes showing Mayor Marion Barry sniffing cocaine with a prostitute or the amateur's video of Rodney King's beating, both demonstrating, among other points, the broadcasters' selective choice of images for maximum effect. On the "smaller than life" TV screen, pictures must be more dramatic and subjects more "real" to captivate "consumers of spectacles."<sup>19</sup> During a three-week ratings period in 1989,

[...] the "Geraldo" show featured the following subjects: "Prison Motherhood," "Lady Lifers: Bad Girls Behind Bars," "Teen Prostitutes," "Women Who Date Married Men," "Girls Who Can't Say 'No!'," "Murderers Who Should Never Get

17. Communications experts of the sixties came into this new academic discipline from diverse fields, like McLuhan from English studies, or Schiller from economics, thus demonstrating that media studies had to be pluridisciplinary.

18. Joseph Straubhaar and Robert LaRose, *Communications Media in the Information Society* (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth Publ. Co., 1996) 413.

19. Martha Rosler's definition of audiences, quoted in *Culture Inc.* 146.

*Out of Prison,* "Campus Rape," "Illicit, Illegal, Immoral: Selling the Forbidden Desires," "Parents of Slain Prostitutes," "Cocaine Cowgirls," "Chippendales," "Battered Lesbians," "Contract to Kill: Running from the Mafia," "Men Who Marry Prostitutes," "Transsexual Transformations," "Angels of Death," and "Secret Lives of Stars."<sup>20</sup>

Such shows are intended to fascinate, therefore to attract, the potential consumers of the major propaganda in the American media which remains advertising.

Like so many other American media, advertising was revitalized by WWII thanks to massive government and military expenditures on its war-support, on motivational research and on propaganda campaigns. During the post-war years, "popular culture fused with merchandising, adapting and employing the instrumentation and techniques that appeared earlier in the research labs of the cold and corporate warriors."<sup>21</sup> Since then, the advertising industry has persistently adopted the depth approach, assuming that people do not always behave rationally, that they don't necessarily tell the truth and that they don't really know what they want. Consequently, they aim the ads at the level of repressed emotions, in particular at sexual fantasies.

Overwhelmingly commercial, the American media depend on advertising for their economic survival. According to *Advertising Age*, in 1994 corporations spent \$150 billion on national advertising!<sup>22</sup> CPM, "cost per mil," the price an advertiser pays to reach one thousand potential customers, is the economic gauge of the industry. This marketing imperative, which has shaped the form and content of the media, often leads ad-persons, writers and directors to emphasize what is supposed to appeal to the greatest number. Some observers have described the commercial media system as existing primarily to deliver the largest possible consumer audience to advertisers.

As media programs and products depend largely upon financial backing from advertisers, the latter require an appropriate "frame" within which to project their products to the right kind of audience. Relatively homogeneous target audiences for advertisers lead to increased segmentation, often facilitated by technological evolution: usage-based, demographic, or lifestyle segmentations; and, most interesting to advertisers, geodemographic clustering. The history of the media has even

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20. Neil Postman and Steve Powers, *How to Watch TV News* (Penguin Books, 1992) 92-93.

21. *Information Inequality* 63.

22. Quoted in Mark Crispin Miller, "Free the Media," *The Nation* (June 3, 1996): 12.

witnessed the death of some media or programs because, even though they maintained very high circulation figures or ratings, the demographics of the readership or viewers were unattractive to advertisers, usually too old and too rural, not sufficiently “upscale.” Memorable cases are *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Gunsmoke*.

In the 1970s, viewing habits were transformed by the advent of the remote control and by the multiplicity of channels offered by cable and satellite systems. Today more than ever, people “zap” to avoid unwanted content, “flip” or “cruise” to check what’s on elsewhere, “mute,” most often for ads or sports, “time-switch” and then “zip” out the commercials and credits in fast forward with their VCR, or “graze” (split-screen viewing, especially popular among the young). Simultaneous consumption of several media—watching TV while browsing magazines and talking, for instance—indicates that the use of the media is increasingly permanent, but also very casual, leading to amazingly low rates of retention or recall. Americans receive roughly 1500 advertising messages *per day*, of which the vast majority are supposed to miss their target entirely, others to cause a “boomerang effect,” and 10% to have a positive impact; but half of these are forgotten within 24 hours.<sup>23</sup> (But will they be recalled at the crucial moment of choice?)

Relatively new trends in advertising are the “infomercial,” a program-size blend of advertising and consumer advice, often categorized as PR material, meant to appear as a source of information, almost as a service; the “advertorial,” an ad disguised as editorial content, usually appearing in a magazine; and the “magalogue,” a direct-mail catalogue meant to appear as a fashion magazine. By integrating funding and promotional appeals in their shows, by meshing the Great Story and the “good news,” post-war TV evangelists were the first to blur the distinction between product advertising and programming. Today, entire networks, the “home shopping channels,” are turned over to advertisers, while on others, like MTV, or children’s television—the “kid-vid ghetto”—entertainment and advertisement can hardly be distinguished.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike in the 1950s when they were somewhat despised and deliberately annoying (to grab attention), today advertisements are faster, flashier and more seductive. They are often of far better quality and more attractive than the shows they interrupt. Most commercials are like mini-

23. Ignacio Ramonet, *Le Chewing-gum des yeux* (Paris: Alain Moreau, 1980) 66.

24. Starting in the eighties, broadcasters also introduced “time compression” machines to speed up movies and old TV programs (by 8%), thus allowing room for extra commercials without having to cut scenes. See Albert Scardino, “TV’s Pace and the Ads Increase as Time Goes By,” *New York Times* (Sept. 11, 1989): C 10, mentioned in *Information Inequality* 67-68.

fictions, allegories, spectacular sketches, and they now even tend to be "self-referential," advertising the ad as an admirable art form rather than the product. Advertising has thus become harder to distinguish from the supposedly non-commercial messages of the media culture. As they become more like entertainment films, ads aspire to "zap-proof status."<sup>25</sup>

Diversity or multiplicity of channels is sometimes interpreted as allowing the audience to be more "active," to express greater viewer discrimination and freedom. The President of Communications of ABC reminds us that nobody can watch everything on TV; therefore there is a choice.<sup>26</sup> Assuredly, the discovery of the importance of the social context of communication reoriented studies toward an interaction between the source and the audience. But it should not lure us into thinking that individual interpretations of media messages, even when they are very critical as they often are, might be sufficient to give the viewer or reader control. Mark Crispin Miller draws a far more perceptive conclusion about our relationship to the "box":

*[O]ur jeering hurts TV's commercial project not at all. Everybody knows that TV is mostly false and stupid, that almost no one pays that much attention to it—and yet it's on for over seven hours a day in the average household and it sells innumerable products. [...] TV [...] promises an unimpeded vision of the whole known universe, and yet it shows us nothing but the laughable reflection of our own unhappy faces. [...] Night after night, TV displays a bright infinitude of goods, employs a multitude of shocks and teases; and the only purpose of that spectacle is to promote the habit of spectatorship. It celebrates unending "choice" while trying to keep a jeering audience all strung out.<sup>27</sup>*

TV indeed "aims to be everywhere," to become our surroundings, to be "not only 'on the air,' but [...]the very air we breathe. [...]It has all but 'boxed us in'."<sup>28</sup>

### **Marshall McLuhan and the exploration of the mediasphere**

Even though McLuhan's intuitions often appear today as dubious aphorisms, he correctly perceived that the electronic media, and in particular the "electronic fireplace," was ushering in a new age of communication. According to McLuhan, people are shaped, "massaged"

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25. Miller, "Deride and Conquer," in Todd Gitlin, ed., *Watching Television* (New York: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture, 1986) 189. See also 187-192.

26. Quoted in Miller, "Deride and Conquer" 183.

27. Miller, "Deride and Conquer" 228.

28. Miller, *Boxed-In. The Culture of TV* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern U.P., 1988) 8 and 17.

by their media environment and by the pseudo-reality of a media culture. Back in the sixties, he introduced the idea that the media's influence extends well beyond its content, that the real message lies hidden elsewhere. Not only does the form of communication alter the content, but each form has preferences for certain kinds of messages. Media—the television or the computer, for instance—alter our perceptual habits, provide psychological extensions of our senses and, thanks to cybernetic devices, an amplification of our nervous system. They also create dependencies, probably even addictions. Finally, the “message” of any new medium or technology is also the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces in society. Thus, media transform society as well, as witnessed by the evolution of the U.S. since WWII. For McLuhan, in the information culture, the key to control was understanding the medium or process involved in new technologies and anticipating the direction of change. Today, few would argue with this point.

Long after the publication of *Understanding Media* (1964), many of McLuhan's “hunches” appear as debatable generalizations. Yet, in his remarkable earlier work, *The Mechanical Bride*, he skillfully dissected the emerging commercial social body. He was one of the first to draw attention to the impact of war, technology, business and advertising on our definitions and experiences of freedom, education and information, sports and sexual fantasies. In short, our whole collective psychology, including our vices and virtues, had been redefined to serve marketing purposes.

Even though many specific aspects of his theories might seem outdated and almost quaint—his categorization of media into hot and cool, for instance—his overall theory appears to have renewed relevance. The psychological impact of media on people is now obvious: the identification of dependent users with their most recent media extensions; the immediacy of communications; the strategic importance of controlling communications; the emergence of a very real—but far from universal—“global village.” Disney claims to provide universal messages because “it's a small world after all;” and IBM offers universal solutions for a “small planet.”

One of the problems of McLuhan's legacy is that all those media critics who define themselves as politically active, whether on the right or on the left, cannot accept his famous formula—that “the medium is the message,” that content matters less than the channel through which it reaches us—without somewhat negating their own views. This form of technological determinism, of one-dimensionality, can only appeal to optimistic technocratic advocates of new communications channels, to media freaks and hackers who try to carve out alternative niches in the mediasphere, or to enthusiastic and innovative evangelical broadcasters. Ben Armstrong, head of the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), saw

himself as a broadcaster who "just happens to be Christian," and predicted that "Christian TV would be the tool that ushers in the triumphant return of Jesus Christ."<sup>29</sup> The political Right feels uncomfortable with McLuhan's theories because he was fairly critical and pessimistic concerning the system; the Left because he was a deeply religious man whose objections were interpreted as being more moral and reactionary than political and progressive.

In a very perceptive article entitled "Deride and Conquer," Mark Crispin Miller concludes:

*Throughout the virtual whole of any broadcast day, TV offers us TV and TV only, representing no action that does not somehow refer to, and reinforce, the relationship, or stand-off, between the bored, fixated viewer and his set. [...] The spectacle is an endless advertisement for the posture of inert modernity. [...] TV begins by offering us a beautiful hallucination of diversity, but it is finally like a drug whose high is only the conviction that its user is too cool to be addicted.<sup>30</sup>*

Those who recognize their addiction to the media, whether they enjoy it or whether they loathe it, can truly understand what McLuhan had to say. Those who confidently consider that the media does not run their lives, that they make up their own minds, reject McLuhan's all too global views. He posed the right questions but few of his theories, when examined in detail, stand up to investigation. In conclusion, I would say (to paraphrase a media critic of the late sixties): McLuhan is difficult to understand, hard to believe, but dangerous to overlook.

### Television's mediascaping

By the early sixties, most observers agreed that television was emerging as the major media habit and agenda-setter. Through its ubiquity and saturation programming, it was transforming the media landscape. Competing older media—in particular radio, film, magazines and newspapers—were forced to rebuild their formats.

Throughout WWII, radio had been the dominant source of information and propaganda. The boom in radio set manufacturers' sales provoked a twenty-fold increase between 1941 and 1944 (from \$240 million to \$4.5 billion). Like other electronics industries, the technology of radio transmitters progressed as a result of war-related research: "The war transformed the radio industry into the electronics industry," thus giving

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29. Quoted in Laurence R. Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1994) 249. See also 240.

30. In Gitlin 227-8.

electronics “the military basis that would sustain it for the next four decades.”<sup>31</sup>

In 1945, the FCC, responsible for the allocation of broadcast frequencies, and responsive to RCA’s lobbying, decided to move frequency modulation (FM) radio to another part of the spectrum, thus opening up space for commercial television channels instead, but also rendering all existent FM radio transmitters and receivers obsolete. FM radio did not recover until the 1960s when it concentrated on high quality music transmission.

When transistors finally entered the civilian market in the mid-fifties—they had been invented by the Bell Labs in 1947 but the military had bought most of them until 1960—they added mobility to the AM radio which managed to retain an audience thanks to its association with the “drive time” of the fifties’ car-culture and to the niche it found in kitchens and bedrooms. It became a diversified, background media.

Inspired by the Armed Forces Radio’s wartime use of the new technologies of tape and of the improved technology of records (see Sim Copans’ interview in this issue), radio broadcasters claimed almost exclusive use of recorded music. This also marked the end of national radio networks. Local radio stations—even in metropolitan areas—needed only cheap recorded music appealing to sectional tastes. More importantly, they didn’t have to compete for national advertising, but could rely on local advertising. From then on, radio programming became increasingly segmented.

Most radio stations are privately owned and operated on a commercial basis but there are also noncommercial alternatives, educational or community stations, or Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) affiliates. Because of the relatively small initial investment required, and because of the often local character of radio stations, possibilities are greater than in other broadcast media. However, diversity of programming is becoming an issue as marketing imperatives dominate the radio industry. In 1988, the trade magazine *Radio & Records* described radio as “little more than electronic real estate.”<sup>32</sup>

In the 1950s, Americans, notoriously “visual,” preferred TV to radio. Also family-oriented, they preferred the convenient and comfortable enjoyment of prime-time home viewing to the excitement of “going out” to the movies.

Immediately after the war, the Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA) refused to sell its films to the rival TV medium. However, it soon realized that television could be an important source of profit and, by the

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31. *Infoculture* 228.

32. Quoted in *Culture Inc.* 40.

mid-fifties, Hollywood studios, which had largely benefited from the war by producing propaganda films and by occupying the world film market, started earning a large share of their income by selling old movies to television and by producing TV shows and made-for-TV movies. The major studios also adapted by producing wide-screen and high-budget films, thus providing the audience with a different perception and new sensations, then by going for the mid-fifties' youth market, the baby-boomers. Thanks to a very favorable Supreme Court ruling—*Burstyn v. Wilson* (1952)—extending free speech guarantees to movies even when they appear as sacrilegious, Hollywood could start dealing with more daring subjects in a more daring manner. The liberalizing effect of this decision was reinforced in 1957 by the *Roth v. the United States* decision concerning obscenity, thus clearing the way for far more sexually explicit material and, beyond that, for the pornographic revolution of the seventies. This led to theater and TV movies treating subject matter quite differently, thus also accentuating the generational segmentation of the audiences.<sup>33</sup>

One of Hollywood's post-war problems was that, in its competition against television, it was largely excluded from the advertising market. However, advertiser tie-in deals became a common practice in the late seventies, especially after Coca-Cola bought 49% of Columbia Pictures and started "plugging" its products in its own movies. Elaborate "product placement" enabled advertisers to subliminally reach one of the last captive audiences, but it also made movie producers increasingly dependent on payments for displaying products, preferably in the hands or on the body of the star-hero. For this and other more technical reasons, the arts of film and advertising drew ever closer. McLuhan was one of the first to note that the success of fast-paced, short sequence films was prepared by the audience's habit of watching ads which had introduced these principles in the viewer's daily life. Movies started looking more like advertisements with many close-ups on the hero and the product. As Mark Crispin Miller puts it:

*[T]oday's Hollywood movie works without, or against, the potential depth or latitude of cinema, in favor of that systematic overemphasis deployed in advertising (and all other propaganda). Each shot presents a content closed and unified, like a fist, and makes the point right in your face: big gun, big car, nice ass, full moon, a chase (great shoes!), big crash (blood, glass), a lobby (doorman), sarcasm, drinks, a tonguey, pugilistic kiss (nice sheets!), and so on.<sup>34</sup>*

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33. See Donna McCrohan, *Prime Time, our time: America's life and times through the prism of television* (Rocklin, Ca.: Prima Publ., 1990).

34. Miller, "End of Story," in Miller, ed., *Seeing Through Movies* (New York: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture, 1990) 205.

Part of the commercial strategy of the studios is also based on movie release dates to various media and markets. A typical distribution order might be: domestic theaters; foreign theaters; pay-per-view and/or videocassette; pay TV; foreign TV; US network TV; and finally syndication for minor markets and for reruns, including for the basic cable service. However, many lower quality and budget films never even make it into movie theaters, going straight to the videocassette and cable markets. In fact, since 1986, video sales and rentals represent American films' largest income share.<sup>35</sup>

Like the movie industry, magazines and newspapers tried to resist TV but they soon came to the same commonsensical decision: "if you can't lick 'em, join 'em."

In the fifties and sixties, mass-circulation general-interest magazines, which largely depended on the same type of national advertising as television, responded to the challenge by trying to build wider audiences. But, despite their ubiquity, magazines could not beat TV and began losing ad income. By the seventies, many magazines modified their retail strategy, aiming at the captive, bored audience in the cashier's queue, thus also saving on rising postal costs. They also modified their content, slavishly following the agenda set by television's pseudo-events and adopting a kaleidoscopic look reminiscent of TV's heterogeneous content and fast-paced images. Newsmagazines survived as complements to TV news and features, and women's magazines survived thanks to their audiences' specific demographics and consumer power, and to their close ad-edit linkage. The trend in the magazine industry is toward ever increasing segmentation, both in editorial content and in advertising.

After the war, newspapers lost a large share of national advertising, but they were able to compensate for this with local advertisement, with successive technological labor-saving devices, and by following the shifting demographics of the American population, in particular the shift to the suburbs. Today, one third of weekly papers, often entertainment-oriented, cover the suburbs, and this represents a constantly rising market. The content of newspapers has also changed. It has become more interpretive, focusing on "the news behind the (TV) news," and syndicated features—pseudo-news—have gained more space. Today, 44% of American adults read newspapers daily for an average of less than twenty minutes (compared to 66% in 1980). Many of them are older subscribers addicted to the reassuring habit of early morning home delivery.

For the press, it is in the local and regional market that the objective is exclusivity because most newspaper advertising is local, and local

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35. See Douglas Gomery, "If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall," in Miller, *Seeing Through Movies* 79.

monopoly maximizes advertising revenue. Yet, the overall trend in the print industry is toward greater consolidation and concentration of ownership.

### **Cruising along the electronic "toll-way"**

Network TV dominated the mediascape throughout the sixties and seventies. But it is now its turn to be replaced by other sources and channels, in particular by an interactive and individualized personal computer.

In 1978, the three networks' share of the TV audience was 92%; today, with FOX, it is 60%. The networks—excellent examples of economies of scale through widely distributed programming—are the victims of their "lowest common denominator" and "copycat" programming, and of the diversity introduced by the multichannel environment and by the videocassette markets. By allowing people more personal choice, the VCR increased the possibility of narrowcasting. It also inaugurated a boom in pornographic material which, in the late seventies, represented over half of videocassette sales. Today, Americans buy 75 million pretaped cassettes a year, and rent over two billion.

In 1973, the FCC required that cable operators provide local-access programming and that their stations be bi-directional, thus making possible the introduction of "pay-per-view" TV. Cable operators, receiving programming from communications satellites, offered not just a better picture, but additional channels in order to attract new subscribers. But it was not until the late seventies, thanks to President Carter's commitment to deregulation, that cable and satellite finally took off. By 1980, when they were finally free to develop without federal restrictions, there were already 4,200 cable systems in operation. Superstations and networks available only on satellite via cable began to appear, led by Ted Turner's TBS and CNN, by CBN, later known as "The Family Channel," by the all-sports ESPN (since bought by ABC), and by C-SPAN (1979), dubbed "call-in democracy," which provides live and thorough coverage of major political pseudo-events and became a pioneer of interactivity by launching its "viewer call-in program."<sup>36</sup>

The FCC's 1983 authorization of multichannel systems resulted in an intense franchise war to wire the cities opposing the cable operators, the telephone companies, the direct broadcast satellite (DBS), the "over-the-air" wireless pay-TV channels, and even the videocassette market. By the

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36. Although the audience of C-SPAN and C-SPAN2 (1986) rarely exceeds 2 million out of a potential audience of 70 million, more important is the fact that 98% of its viewers voted in 1992, and the networks provide instant feedback from them. Clearly, these people are political opinion leaders!

1990s, this opposition had developed into a major politico-lobbying battle. Today, there are over 13,000 cable systems in the U.S. with over 130 million subscribers, the two major systems being Tele-Communications, Inc. (TCI) and Time-Warner Cable with over eighteen million subscribers.

By being able to narrowcast hundreds of programs, genre channels as well as demographic channels, cables are better at targeting, more flexible and more profitable. Cables start profits at very low ratings because their money comes not only from ads, but also from sponsors and subscriptions. Considering the multiplicity of channels, ratings for individual cable satellite networks are of course weak, but in 1993 the cumulative viewing reached over two-fifths of the audience.<sup>37</sup>

In their protracted resistance to the rising cable industry, the networks and the TV magazines dependent on their advertising, especially the very influential *TV Guide*, long caricatured the opposition as that between pay-TV and “free” TV—thus, in fact, presenting the issue as not just economic, but as quasi ideological. They also benefited from the further deregulation of the eighties which allowed more violence and sex, more ads and less public service. Their more recent reaction to a dwindling viewership has been to broadcast reality shows, heart-tugging documentaries, or pseudo-talk shows like “Geraldo” filled with emotional outbursts and appealing to voyeuristic tendencies. Interactivity has invaded even the most traditional forms of television through call-in shows, forums and participatory interview shows. However, in a post-channel media scene of unlimited choice, networks might have to concentrate on news, sports, and major events, the only type of programming likely to attract a broad audience.

Through interconnectedness, the new electronic and optical networks will blur the distinction between different technologies, between computers and television, between telephone, satellite, and cable, between video and movies, between information, advertisement, entertainment and services, between one-way and two-way communication, between interpersonal and mass communications, between public and private, between the source and the audience, perhaps even immersing the user in a “virtual reality,” inside the system itself.<sup>38</sup> The revenue to be generated by the building of this “electronic superhighway” is estimated at \$3.5 trillion in 2001. (The GNP of the U.S. is approximately 6 trillion.)

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37. Straubhaar and LaRose 251. Cable systems themselves are now threatened by the VCR, by “pay-per-view,” and by DBS or, as the President of TCI says: “Don’t be stupid.” Quoted in François Mariet, *La Télévision américaine. Médias, marketing et publicité* (2<sup>e</sup> éd., Paris: Economica, 1992) 134. See also Josette Bonte, *La télévision à la carte* (Paris: P.U.F., Que Sais-Je?, 1996).

38. *Infoculture* 277.

The centerpiece of this new architecture is, of course, the personal computer, the media symbol of our age which, like so many other technological innovations, was born from military-financed research during WWII and first used in wars. Most early computers received their financing from the U.S. government, the Pentagon and the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). They soon became a strategic necessity for the military. Their first major calculations consisted in computations for designing atomic weapons as well as ballistic calculations and operations research. The basic principle of this type of research, "maximum efficiency," was to translate into "maximum profit" for post-war civilian uses.

Whirlwind, built at MIT between 1945 and 1953, financed first by the Office of Naval Research, then by the Air Force, was to coordinate the SAGE (Semi-Automatic Ground Environment), the computerized electronic air defense system of the U.S. which cost some \$61 billion.<sup>39</sup> This system represents the first wide-scale data communications application using "modems" (MODulator-DEModulator) to allow the inter-computer's digital language to travel along phone lines. The SAGE was also responsible for introducing the concept of on-line time-sharing systems, which allows multiple simultaneous use of computers.

IBM's first general-purpose computer was the 701, adapted from the Defense Calculator it had produced for the DOD in 1951.<sup>40</sup> It was to provide the model for business, and later personal and family computers until the mid-sixties.

By the early sixties, systems analysts and operational researchers in the government and in the Pentagon resorted to computers to solve every major problem, which led to the "electronic battlefield." However, still in their infancy, computers were unable to guide the American military to victory in Vietnam. Back home, TV, the well-established agenda-setter, was also trying to "support our boys" but its images were providing daily doses of loss.<sup>41</sup> The Pentagon was to draw appropriate lessons and, in future wars, such as that in the Persian Gulf in 1991, learn to harness the "timid

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39. For the development of the computer for military ends, see *Infoculture* 148-9, 311-20, 347-50.

40. The first American nonmilitary commercial computer was the UNIVAC I delivered to the U.S. Census Bureau in 1951, the first to hit the headlines by predicting the outcome of the 1952 presidential election.

41. In *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1986), Daniel C. Hallin convincingly demonstrates that the political establishment's view of the war prevailed on network TV until at least 1968. However, there might also have been a growing "credibility gap" between the view the media wanted to project and the doubts many Americans had about involvement in Vietnam.

giant” to project carefully selected and spectacular, yet reassuring, “virtual” images lauding the technological wonders of impersonalized conflicts.

In the 1960s, the Pentagon and the NASA invested massively in the R&D of a new electronic technology, integrated circuits. These found their first use in military programs, then in the space program in which the strategic or political results, rather than the cost, appeared on the bottom line. Throughout this period, the military remained the largest financial supporter of computer manufacturers and virtually all programs were initiated by organizations working under contract for them. They were followed by the civilian government agencies (IRS, CIA, FBI, and others), then by private firms, particularly banks and mail-order firms interested in creating data banks of information about their clients.

The first “local area network” (LAN) was the Octopus network of the AEC’s Livermore laboratory in 1964. It was soon followed by a “wide area network” (WAN) dedicated to defense research. By the late seventies, the military began linking computers into networks through telecommunications channels.

In 1964, the Rand Corporation, a Cold War think tank, was asked by the DOD to imagine a system which would allow the military to continue communicating even after a massive nuclear attack. This system, ARPANET, which had to be without central control or authority, depended on total interconnectedness between all its parts. Each computer was of equal importance and equally situated within the network. The modem, the key link between computers, was to give millions of individual users access to a potentially global electronic network, as it also created expanded possibilities of decentralized networks through the “bulletin board service,” or BBS.

CompuServe and The Source, both founded in 1979, were the first large computer consumer dial-up services. Computer links then appeared everywhere, and the fax market took off in the 1980s. By the 1990s, computers became ubiquitous, increasing speed and reach, but not radically altering the configuration of work.

There is, of course, no denying the efficiency and convenience of PCs. However, they also introduced new concerns, new forms of psychological and physical problems. Examples of this phenomenon are frustration when you don’t know how to reach what you’re looking for, anxiety and addiction, repetitive stress injuries (RSI) and eye fatigue, and muscular and skeletal injuries. In 1990, the cost of these ailments was estimated at \$20 billion a year.<sup>42</sup> For many workers, the computer is

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42. *Infoculture* 347. See also Richard Saul Wurman’s *Information Anxiety* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

perceived as a form of impersonal monitoring system. As McLuhan warned back in the sixties, a "technological extension of our senses designed to alleviate physical stress," designed to make work or leisure more efficient, is likely "to bring on psychic stress that may be much worse."<sup>43</sup> The introduction of new systems partly responds to the "keep up with the Jones Corporation (or colleague)" syndrome. The information society, and its constantly changing technology, can project on your personality—you don't have E-Mail!—and has the potential to become very intrusive.

A whole range of new services in the telephone business—automated telephone credit cards, expanded 800 numbers, call forwarding, voice mail, caller ID (the "electronic peephole"), etc.—mean you can be "reached" anytime, anywhere, but they also raise ethical issues as more communications often mean less privacy or more obtrusiveness (for sexually explicit messages, for instance).<sup>44</sup>

Are the results of the computer revolution worth the investment in information technology, estimated at about one trillion dollars during the 1980s? Overall, investments appear disproportionate to gains in productivity. Are many workers constantly learning new technologies which distract from the real work? Are successive information systems paid off before they are rendered obsolete? Don't computers, in fact, sometimes automate problems rather than solve them?<sup>45</sup>

Information technologies have led to changes in the structure of the work pyramid by up-, re-, or de-skilling. Two new conceptual models describe the new structure as either the "flattened pyramid," with no middle layers of management, or the "core and ring" model with a core of key employees and a ring of contingent employees hired according to the fluctuating needs of the corporation and perhaps working out of their "electronic cottages" in a modern version of the "putting out" system.<sup>46</sup> Today, the trend is to downsize computer systems, to network PCs rather than rely on a mainframe with terminals, and towards "ensemble computing," PCs hooked up over networks to share the work. Some observers even predict "virtual corporations" with work being E-mailed which could improve the quality of life on a variety of levels.

Computer technology raises the question of computer literacy and the notion of a "hidden agenda" according to which computer education is also a way to make people unwittingly accept an organization of the society dominated by the electronics industry. According to some critics, a

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43. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) 72.

44. "Pay-per-call" 900 numbers were first used for "telephone sex" which, by 1990, was a \$2.4 billion business.

45. *Infoculture* 349, and Straubhaar and LaRose 356.

46. Straubhaar and LaRose, 359.

paralyzing overload of information, an information “glut,” convergent, persuasive, and based on manipulatory slogans—technology as progress, democracy as access, “free flow” of information—can wear down rational, critical thought. This technological rationality, which dominates our way of thinking, has become an end in itself and helps justify a marketing society devoid of ethical or moral standards.

Other critics, such as Herbert Schiller,<sup>47</sup> argue that trends in information are mere marketing strategies and sheer propaganda. Information is being reduced to a commodity as we are moving toward what Vincent Mosco has dubbed “the pay-per society” in which information will become more expensive and thus less accessible to poor people or countries.<sup>48</sup> Is this not likely to create a vast “information underclass” stuck with “the Tube” and with “POTS” (plain old telephone service), and excluded from many other important services?

Another major issue today concerns control of the Internet, the network of networks, a major tool in international competition, which is well in keeping with the social trends of the nineties with their emphasis on responsibility and autonomy. Media resourcefulness participates in the general erosion of trust in traditional forms of authority. In this respect, and perhaps sometimes naively, the new interactive media are perceived as examples of “do-it-yourself” (DIY) technology, as a manner for individuals to regain control, providing new means of education, protection, work and economic gain, health safety and community involvement. Techno-intimacy makes personal relations distant and safe, including different forms of mediated or virtual sex, extremely popular in the new media. It also breaks isolation, something particularly important in an aging America interested in reliable forms of communication. But how safe is network communication, how inquisitive and obtrusive might it become?

Networking also participates in the general move toward privatization. It allows people to retreat to their “electronic cottages” within urban villages, while remaining connected to their “media communities.” This move, which has been facilitated by the increased possibilities of feedback and by the Net’s reach, might also further buttress “Fortress America.”<sup>49</sup>

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47. In *Information and the Crisis Society* (New York: Oxford U. P., 1986).

48. *The pay-per society: Computers and Communication in the Information Age* (Norwood N.J.: Ablex, 1989).

49. Douglas Rushkoff, *Media Virus! Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

### The "free flow of information"

These home media centers—connected to a global network—represent the most recent stage in an "Americanization" of communications which started with WWII.

With the post-war imperative to export, "private, American-made media products and U.S. informational networks blanketed the world."<sup>50</sup> They much relied on the concept of "free flow of information," actively promoted by major American media as early as June 1944. It adapts laissez-faire ideology to communications, considered a merchandise like any other. The State Department played its role with the US Information Agency (1953). This "free flow" doctrine, presented as universal and humanistic, rejects any kind of interference in its claims of "objectivity" and "neutrality," in particular any international codes or agreements that might impose social accountability as a principle for the informational system. Instead, new information technologies are presented as the means of reducing inequalities between and inside nations, thus allowing poor countries to "leap-frog" the Western industrial age. "A very close cooperation between the government and the private corporate media in the pursuit of these positions has marked the last four decades."<sup>51</sup>

In the 1960s, with the massive exportation of American cultural products, critics started to denounce what they perceived as a form of imperialism, and they underlined peoples' need for "cultural proximity," meaning exposure to media products from their own culture. However, the cultural fragmentation of the American media's content—made possible by a vast yet diverse national market and by the technology of narrowcasting—considerably facilitated the export of U.S. cultural goods.

"Transborder data flows" (TDF), largely controlled by big corporations, risk accentuating this unbalance. For instance, the U.S., which produces only 5% of the films in the world, gets 50% of the movie receipts and, in 1987, accounted for 79% of global film and television exports. On-line data bases in the US and computer software programs are two other examples of considerable, though less visible, export items.<sup>52</sup>

Do American conglomerates like IBM, CNN or Disney provide feedback opportunities for local cultures, or do they tend to "whitewash"

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50. Schiller, *Communications and Cultural Domination* (White Plains, N.Y.: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976) 38.

51. Schiller, "Is There a United States Information Policy?" in William Preston Jr., Edward S. Herman, and Herbert I. Schiller, *Hope & Folly. The United States and UNESCO, 1945-1985* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989) 288 and 299. See also *Culture Inc.* 49.

52. *Culture Inc.* 127-128.

regional identities?<sup>53</sup> American information is globally imported but it is also imitated to the point where some see Europeans as becoming “transculturalized.” It is still a matter of debate to know whether a form of cultural imperialism based on production and control of information will lead or not to the “boomerang effect” according to which foreign media products can be used in a strategy of “counter-penetration.”<sup>54</sup> However, exposure to commercial cultural products does usually lead to their consumption.

Worldwide, the transnational corporate sector “with its affiliates and dependents *inside* each national configuration,” self-servingly describes itself as “‘free’ in contrast to the ‘controlled’ or ‘enslaved’ media elsewhere,”<sup>55</sup> while successfully pressing for what is called “deregulation” or “liberalization” or “privatization,” allowing the commercial utilization of telecommunications and the massive financing of broadcasting and cable by advertising. U.S. efforts under Reagan to destroy the international public sector has allowed “transnational corporate decision making [to replace] national sovereignty in a good part of the world.”<sup>56</sup>

According to Herbert Schiller, a “new international information order” is long overdue. Its first principle should be

*the full recognition of the principle of national sovereignty, which, when applied to information, insists that each nation has the right to determine what information comes in and what goes out. In the implementation of this cardinal rule, other needs become apparent: information flows should not be one-directional; all nations should have equal access to all sources of information and participate equally in the control over, and use of, international transmission channels.*<sup>57</sup>

This would mean the reduction of the monopoly power of transnational media. The degree to which these principles appear as utopian attests to the ideological effectiveness through media control and message saturation of the dominant transnational media.

The private media monopolies, which control global information, are not publicly accountable and their interests are clearly different from those of the public. Furthermore, the information sector “controls the definition and presentation of itself, and thereby is relatively invulnerable to critics and criticism.”<sup>58</sup> Besides, we must rely on the communications monopolies

53. Rushkoff 226.

54. See René-Jean Ravault, “Des effets pervers de l’expansion mondiale des médias américains,” in Claude-Jean Bertrand, éd., *Les médias américains en France* (Paris: Belin, 1989) 236-51.

55. Schiller, *Hope & Folly* 293.

56. *Information Inequality* 135. See also page 69 and *Culture Inc.* 115.

57. Schiller in *Hope & Folly* 297.

58. Schiller in *Hope & Folly* 289.

to denounce any malfunctions and abuses within their own system as politicians and academics tend to shy away from a frontal examination of the conflicts of interest between the media owners' strategic informational responsibilities and their economic and political roles.

*The consequence is a national discourse that is increasingly one-dimensional. And although concentration in industry is as American as apple pie, its presence and metastatic growth in the information-cultural field calls into question the elemental assumptions of democratic government. Can we be confident that the large institutions that preside over the society's daily output and intake of imagery and information are adequately informing the citizenry?<sup>59</sup>*

To provide people with serious guarantees, existing control over the media should be transferred from private corporate decision-making to public participation and accountability, making information and its technologies widely available, inexpensive, and non-commercial instruments to further social and cultural ends.<sup>60</sup>

### **Public and "people" control of the media**

Public control of the media, strictly reactive, appears in the ratings and in long-shot licence challenges. Theoretically, the public also controls public broadcasting but the fact that corporate sponsors avoid controversial programming for fear of hostile reactions either from their own ranks or from public pressure groups has a dampening effect on programming. Some media watchdog groups—anti-indecency or political correctness groups, on the left or on the right—are particularly effective through lobbying, by putting pressure on politicians, or by boycotting the sponsors of objectionable media products.

New technologies such as desktop publishing, computer bulletin boards and networking, might be conducive to "people" control, to decentralization, to plebiscitary and participatory democracy. One encouraging example is the public-access Paper Tiger Television in New York City and Deep Dish TV, its satellite distribution arm. The solution is to gain control of the means of media production, and much of the hope here rests on the decentralized network whose founding tenets emphasized unlimited and free access and information. With little to no possibility of hierarchical control, the ill-defined "cyberspace" could allow people to escape into voluntary regroupings in "virtual communities." A number of "alternative" networks do exist, such as PeaceNet or EcoNet. Between the

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59. *Culture Inc.* 164.

60. See *Culture Inc.* 171-3.

traditional centralized and vertical communication, and the new horizontal forms of communication, there lies a “media gap” favorable to group communication.<sup>61</sup>

In conclusion, DOD investments in electronics communications set the post-WWII course of innovations in the mediasphere. These massive disbursements of public funds benefited corporations whose marketing strategy first led to our daily TV fare, then to our multimedia environment. Marshall McLuhan, who raised pertinent questions but did not always provide convincing answers, was one of the first to realize that the commercial media’s total impact extended well beyond its messages. Already a crucial agenda-setter for early media studies, some of McLuhan’s intuitions still appear relevant as the seamless Web is presented as yet another liberatory force, as a cult object. He also predicted that marketing redefinitions of key concepts such as “freedom” could, ultimately, threaten any real choice or alternative. This corporate rhetoric provides the ideological underpinning of deregulation and of its international extension, the “free flow” doctrine. Multiplicity of channels and apparent diversity of sources, presented as “choice,” has been accompanied by the growth of transnational media conglomerates, a net reduction of sources. Today, global privatization of media sources and channels threatens the public’s need for free, reliable, and accountable information and services.

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61. See W. Russell Newman, *The Future of the Mass Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1992) 9-11.