

Structure, Control, Power

The “System” of American Media

An interview with Herbert I. Schiller

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*Professor Herbert I. Schiller, former head of the Communications Division at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) has been, for the past three decades, a leading critic of the American media and of U.S. foreign policy. After earning his PhD from New York University (1960), he taught at the Pratt Institute in New York City, at the City College of New York, at the University of Illinois, at UCSD, and at New York University. He has been Visiting Professor at the University of Amsterdam, the University of Stockholm, the University of Paris VIII, the Hebrew University (Israel), and has also lectured at many other universities in Latin America, Asia, and Europe. The author of eight major books on the media, and coeditor of five others, he has relentlessly exposed the ideological underpinnings, marketing imperatives, and international ramifications of the American media. Among his most important works, whose titles are quite evocative, we can mention *The Mind Managers* (1970), *Mass Communications and the American Empire* (1971), *Communications and Cultural Domination* (1976), *Culture Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (1989), and *Information Inequality: The Deepening Social Crisis in America* (1996).*



Over the past thirty years, teachers and students in France have read and used many of your works in media studies. Our readers might like to know more about the man behind the books. Who are you, Professor Schiller?

This interview was conducted on June 27, 1997, at the home of Herbert Schiller, La Jolla, California.

Well, I've been a teacher, writer, and lecturer for most of my life. I have to tell an audience such as yours that I was married in Paris and my

wife and I received a “*certificat*” in 1946 when the government was understandably trying to increase the birthrate. My marriage certificate was accompanied by this “*livret de famille*” in which there is room to put down twelve children. We disappointed the government: we had only two children. To this day, this is my legal marriage certificate, so I guess that allows me to feel a little more “*rapport*” with the French.

I spent several years in the army and found that, afterwards, it was very difficult to resume my education because I had so much world experience which contradicted what my academic teachers were telling me.

Where were you stationed?

For two and a half years I was stationed in Algeria and in Morocco where I witnessed a very strong display of—if you pardon the expression—French “imperialism” at work. After I came out of the army, I worked for almost three years as a civilian employee of the American occupation forces in Western Germany. I was still pretty young, and it was there that I received my real education. I saw the restoration of German capitalism, the way they reconstructed the system which was supposed to have been destroyed by the allied war effort. I saw the very deliberate re-assembling of the whole cartel system and the rehabilitation of the nazis. So, as I say, my real education in terms of social practice, in terms of how social institutions are organized, how decisions are made, came about from being placed in these unusual circumstances, from being on the spot.

When I returned to the United States, I went back to school but found it difficult after these experiences. I started teaching at Pratt Institute in New York City, where I stayed for ten or eleven years. We were then entering the McCarthy period, I was studying for my PhD, but my views were already pretty strongly organized. As a result of my experiences in the army and in Germany, I was, I guess, what you would call a pretty strong leftist. Here I was teaching at Pratt, a private college financed originally with Rockefeller-Standard Oil money. It was such a conservative place that they wouldn’t even accept government money to build dormitories for the students who were coming in at the end of the war, while everybody else was grabbing these funds. That’s how conservative the place was! Strangely enough, this citadel of conservatism was like a refuge. I don’t mean to say that I felt totally relaxed, but I could say almost what I wanted. Who could imagine a radical teacher at Pratt? Meanwhile, all around me, people were being pulled out of the universities, being dismissed; it was a truly terrible purge period.

After I finished my PhD at New York University in 1960, I moved from Pratt to the University of Illinois and spent ten years there. That’s where I

made the transition from being an institutional economist. I was one of the last economists who was not what you would call a “mathematical economist.” Institutional economists no longer exist in the United States; they have been “exterminated.” At Illinois, I moved into a position in the field of communications, and that’s where the transition occurred. But I never lost, or ignored my economic perspective on social matters. I always try to first look at the material reality. During the sixties, I was pretty active in speaking out against the Vietnam war. As a result of my political activism, life at Illinois was becoming less and less serene; so, in 1970, I left for the University of California at San Diego.

These were times of turbulence at this relatively new university (UCSD). The students had launched major protests: the Afro-Americans, Latinos, some native Americans, and a handful of white radicals had seized buildings and demanded a college dedicated to the instruction of the minorities and an education tied to the needs of the people in the developing countries; in other words, a truly Third World college. I was recruited to handle the communications division. I didn’t know what I was getting into, but I did know that it was about time to move on. For this job I was interviewed not only by faculty, but also by students. This was one of the rare times when there was a meaningful student input, a very fluid period which didn’t last long. The students interviewers proved very insistent, asking how my research might help their particular needs, how might I be useful to their cause. Apparently, my answers satisfied them and I became the head of a communications program. Almost immediately after we were established, we were attacked on all sides, by the surrounding conservative community, by the conservatives on the campus, by the state government. The students originally wanted to name their college the Lumumba-Zapata College; you can imagine that name never got anywhere. For many years it was called the Third College because it was the third one to be established on campus. This the students approved of because it could be interpreted as meaning Third World. The administration kept on looking for names, looking for names, so finally about two years ago they were able to suggest the name Thurgood Marshall. So, in the early seventies, the college was a very original place, but all of that got stripped away very rapidly and we relapsed into what you would generally call an academic and conventional type of work; but I’ve always tried to do my course work in a critical manner.

I did an awful lot of travelling and lecturing in the late seventies and eighties, and my work is known and pretty well received in many parts of the world. In 1982, I taught at Paris VIII where the cosmopolitan student body proved very stimulating. My books have been translated into fifteen languages—Spanish, German, Korean, Japanese, Russian, Chinese, and others—but I must say the French have never translated a single one of my

books. However, for twenty-five years, I've occasionally written articles for *Le Monde diplomatique*. In fact, in the early seventies, they published one article that became one of the major pieces in the discussion for a New International Information Order ("la libre circulation de l'information").¹

For a long time the American government, and in particular the Department of Defense has basically determined the media's technological evolution, in other words the priorities in terms of developing new media technologies of communications, whether they be the radar, the radio, the computer, and it has determined this by financing R&D in the communications industry. But, at the same time, the major media organizations are considered as the real agenda-setters in terms of contents and messages. So, in the absence of any kind of significant adversarial relationship today, what is, in fact, the division of labor between the American government and the media corporations?

I would say that in recent years, and especially in the Clinton period, an effort has been made to encourage governments to further open the field for the corporate media operating both domestically and globally. By that I mean they have encouraged certain directions that are of great profitability and value to major media corporations. This is called deregulation, and the U.S. has pushed deregulation not only in the media area, but in the entire economy as well. In the media area, this has allowed several things to occur. First, it has enabled enormous concentration to proceed. The American media have been concentrated for a very long time, so this is not something that just appeared. But I am now speaking in terms of a new dimension of concentration, not just in specific media, but a cross-concentration which means that whereas there used to be a stand-alone TV, a stand-alone press, and a stand-alone film, increasingly these are absorbed into huge corporate structures. And all of this has come about, or at least has been greatly facilitated by the government's present form of deregulation; in fact, certain kinds of language are used—the threat of "monopoly," for example—as a way to make this process seem very benign, seem favorable to the public's interest. Whenever you talk about state monopolies, of course, the American population is always hostile, but state monopoly has usually been, and this is certainly true in Europe, a structure of public responsibility. But by labelling it a "monopoly," it appears that destroying or weakening it is doing something very beneficial to people. So, the semantic issue has been part of the whole process.

1. An article by Herbert Schiller on the U.S. Information Policy since 1945 is to appear in the forthcoming (August 1997) issue of *Le Monde diplomatique*.

Deregulation has had an enormous impact on U.S. expansion into the global market, because deregulation, as pressed by Washington and the corporate world, means that the abilities of national states to in any way insulate themselves, to in any way defend their own national sovereignty in the crucial area of communications, becomes less and less possible. And so, in a deregulated French or German communications system, not only will local capital be able to carry on whatever it wants to do without public scrutiny, but much more significantly, the very powerful, very tiny number of enormously concentrated U.S. media companies have much greater opportunities to move into these national spaces. And, of course, the most crucial area is in advertising. With deregulated media, no longer can there be stipulations saying, "Well, you can't interrupt the program." It all becomes a much more unaccountable business, and this is where American power manifests itself.

We all know how important military investment has been in terms of communications since World War II. McLuhan even pointed out that throughout history there has been a link between war and technological development. But what impact do you think this massive investment has had on the kind of development that was made in communications?

I think this is something that is very tangible. I don't think any kind of technology comes into existence objectively unmediated by the social sphere. Whoever is producing that technology, whoever is financing that technology, whoever is designing that technology, has certain kinds of objectives. Now there is a degree to which these objectives become totally rigid and cannot be superseded; that, I think, is an open question. But I think that the technology does come with some very embedded kinds of orientations and applications so that, for example, the vast amount of technologies and processes that were financed by the military since the end of World War II clearly had a military application, for surveillance, for pinpointing messages or getting messages through in ways that would be unobtrusive. There were many specific goals. Now we find that several of these objectives have been carried over into the civilian sphere. Of course, they are given a very different coloration, but nevertheless they are there.

Let me give you a couple of not so crucial examples, but which nevertheless illustrate what we're talking about. In the United States now, when you want to get a new telephone, the telephone company will give you a list of options: do you want call-waiting, call-forwarding, user-identification, a dozen or more options. Most people, including myself, haven't the least idea why we really need them, but nevertheless most people are swept along. Almost all these applications had an earlier

military reason to exist. They may or may not have a reason to exist now, but they are used because companies can make money from them. Even the Internet was originally a military operation. That's where the money came from: it was essentially to allow the military and the most high-powered scientists to exchange information as rapidly and as efficiently as possible, in a way that would be protected against any kind of external monitoring. I don't think that any of these technologies can automatically be applied without some concern about where they came from and how they were structured to begin with.

You know the astonishing figure that roughly a trillion dollars has been spent on R&D by the military since World War II, and this is probably a low estimate.

What are the likely consequences of the Telecommunications Act of 1996?

That Act had as a stated public objective to increase competition, so that the long-distance telephone companies would be in competition with the local companies, and the local companies could enter long-distance, and everybody supposedly, and in particular the consumer, would benefit from lower prices. Now we already have a year or more to observe what has happened. It is a total negation of what had been said at the time. Since the passage of this Act, there has been an absolute torrent of amalgamations, consolidations and mergers. Now if this is regarded as a step toward competition, we have a very different definition of what competition is. I really cannot overstate what a vast amount of consolidation has occurred as a result of this Act which was supposed to promote a very different type of economic sphere. In the field of radio, for example, there has been wild concentration in this last year or two, to say nothing of other areas as well. And in the field of telecommunications, the big telephone companies, like AT&T, are attempting to reintegrate with some of the local telephone companies which they originally had owned and divested in 1984. So the very opposite of what this Act promised has, in fact, occurred.

This reminds one of the anti-trust measures which were originally aimed at monopolies but which often ended up being used against unions.

Well, American history is strewn with such examples. One of the most important is media-related. I called attention to that in *Culture Inc.*. It has been the utilization of an amendment to the Constitution originally intended to protect the rights of the liberated slaves. The "due process" clause of the Fourteenth Amendment was, and has been totally transformed into, a defense of corporate property. Corporations are considered as legal persons and therefore covered by its "equal protection" clause. Companies

also claim First Amendment protection for the corporate “voice,” advertising in particular. Corporate “freedom of speech” is confused with the expression of an ordinary person.

*It has become quite fashionable in France, maybe even in the United States, and especially on the left, to dismiss McLuhan’s contributions to media studies, to criticize the numerous specific shortcomings of his very eclectic writings, which are more often based on intuitions than on experimentation. But, in terms of social and psychological impact both on the individual and on the society, aren’t the media in fact a new “environment” as McLuhan was one of the first to define it, and isn’t the medium to some extent the message? Almost fifty years after the publication of his very perceptive book, *The Mechanical Bride*, what’s left of McLuhan’s legacy?*

I think you have to separate McLuhan’s later work from the earlier work, such as *The Mechanical Bride*, where he was very much aware of the structure of the media industries and where he showed the link with the enterprise system. That was very important.

I never was a big fan of “the medium is the message.” You have to be cautious because the extent to which you subscribe to this view diverts your attention from what’s been going on in terms of structure. However, I would say that we have seen develop in the U.S.—and I think elsewhere where the same forces have been operating—a fascination, a compulsion with the “images” coming mostly from TV but obviously from film as well. We have, therefore, a situation that has, I guess, validated at least a part of the McLuhan view. Now it doesn’t mean that I subscribe to the view that content is irrelevant; on the contrary, it’s crucial. But it does mean that the mechanism that’s producing the content does have an extra quality to it, an extra dimension of enormous power, so that many of the characteristics that we may talk about here come out of this extra dimension of power. We have, for example, in the extension of MTV a striking example of McLuhan’s views in this one particular sphere: a dazzling, continuously changing array of images making it hard to determine specific content. This constantly revolving kind of imagery, which has a very strong effect on whoever is watching it, destroys any capability for sustained attention.

The United States has a strong tradition of local media and local politics. But what is left, today, of local control and local content in the media. Is advertising the sole remaining local media?

There are a few major developments and features today. First of all, local media have been very heavily infiltrated with national imagery.

Because of the new technologies, local media can easily obtain, through the satellite, things that they ordinarily would not have had. So when you watch local media in the United States, they are using many things that are national. But, invariably, it will be what you might call of nonsubstantive quality: a national disaster, a river overflowing, a flood, a volcano eruption, some major types of criminal cases. The O.J. Simpson trial was televised locally as well as nationally. There's this mixture of the national and the local because of the technology.

A second characteristic, one I've already alluded to, is that the local media, and in particular radio, which is a very important element in the whole panoply of the media, has been not only concentrated but has almost become the province of the Right. Now, I'm speaking very generally here and, clearly, there would be instances where that might not be the case. But overwhelmingly, if you are turning on local radio, wherever you might be, the likelihood is you're going to hear some right-winger propounding his views—mostly *his*—on whatever the social scene happens to be. Now this is really a major change from an earlier period. I'd like to suggest that in the seventies, for instance, radio programming would have been much more "mainstream." *Today, these right-wing views have become the mainstream*, and this is something very important to realize about the whole American political picture. There has been such a shift to the right that things that would have been regarded as absolutely unimaginable fifteen years ago, that would have been regarded as part of the "Kooky Right," are now part of what is regarded as the national discourse. So the local media reflect that very conservative point of view. One is of course familiar with Rush Limbaugh, but besides him you have Oliver North who was a major figure in the Contragate business, you have Gordon Liddy, another major radio figure who was in the Watergate business; these are the political figures who are now dominant across the radio spectrum.

A third major characteristic is that the local media are no less suffused with national advertising than are the major networks. That doesn't mean that you don't have local advertising in there as well. So that if you are listening to radio in the United States, for the most part, it's a very trying kind of experience.

To what extent can the segmentation of the audiences as a result of narrowcasting allow for the expression of a greater diversity of opinions?

Just like the Telecommunications Act of 1996 was presented as something that would allow for more competition, narrowcasting is presented as something that will widen the range of voices. But twenty

channels or twenty stations with the same underlying control are not as if you had twenty completely diverse activities, each one with a different set of interests and each one financed by a different source. Today, stations are almost all financed by the same sources and organized in a formulaic way to maximize whatever kinds of revenues they can get. Let me give you an example. In the last few years, more and more of the relatively few (to begin with) radio stations that carried classical music have disappeared. Does it mean that no one likes classical music? No! The main reason is that these stations are being bought up by larger chains, and the chain ownership feels that they can get a larger rate of return on their advertising if they go to some kind of pop-music formula. So, despite all of these channels, we see that a very special programming ingredient is disappearing. The same thing is happening in film. Here we have multiplexes, cineplexes with ten, fifteen, twenty, sometimes even thirty cinemas together in a complex. Try to find a foreign film in there! Try to find what used to be called an "art" type of movie! So here we have all of these various installations, and channels, and circuits, and they are all controlled by the same sources and producing the same kind of material. Of course, there can be a variety: there can be a detective show, and another kind of detective show, you can find twenty-five detective shows, but find a show that has some really different character. However, nothing says that when you have a large number of channels, you must follow the American pattern, what is being done here. With national policy you could very well say that among one hundred channels, twenty should be for local types of uses, and you could specify these uses. But once you define the system as a market proposition, the owners will decide.

The extent and influence of religious programming in the U.S., and the political role of the religious Right is particularly perplexing to many French observers reared in the tradition of state education. Yet in France also, citizens are preoccupied with the morality, with the purpose of the media; it is very much on the public agenda. And, of course, the American religious Right is always talking about morality. So, in your opinion, is the moral preoccupation of the religious lobby fundamentally at odds with the commercial media's dismally spectacular content and profit-orientation and, more generally, what is the political significance and what are the prospects of media watchdog groups and of sponsor-boycotts or other tactics?

The religious Right has, obviously, made great gains in this country as has right-wing sentiment in general. It is clearly gaining a larger voice and has a greater activity. Of course, one of the crucial areas that they are engaged in is monitoring the images and the messages that are flowing

through the media. Yet one has to say that there is a very troubling kernel of reality in their concern. There is a vast amount of material that flows through the media that one could raise questions about. We know why it's there. For the most part, it's not there because of some intrinsic value of that kind of program but because some company or group is making money from it. So this raises a very urgent question: would one then support the religious Right's efforts to censor this material, or take very extreme action to have it removed? What is a sensible position to take in this circumstance?

What you are asking is something that came up just yesterday [June 26th, 1997] with a ruling of the Supreme Court on the Internet. There were many voices that were raised—not only from the religious Right—which were concerned with a lot of the images on the Internet, all kinds of pornography and what have you, and the Supreme Court ruled that this could not be regulated by the government, that it was different from TV, that it was an area in which free speech had to be defended and that there were other ways of filtering out that material, some kind of technological chips or what have you. What we really have here goes far beyond the question of the religious Right and the kinds of messages it objects to. I really think that we are talking about the morass that has increasingly encompassed the whole social atmosphere. And this atmosphere essentially comes out of an absolutely unaccountable, totally irresponsible and indulgent use, not only of media channels, but of everything else, and which goes under the name of freedom. And this has to be at some time or other, sooner in my mind, seriously reconsidered, because if this definition of freedom is accepted, there is no way to counter or resist these forces of social disintegration.

So the religious Right raises these questions and I think its answers are, obviously, very distasteful. No one would want to suggest: "Yes; let's go in there with a pair of scissors, a blue pencil, or whatever, and censor the material," but one then has to come to grips with why the material is there in the first place and how can one go about dealing with this problem.

Technological rationality often helps justify progress and media developments. But new media also mean new issues, issues in privacy, in advertising, in obscenity, issues of copyright and patent, issues of private property. How do you foresee the ethical issues in the media, and what kind of political conflicts are they likely to provoke?

I think that we are going to have more and more, not less and less, conflict about these questions. It's not a question of having more channels, it's a question of what is being put on these channels. Where does the responsibility rest? Is there any responsibility at all? In a commercialized,

deregulated society, responsibility has been abandoned. The good sense and benevolence of the private decision-makers is a very thin shield, at best, and nothing you can rely on in this respect. So I would say that you're going to find that these kinds of issues will start out as limited questions of pornography, privacy, etc., but they will soon move into the wider cultural sphere, and I think it is not going to be a very long time before the cultural sphere becomes totally absorbed into the political sphere. I see no other way. I'd be very interested in knowing to what extent a regenerated, critical social movement in France will recognize that they have to bring the cultural question into the foremost area of issues of control, of ownership, of concentration of the media system. I don't think this debate can be omitted because it touches on "freedom," something you can't talk about. These issues have become, by the very nature of what we were mentioning before—McLuhan and the culture of television—the substance of a great part of most citizens' lives; so they can't be excluded from politics. One has to be more and more concerned with the mental health, the cultural vigor of our society and of individuals in that society, and that cannot be left as an isolated, compartmentalized area. So, to respond to your question, I would say that ethics, cultural policy, if you want to call it that, responsibility, new definitions of what constitutes liberty and freedom, these are areas that are going to be very decisive in the forthcoming years.

And when you decide whether you are going to take caller identification or not from AT&T?

Yes, exactly, this stuff is passed off as a minor individual decision but when you aggregate it, you are dealing with the very character of the kind of social order you're in; so that, for example, the surveillance situation in an advanced industrial society like the United States becomes increasingly menacing not because anybody is deliberately doing this, but because this new technology allows for the aggregation of thousands, of millions of records whose potential intrusive effects are cumulative.

Examples such as the Immediast Underground and its resistance to the invasion of the public space by the corporate agenda and advertisers, or the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL) are encouraging, but how likely is it that such alternatives will really thrive on the Web? Is there any kind of analogy possible with the fate of the public access channels on the early cable systems? Do interactive media in fact hold out any promise in terms of escaping from the same kind of control we have in other media?

That really raises the question of the direction of the Internet. There is no doubt that in its earliest development, after it moved out of the military-

scientific sphere into this larger general sphere, and probably even up to now, you could make a strong case that this was going to be a liberatory alternative, that people would have the possibility of just untold number of voices and personal expressions on individual websites. This is in keeping with the way all technology is presented in the United States. Radio was going to be liberating, TV was going to be liberating, cable and satellite, and so on. I don't want to give a jaundiced or cynical view, but this is the kind of public-relations approach that surrounded all of these new media, and all of them *did* have potential.

What we are seeing now—and I do think it is lamentable but to be expected, given the power bases and the drives in the dominant society—is that the Internet cannot be left as an open vehicle which would be truly a vast universal set of individual expressions, thus allowing it to be a source for mobilizing indignation, or social interest, or artistic and esthetic experience. I think there are forces at work—and I don't mean to suggest that there's some conspiracy or dominating little clique—which reflect the basic dynamics of an advanced capitalistic system. The Internet is in the process of being turned into a very major vehicle for commerce and advertising. The best brains in the United States are working 24 hours a day to figure out techniques to fulfill that objective. Up to now, they admit they haven't been successful. They don't know exactly how the best way is to charge for information, how the best way is to insulate the commercial transactions, but they are working on it and they are developing better and better techniques. And what we are seeing is a change in the direction of the Internet: it is becoming a vehicle for the very same forces that have been so successful in appropriating radio, television and cable. Admittedly, there will likely be space left for other forms of expression, marginal space, like in the other media. But space with the opportunity to get a real audience of significance, an audience which allows whatever your views are to gain a certain amount of resonance, that, to my mind, will not be likely.

We are still in a period of transition. One cannot make these statements and set them in concrete. There is a very valuable influence of interactive media, but who is going to direct this interactive media, what are the sources going to be? Here again, we have a technique that has great promise but what will it be used for? Let me give you an awesome, in a sense horrific example: the man who is identified with all of these developments is, of course, Bill Gates, Microsoft's leader. The vision of interactive media he presents in his book, *The Road Ahead*, is the following. You are watching any one of a vast array of programs, sitcoms, dramas, or whatever. You see a man who is wearing a tie you like. You can immediately, with whatever instrument you have, access it, obtain information about the tie, where it comes from, how much it costs, and

order it. This is presented as a fabulous vision of the future, of technology's potential.

It is interesting to note that the cheapest possibilities of access to the Net require that you go through screens of interactive advertising—Sega, for instance—before getting into the basic services. So now people have the same dilemma as before with other media: pay less and join the advertisers' audience, or remain ad free, but pay more.

That point is important and it goes well beyond the media. It is the increasing stratification of society. Of course, there have always been social classes in the United States; but now, the separation in terms of income and the kinds of things and services that are available to those with more or less income—"information inequality"—are increasingly differentiated. We see this with television. This kind of segmentation is a very pronounced kind of development, one which is, of course, very good for advertisers.

How appropriate is it to talk about "imperialism" when one wants to characterize American cultural influence? Some analysts, in particular in France, point to the eagerness with which foreigners adopt American cultural products and they prefer talking about cultural "influence" or commercial "expansionism."

To me, this is amusing because for over thirty years I have been writing about American expansionism, cultural aggression, or whatever you want to call it, and I never have hesitated to use the term cultural imperialism. And over that period there has been constant refusal, denial, and rejection (and certainly the United States has not exactly been a center of attention) of these views. These views have had a far greater resonance in Latin America and in Europe. But in my own estimation, the only fundamental modification I might make in what I have been tracing for a very long time and which I think is not in any way disputable—the vast increase of influence coming out of the American-dominated media—is that the whole structure of business has become more transnational. You don't have to just say American cultural imperialism today, you can talk about transnational corporate imperialism, but still with the reservation that a very substantial chunk of that transnational system has its base in the United States. If you watch ads put out by SONY or if you watch ads put out by almost any other newer transnational from Brazil or Mexico, for instance, they also follow the US model and adopt the same marketing principles. But, even so, one does have to recognize that this is what one might call a "metastacized" situation: the cancer has gone in many different directions, but the source still remains in the U.S.. I know that this

is not the most polite, elegant way of putting this, it will not endear me to the media conglomerates, but that is basically the situation. I've always found it intriguing that so many individuals in other countries—I can understand it in the United States—are so unwilling to accept the notion that their societies were being dominated by these kinds of forces. It's not as if one were arguing that that is the way it should be; it's just a description of reality.

For many French people, the word "imperialism" is associated with Lenin, with Marxism, and therefore people don't necessarily react in terms of an objective situation, but rather in terms of their own political identification. Another major reason for refusing to use this term is D-Day, June 1944: for a whole generation of French people, aware of cultural changes brought about after chewing gum and cigarettes, it seems like a betrayal of the American GI to talk about imperialism. The refusal of the term "imperialism" reflects, in part, a nostalgic faithfulness to this "liberation."

But it is also important for people to realize that along with this liberation came the very same economic dynamic we have been talking about. It was very clearly marked and wasn't just inadvertent and random. There was a very clear-cut intentionality.

And Time magazine's war babies also arrived, as well as Life, The Reader's Digest, etc.

And as we are celebrating, this very month, the fiftieth anniversary of the Marshall Plan, its so-called "disinterested aid" should also to be scrutinized. It was the forerunner of a half-century of U.S. economic interventionism and pressure to limit and destroy socialism, western as well as eastern.

You coedited with George Gerbner and Hamid Mowlana a book entitled The Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf: A Global Perspective (Boulder, Co., Westview Press, 1992). Could you summarize the thesis of this book?

It is a compilation of articles by writers from fifteen or so different countries explaining how their national media handled the Gulf war. The American "image," carried by CNN, was clearly the dominant image around the world.

How would you characterize the treatment of France by the American media?

For several years now, even though it has never really been a strong opponent of American policy, France has had a very poor “press,” a very poor image in the U.S., primarily because it has at least raised some objections to American cultural and political arrogance. This, in itself, is sufficient for Washington to categorize France as a country that is either in the wrong century, or is cantankerous, or has peculiar standards and values.

For example—and this is most scandalous because it shows how controlled our representations are—the media make it seem absolutely ridiculous that French people would want to have a reduced work week, or that they should have vacations that are a month long, or whatever—all of the things that are being increasingly cut back in the United States on the (to my mind) completely false basis of competitiveness in the global market. In the meantime, here, capital is allowed to continuously repress the work force and to extract larger returns. The fact that in France, at least at this point, there has been some holding of the line, is presented as an anachronism: how do these French people expect to live in an industrial order when they have five weeks’ vacation and work 35-hour weeks and all these other crazy demands? If you were to ask, in a random poll in the U.S., which country is the least capable of moving into the twenty-first century because of its outlook, I’m sure you’d get France at the top, and this is only because of media coverage. Every opportunity I get, I try to explain that France is the only place where you have had any kind of serious opposition raised against what is going on on a global scale. I don’t know if they’ll succeed, maybe they won’t, but it’s a position that should be given respect.

Now let me give you one very specific example: the very recent meeting, in Denver, of the so-called “group of seven,” now the “group of eight” with Yeltsin. This meeting was covered very poorly to begin with; but here, this report I received—this is a Paris-dateline Reuters report—gives us the reactions of both Prime Minister Jospin and President Chirac. Both of them, particularly Chirac, make very pointed criticism of the way this meeting was held and of the attitudes expressed by President Clinton and his advisers. Here is a quote from Chirac: “We are wasting our time here; we are nothing but extras in Clinton’s marketing plan.” None of this appeared in the United States. This was sent to me by somebody who picked it up on the Internet; so again we have something here that is useful. But for this fortuitous message, we would never know that the two top leaders of France had regarded this conference as a sham and as a farce. Now, with this kind of ignorance, we must again ask ourselves the value of America’s abundant media. Here is a people who feel that they know more

than any one else because of their technological capability. Yet, they know more about the most unimportant things. They are experts on triviality, but when it comes to any understanding of what's going on—not necessarily my point of view—but simply an understanding of what's going on ... it's a black hole.

In conclusion, what would you say is most important for French students, citizens, spectators and consumers to know and understand about the American media?

Given all of the responses that we've had in this interview, I would like to point out that the people who are working in the media—the professional editors, writers, photographers, filmmakers, TV programmers—who do very different jobs and are sometimes very well paid, do not necessarily share the views that their products suggest. They are what we might call “hired guns.” Some might have more autonomy than others, but in general they do what is expected of them. So, when we talk about structure, control and power, about the aggressiveness and the domination of these huge companies, try to keep in mind that these are the central actors in the system. However, there are large numbers of people who, under other circumstances, might be doing different things, have different outlooks and philosophies. I, myself, have encountered that many times when I am interviewed; the man behind the camera, or the interviewer will say, “Well, that's very interesting, or I like that.” Therefore, it is important to avoid making a sweeping rejection of a whole field.

I would also say that the overwhelming characteristic today of the whole structure is one of absolute arrogance. Again, I am not talking about the people, I am talking about the way the system is organized. And I think we should introduce a very macro, large-scale conception: the United States governs rule at this particular time—I think it is a brief period—and feel no challenges to them. There are small-scale problems that arise and that they can deal with; but they feel that they are in control of the whole global terrain. And since communications are probably one of the most dynamic areas of growth and expansion, this attitude of being in control is even more pronounced in this area. We have here then a sector that just wants to do things that it sees as to its own benefit. There's not even the tiniest particle of real concern for what you would call in some way or another the public's interest, the social interest. You might hear a little bit of hypocritical comment in specific circumstances; but basically, in terms of actions, in terms of demands, in terms of what they are doing, this is the way it goes. I would say therefore, that it is a very crucial obligation for students, teachers, citizens in other countries to be very, very careful, to scrutinize, and to attempt as well as they can to understand the ingredients

and how the ingredients are put together in the various media concoctions that come their way. I don't think there is any more useful preparation for personal autonomy than to understand exactly how a set of images and messages are organized when the organization is under corporate domination.



