
WALTER BENJAMIN ON THE RIGHT TO BE REPRODUCED: HUMAN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH VIDEO TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine how the power of filming technology – connected the development of the smartphone – leads to a process of democratization that brings increasing control of information, images, and events to the individual person. Filming loses its elite quality and is brought down to the level of the masses. Gradually people are empowered to both film and to be filmed. This right is important for human development in a technological world which involves the ability to participate in media technology and not to be overpowered or controlled by it. It will demonstrate this through a reading of Walter Benjamin's ideas concerning the technologies of film in the age of mechanical reproduction. It will apply Benjamin's ideas to the current situation where news and social media such as TikTok which are increasingly shaped by the contributions of individuals. It will also show the negative implications, and will conclude that the human empowerment that accompanies video technologies needs to be accompanied by the cultivation of trust.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; Social Media; TikTok videos; Human empowerment

From Reader to Writer

Benjamin in his writings was interested in the effects of technology on human perception and its social and political ramifications. His famous work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* dealt with how images no longer possess an ‘aura’ which places them at a reflective distance, but are now brought close to the viewer and possess a ‘use value’. His observations on this perceptual shift also apply to information. Benjamin recognizes this in the move away from the art of story-telling to the information one finds in the newspaper. In his 1936 *The Storyteller*, Benjamin found that the role of the storyteller was declining. He argues that the traditional storyteller, who brings people together to share personal experiences, has been replaced by the mass media, disseminated to a large, anonymous audience. The value of information is short-lived and constantly overshadowed and replaced by new information. Whereas the mystery of storytelling involved the avoidance of explanation, but the presentation of something “understandable in itself.”¹

Trending news becomes a topic of discussion in people’s leisure time, but trending news can quickly fade away. This creates both impatience and interaction between the readers and the writers of news.

“The fact that nothing binds the reader more tightly to his paper than this all-consuming impatience, his longing for daily nourishment, has long been exploited by publishers, who are constantly inaugurating new columns to address the reader’s questions, opinions, and protests. Hand in hand, therefore, with the indiscriminate assimilation of facts goes the equally indiscriminate assimilation of readers, who are instantly elevated to collaborators...The reader is at all time ready to become a writer – that is, a describer or even a prescriber...Literary competence is no longer founded on specialized training but is now based on polytechnical education...it is at the scene of the limitless debasement of the word – the newspaper, in short – that its salvation is being prepared.”²

With the newspaper, every reader becomes a writer. It is because the newspaper gives readers a chance to express their opinions, such as a reader's column. In this way, readers can become part of the newspaper and exchange their ideas with other readers through the newspaper. But becoming a writer requires certain writing skills, including the ability to express oneself in words, to think, to express one's intentions and to express oneself in a certain way. The era of mechanical reproduction has enthusiastically produced a wide variety of different newspapers and publications that have different professional requirements. This gives people from different industries the opportunity to express their ideas and become an author. This relates to the quotation from *The Work of Art* essay.

“With the increasing extension of the press, all readers become writers...In Western Europe the capitalistic exploitation of the film denies consideration to modern man's legitimate claim to being reproduced. Under these circumstances the film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations.”³

Benjamin wrote this article in 1935 in the early stages of the pioneering of film technology. By now, the development of the Internet has made film technology more gentrified. The lens of a smartphone has become a second pair of eyes. Whether you see a beautiful landscape or a celebrity, taking a picture is really a type of ‘seeing.’ People take to social media and upload and share what they have taken of reality. At the same time people can communicate with each other to evaluate what has been photographed. The image has developed a ‘use value’ that we use for communication. Or as Benjamin observes, “The illiteracy of the future will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography.”⁴

Again, in the newspaper article Benjamin observes that “at the scene of the limitless debasement of the word – the newspaper, in short – that its salvation is being prepared.”⁵ And we can extend this to film to suggest that with smart-phone camera, we are experience the debasement

of film as a high art form, but this debasement is also its redemption.

Technology and the Empowerment of the Masses

Benjamin's friend Theodor Adorno was very pessimistic about the collapsing of the distance between the writer and reader, between high art and low art. In his work entitled "Culture Industry Reconsidered" he writes:

"The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above. To the detriment of both it forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years. The seriousness of high art is destroyed in speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total. Thus, although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object. The very word mass-media, specially honed for the culture industry, already shifts the accent onto harmless terrain."⁶

But Benjamin believed photography, film, and other artworks of the mechanical age can also have a redemptive power. It is through the very techniques of the camera and of editing that the film can create a 'shock effect' which can lead the spectator to critical reflection. He writes:

"The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind." (*Illuminations*, 2007, p. 238)

In his view, these film is not merely aesthetic pleasure, nor a mere distraction or manipulation of the masses, but a tool that can empower the masses.

News in the Age of Media Technology

Today we are flooded with news through the media. It has become easier to read news through a high-resolution cell phone than it used to be through a newspaper. With the advent of YouTube, TikTok, and a host of other social media, short-form video journalism began to grow rapidly. Short video news has greater information carrying capacity than pictures and text and spreads more rapidly. At the same time, people can post their own comments on the pages of the news, and interaction can be generated between people. Smartphones offer more possibilities for professional journalists to gather and disseminate news in real time from anywhere in the world. They can now report from the front lines of events, capture breaking news on the go, and easily interact with a global audience. However, smartphones also give everyone in the audience the opportunity to be the creator of the news. The development of new technologies has changed the traditional monopoly on news generation. This change has made citizen journalism achievable.

Michael Bhaskar in the book *Curation: the Power of Selection in a World of Excess* writes about this power. Bhaskar points out that “Social media offered the possibility of citizen journalism - ordinary people recording the news.”⁷ Citizen journalism refers to news content reported by the public, non-professional journalists, social media users, and other non-traditional journalists. With the popularity of social media and smartphones, an increasing number of people can share news events and opinions through online platforms. The rise of citizen journalism has made traditional news media no longer the sole source of information and the holder of discourse, enhancing public participation in news reporting. Journalism has shifted from broadcasting and editing first-hand accounts obtained by professional journalists to “weaving the narrative from existing sources.”⁸ These existing sources refer to the vast amount

of material that is filmed and reported by ordinary people from within a news events and is disseminated through new media technologies. Older news outlets still have their own field reporters on the ground, but they are quickly being supplanted by non-professional contributors. So increasingly, older established news outlets curate, compile and refine this footage to create their own coverage of an event. Without the materials supplied from the people on the scene, it would be difficult for the news media present real live coverage. Bhaskar suggests, “a random tweet or a bystander with a smartphone encapsulated a situation better than any journalist.”⁹ The ability of professional journalists to compete with private individuals on the scene has been challenged, but that doesn’t mean the skill of professional journalists can be easily replaced.

The Internet has real-time interaction online that newspapers or TV news do not have. People can post their opinions in the comments section, where a kind of interaction between viewers is created. This interaction creates more perspectives on the understanding and analysis of the news and provokes people to think about the news events. It even allows for criticism of possible bias and misinformation in the news coverage.

In traditional journalism, it was important to conduct a lot of preliminary investigative work. Professional journalists went to the site of an event and interviewed the people at the site. Now in the media age, the journalist must gather a gather material and information from the Internet and piece together an event in the form of a collage. The journalist’s job has been transformed. Bhaskar notes “It used to be about collecting and transmitting information. Now it is about parsing vast amounts of noise for the signal.”¹⁰ Bhaskar refers to this new brand of journalists as ‘information engineers’. These information engineers are the ones who ensure that the news is not just information, but a news story that is authoritative in its professionalism and authenticity. It’s a way for journalists to edit untold amounts of material.

“News today means curating people out in the field, in the squares, on the ground of the revolution, not airlifted into it business class. It means wading through published material, much of it brilliant, at least as much awful, irrelevant or misleading, to present us with content that is varied, interesting and informative. And it means self-curation –selecting the most essential snippets for busy readers. This then is the new news: journalism in and information-rich era.”¹¹

But nowadays, the focus is on traffic and profitability. How to capture the attention of users in a time of rapid information change has become a top priority for journalists. The news headline becomes the most important part, which determines whether a user will click on the link or not. But the headline can easily mislead the audience and lead users to misunderstand the content of the news, which can easily damage the objectivity and credibility of the news, and indirectly damage the brand value of a website. And this leads to the problem of political manipulation.

The Politics of Media Spectacle

Benjamin at the end of the *Work of Art* essay pointed to the political consequences of the transformation of our relationship to images – their increasing closeness, their use-value and exhibition value.

“Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.”¹²

In the book *Walter Benjamin and the Media*, Jaeho Kang continues this analyzes Benjamin’s views on the politics of media spectacle. He points out that through media technology, leaders can interact and

communicate with the public more directly, thus enhancing political communication and interaction. Exhibition value can be used in this context to attract the public's attention, provide a platform to exchange political messages, and increase the visibility and support of political contenders during political campaigns. In this way, the power of leaders becomes visualized, which Kang calls "The visibility of power." However, he notes that the "increases in the visibility of power per se... do not guarantee more democratization.¹³ For, through media technology, manipulation becomes easier. "The function of politics now substantially hinges upon the performance of the actor-like ruler"¹⁴

Political spectacle is controversial because it emphasizes the image and performance of the political leader rather than their policies and ideas. Political speeches, political rallies, political marches, etc. have become a kind of political performance. In such performances, politicians usually use various means to portray themselves, including dress, rhetoric, and posture, in order to attract voters' attention and support. This type of political communication treats political leaders as commodities and the audience as consumers.

Second, the masses are not only spectators of political spectacle, but also participants in it. "Benjamin's notion of technological reproducibility implies 'mass' reproduction."¹⁵ In his analysis of early films, Benjamin finds that the masses played their own roles in the films. In marches and rallies, the camera recorded the images of the masses. He saw and understood the masses as a collective when he saw individual images appear in the shots of the group. On the other hand, the masses are not only the audience of political activities and performances, but also participate in the political process in different ways, such as voting, demonstrating, speaking out, participating as citizen journalists, etc. This also means that political activities are no longer the business of a few people or a specific group; everyone has the right and opportunity to participate and express his or her views. Kang calls it a "double media quality."¹⁶ This means that media technology can serve both as a tool for both the presentation of power and as an empowerment of the masses.

Human Empowerment by Media Technology

First, the idea of empowerment by media technology suggests that the public has the right to express itself. In Benjamin's time, letters from readers gave ordinary people the right to express their opinions in newspapers. In the Internet era, the public can use media technology to express their opinions and present themselves visually. When cell phone cameras did not exist, news broadcasts usually involved a cameraman and a reporter. The reporter stood in front of the camera reflecting the distance gap between the reporter and the audience. But with the cellphone, this distance collapsed. Furthermore when the front-facing smart phone camera was invented, selfies became popular. The public became personally involved in news production as had their value judgments.

Also, with the increase in pixels, memory, and even network speed of cell phones, people have started to form the habit of recording their lives with their phones. Often, the public will give priority to filming an event rather than experiencing it. Individuals sharing their lives, thoughts, and opinions on social networks can also generate discussion and attention and become the subject of communication. Media technology allows people to feel a sense of identity and dignity. The ideas or opinions of a lesser-known person can spread rapidly on the Internet if they post content that resonates with many people. The Internet has made some individuals powerful protagonists of social media communication.

Individuals also have the ability to choose information. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel, "We have become "news grazers," who acquire information from multiple platforms at different times."¹⁷ They use the term "lean forward" rather than "lean back" to describe the modern method of getting news.¹⁸ It is a more proactive approach centered on self-reliance. At the same time, many news websites and social media platforms now offer interactive features such as liking, sharing, and making comments, allowing audiences to provide instant feedback and interaction on news content and participate in producing information. These features are conducive to democratizing the dissemination of information by allowing audiences to give instant feedback, and interact with news content, and

participate in the production and dissemination of information.

Benjamin's theory of technology emphasizes technology's potential and political significance, arguing that technology can promote individual freedom and social progress. This empowerment is significant, because the power of technology can easily enslave us if we do not cultivate this empowerment.

The dangers of this enslavement are quite obvious. Fake news and disinformation is spread more easily. While media technology allows us to access vast amounts of information easily, this does not mean all this information is valuable or accurate. Quantity does not mean quality, so we need to have the ability to filter and judge information to distinguish what is true from what is false and what is useful from what is not.

On the Internet, anyone can be the creator and publisher of content. Although this model of citizen journalism prevents media organizations from monopolizing information delivery, it also allows some people to spread false information. The traditional media was "primarily engaged in the contemplation of news"¹⁹ Now there is the experience of information overload where there is no time or room for contemplation.

Also, privacy is compromised, leading to the possibility of increased control. The development of media technology makes personal information vulnerable to collection and even hacking. Governments may use technology to monitor and filter online content, limiting citizens' freedom of expression and access to information.

Another problem is the isolation viewers. The development of media technology has made it easier for us to connect with the outside world, but at the same time, it also tends to trap us into an information cocoon. Algorithms often recommend only content that matches users' interests, making it increasingly difficult for users to access different perspectives and information, deepening the affirmation of their views while increasing their resistance to other views. This way of recommendation by the algorithm can make discussion and compromise between users, more difficult and exacerbate political and social divisions.

Benjamin's approach to technology and its relationship to images considers the influence of technology on human perception and thought. It can be empowering or enslaving. That is why his ideas concerning the 'equal right to be reproduced' points to the importance of the empowerment of the masses in the information age. It also predicts some of the problems brought about by modern technology and offers a way to reflect upon and engage with these problems.

TikTok as a case study

Dealing with the social media platform TikTok is unavoidable when discussing media technology today. TikTok is a very popular social media application, especially among young people. It uses a short video format that allows users to make, share and watch videos of 15 to 60 seconds. TikTok uses an algorithm to direct users to the content that interests them most, which is often light, fun, and easy to digest.

The News on TikTok is in the form of a short format. Due to the length limit of TikTok videos, news content must be concise to attract users' attention quickly. At the same time, news headlines on TikTok usually often use seductive or inflammatory language, and controversial statements. Such headlines quickly attract users' attention and often spark interest and discussion. In TikTok News stories, we commonly find that "clickbait" headlines are used to attract more clicks and viewers. These 'Clickbait headlines' often create a negative opinion of the news media as a whole and undermine the relationship between the reader and the media.²⁰

In order for news to stand out on TikTok, much of it is unique and creative, drawing on a wide range of film and television techniques. News content on TikTok can be from traditional media organizations, small news organizations, or from individuals. The contributions from individuals are often more innovative and diverse. This often makes TikTok news more entertainment-oriented, which can reduce the seriousness and importance people attach to news events. They begin to and them as pure entertainment. Videos are often edited to grab people's attention,

in the manner that Benjamin describes the shock effects created by film. Furthermore, an app like TikTok makes it possible for viewers to switch to another completely different funny or sensational video by a simple swipe of the screen. Change a video, and the audience will change their mood. In this case, the audience's attention is easily distracted.

Third, TikTok's strong social attributes, where users comment and interact with the news, allows users to be more engaged and share their views and opinions. TikTok has also become a very active political platform presidential elections.²¹

Another point is that news on TikTok, except for those published by accredited news organizations, is generally not gated by specialized editors or journalists but uploaded and produced by ordinary users. Many imitate professional news with a style that mimics official accounts, then presenting personal opinions or creating provocative stories to gain attention.

Trust and media technology

The researcher proposes that the empowerment of people through media technology requires not only Benjamin's idea of the people's 'equal right to be reproduced' but also this idea of the importance of the cultivation of trust. As Kovach and Rosenstiel observe that the challenge is to make people active participants in the information age, not "the victims."²²

Regardless of whether it is traditional news media or citizen journalism, the accuracy of news and information is of utmost importance. Efforts should be made to ensure that the information published is accurate and to avoid false news and information. Again, as Kovach and Rosenstiel state, "It is not enough to be almost certain. To "know" something must be true. You have to be able to show it, to establish it, to defend it, to prove it, including to a skeptical public and against official scorn."²³ The news media can try to ensure that the information they publish is accurate. However, we cannot escape the manipulation of news by news sources connected to political or corporate power. Yet with the help of media

technology, people are now increasingly able to question the accuracy of news reports, and share critical opinions. This improvement in critical thinking supports our engagement with media reports and is an important part of regulating the news in the age of media technology.

As a practitioner in the film industry, the author acknowledges the fun and convenience of an app like TikTok, enabling people to share their lives and emotions through short videos and facilitating communication and connection between individuals. TikTok empowers people to create and share content, allowing them to become content creators. However, due to the commercial nature of TikTok it sometimes prioritizes quantity over quality of content, sacrificing their artistic vision for profit. This shifting of priorities is a problem that practitioners must address and resolve by maintaining the pursuit of artistic excellence in balance with promoting standardization and marketization in the industry to protect the rights and incomes of creators. We must balance commercial interests with artistic pursuits, uphold the independence and innovation of creation, and encourage self-expression through creation.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Schocken Books, 2007), 89.
- ² Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 741-742.
- ³ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 232.
- ⁴ *Ibid*, 527.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, 742.
- ⁶ Theodor Adorno. *New German Critique*, 6, Fall 1975, 12-19 translated by Anson G. Rabinbach.
- ⁷ Michael Bhaskar, *Curation: The Power of Selection in a World of Excess* (Hachette: UK. 2016), 216.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 216.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, 219.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 217.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, 220.
- ¹² Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 242.
- ¹³ Kang, Jaeho. *Walter Benjamin and the Media: The Spectacle of Modernity* (John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 136.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, 138.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 139.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, 140.
- ¹⁷ Bill Kovach, and Tom Rosenstiel, *Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 299.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, 300.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, 50.
- ²⁰ Zhang, A. "TikTok Micro-politics: Characteristics, Functions and Optimization Path." *Hubei Social Sciences*, 37 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.13660/j.cnki.42-1112/c.015619>.
- ²¹ "TikTok launches in-app guide to the 2020 US elections." (2019, August 16). Retrieved from <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/tiktok-launches-in-app-guide-to-the-2020-us-elections>.
- ²² Bill Kovach, and Tom Rosenstiel, *Blur*, 12.
- ²³ *Ibid*, 169.

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