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# MASS MEDIA AND PROPAGANDA: HABERMAS AND THE DECAY OF PUBLIC OPINION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT

Mass media, since its early development has been the sphere where the private individual meets with the political public. It has been the ground for both educating and indoctrinating public opinion. For this reason, interest groups who desire power and control over the masses aspire to take hold of this most powerful tool. In order to better understand the nature of mass media and the extent of control over public knowledge, this paper follows Jurgen Habermas' critique of modern-day mass media. and the danger of media control becoming a tool for the elite to dominate the public sphere. Such domination leads to the eventual demise of the political public and public opinion, the blood, and the life of a genuinely democratic society.

**Keywords:** Public Sphere; Public Opinion; Democratic Society; Mass Media

## Introduction

The rise of the bourgeois society from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century marked the rationalization of world-historical development with its insistence on the primacy of reason over shared beliefs. Civil society was considered to

have finally awakened from its deep metaphysical slumber of absolutism and ecclesiastical dogmatism. Accordingly, it was in the 13<sup>th</sup> century that the demise of what Jurgen Habermas calls “representative publicness,” where the power of the crown took the form of absolute supervision of the people. “Civil society came into existence as the corollary of a depersonalized state authority.”<sup>2</sup> In the feudal society of the High Middle Ages, the King, together with his feudal lords, represented themselves publicly as those who held higher power. Such expressions as highness, majesty, fame, dignity, and honor are associated with this exercise of power.<sup>3</sup> However, this public display of high sophistication and power did not form part of the social lives of ordinary people. Habermas writes, “This publicness (or publicity) of representation was not constituted as a social realm, that is, as a public sphere; rather, it was something like a status attribute.”<sup>4</sup> Anything that does not fit into the determination of a manorial lord, in terms of its value and exalted character, cannot be public. Public engagements were limited to the princesses and the knights, while ordinary peasants and town merchants excluded themselves from the crown’s affairs, being passive spectators.

Interestingly, a new form of representative publicness came into existence during the rise of the early capitalist nobility of northern Italy from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which appeared first in Florence and then in France and Great Britain.<sup>5</sup> Early forms of trade capitalism of 13<sup>th</sup>-century Europe paved the way for the emergence of bourgeois capitalist societies in the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Within this time frame, the “publicness of representation” of the high Middle Ages underwent radical transformations from its exclusivist and absolutist representation of high power embodied in the crown to a public representation guaranteed by sound reason and giving priority to the better argument. Power in this respect is not a function of status; instead, it is identified with the sovereign character of the people in the public sphere.

Aside from the genesis of the bourgeois capitalist societies in Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century with its highly humanist values, the development of trade and international commerce likewise allowed for

the eventual realization of the traffic in commodities and news.<sup>6</sup> Just as the early development of the public sphere was limited to the learned bourgeois and capitalist bourgeoisie, news access were likewise limited to the few elites. The development of the access to news was coterminous with the development of early international trade capitalism. Habermas reiterates, “The traffic in news that developed alongside the traffic in commodities showed a similar pattern. With the expansion of trade, merchants’ market-oriented calculations required more frequent and more exact information about distant events.”<sup>7</sup> The need for exact and new information from distant lands for trade and security led the merchants to monopolize news distribution. “The great trade cities became at the same time centers for the traffic in the news; the organization of this traffic on a continuous basis became imperative to the degree to which the exchange of commodities and securities became continuous.”<sup>8</sup> However, under the monopolistic control of large capital industries aided by the state censorship, the information received by ordinary people (the local town merchants, artisans, and peasants) was fragmented and meticulously scrutinized. It was not in the interest of the state and the elite to allow the dissemination of news information that ultimately served their interest in expanding the market and power entrenchment in politics. To this, Habermas asserts, “For the traffic in news developed not only in connection with the needs of commerce; the news itself became a commodity. Commercial news reporting was, therefore, subject to the laws of the same market to whose rise it owed its existence in the first place.”<sup>9</sup> To be sure, news pamphlets were distributed among the people, nonetheless, only the most insignificant details of an event was permitted to be in public.

### **Mass Media: a short history**

The expansion of the scope of human communication was necessary to sustain the organization of early civilizations. Habermas recognized the importance of this, “The occurrence of human communication over time and at a distance is much older than the mass media now in use. This

process was integral to the organization of each society, which persisted for long periods and extended over large areas.”<sup>10</sup> So at the center of every flourishing society stood the importance of human communication. This vitality of human communication in the development and organization of society is best exhibited in how the early state civilizations and church institutions held power over the people. During the high Middle Ages, the church gained power over the people through the holy scripture and the sermons in the pulpit.

However, when the printing press was introduced in the early 15th century, this caused an alarming reaction from authorities, the church, and the state alike. They perceived the emergence of the free press as a threat to their absolute power and domination over the people’s knowledge and beliefs. Subsequently, press statements and newsletters that expressed ideas which threatened state power were censored by the state’s official censorship boards. “Only a trickle of this stream of reports passed through the filter of these “newsletters” into printed journals. The recipients of private correspondence had no interest in their contents becoming public.”<sup>11</sup> Despite the strict censorship imposed by state authorities on the free press, it nonetheless served its purpose of informing the people. The problem, however, is that since the free press is owned by elite property-owner individuals whose ultimate interest is their profit over producing good information, they “were satisfied with a system that limited information to insiders.”<sup>12</sup>

This new technologies of printing also replaced the scribes of the early letters with professional authors and editors who produced books, magazines and journals. The application of print technology in the mass production of reading materials revolutionized public relations in its earlier stage. “The successful application of the print technology to the reproduction of texts in place of handwriting, about the mid-fifteenth century, was only the first step in the emergence of what we now call a media institution – an organized set of interrelated activities and roles, directed towards certain goals and governed by a set of rules and procedures.”<sup>13</sup> This early introduction of the media institution in the rise

of modern mass media has led to the liberal formulation of the freedom of the press. The need to ensure freedom of the press – exemplified in the diversity of content in media programming – is grounded in the idea that such diversification of content in mass media offered support to the citizens to maneuver through the murky and muddy waters of democratic engagements.

The problem was not whether the public is free to engage with mass media. Nonetheless, the commodification of news and information in modern public relations led to the danger where “citizens can find themselves both polarized and paralyzed in a situation of information overload.”<sup>14</sup> With the growing number of mass media artifacts and technologies, the world of the press and public relations had grown more potent in commodifying news and entertainment. Like its coterminous principle, bourgeois capitalism, the press in the liberal era had entered into the private sphere of commodity exchange. Habermas writes, “In comparison with the press of the liberal era, the mass media have ... attained an incomparably greater range and effectiveness ... On the other hand, they have been moved further out ... and reentered the once private sphere of commodity exchange.”<sup>15</sup> This integration of modern mass media to commodity exchange would inevitably lead to the manipulation and transfiguration of public opinion to bourgeois false consciousness.

### **Mass Media and Democracy**

The knot that binds mass media and democracy is similar to the umbilical cord that binds the mother to her children at birth. What sustains democracy in the proper sense is the public; the life and blood of a democratic society runs through the veins of public opinion. Hence, a truly functioning democracy presupposes active and critical citizens capable of self-determination through their critical engagements in public discourses that matter to their political lives. Over the past decades, people have seen the rapid democratization of the world. Nations around the world are beginning to embrace the fundamental principles of liberalism: equality and liberty. It is for this reason that Francis Fukuyama proclaimed

the end of world history. The end of world history is brought about by realizing democracy in the global arena.

Despite the democratization of the world, democracy remains an abstraction to some, especially in most developing countries. The kind of democracy that has taken form over time is an elite democracy; a democracy that centers upon the few most powerful elites who run the country's major economic and political systems. They are the transfiguration of the earlier manorial lordships. The only difference is that these new political elites transubstantiate themselves to the role of the divine. Their power is no longer limited to a display of grandeur and lordship; these elites can now create a world where everyone lives and thinks according to their design and will. Mass media should play the most crucial role in emancipating people from their deep political slumber. But now the control of media under the name democracy denies the press its freedom. Indeed, truth has become a costly commodity in our time.

Furthermore, this control is certainly not by force but by creating in the mind of the public, a false consciousness wrapped in ideas of sovereignty, equality, and liberty. "Those at the top understand that the corporate political culture is not a mystically self-sustaining system. They know they must work tirelessly to propagate the ruling orthodoxy, to use democratic appearances to cloak plutocratic policies."<sup>16</sup> From this presupposition, modern media must take the role of the Messiah. The Messianic role of the media consists in combating the false consciousness that the governing power has inculcated in the minds of the incognizant public. Ideally, free media must counter the prevailing consciousness of the current orthodoxy and replace it with what is the truth. Such can only be realized when in the process of relaying information, the public is allowed to think for themselves and thereby engage critically in purifying the public sphere. Noam Chomsky writes, "The role of the media in contemporary politics forces us to ask what kind of a world and what kind of a society we want to live in, and in particular in what sense of democracy do we want this to be a democratic society."<sup>17</sup>

## **Mass Media and the Democratization process**

The question of the fundamental role and function of mass media posits a necessity in the transformation and development of modern democracy. The question presupposes a network of problems that are both social and political in structure. Moreover, to provide an exhaustive account of the question, one must ponder profoundly and return to the prevailing power structures that generally govern mass media. In the past, mass media communication was regarded as the medium for establishing and promulgating reasonable public opinion. It was primarily conceived as the most potent instrument to combat absolute government rule. Mass media communication was regarded as the most powerful tool to liberate the public from the absolutism of the prevailing power structures. However, in recent times, the press may have taken on a different appearance from its intermediary role in forming the public's political rationality to becoming the worst enemy of public opinion. In the past, a bond existed that necessarily linked the press and public opinion. "The press, the mass communication ... had a necessary, conditional relationship to public opinion: without the press, there was no politically effective, reasonable and responsibility-conscious public opinion."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the necessary relationship between the free press and the public in transforming and recreating public opinion is brought about by mass media's intermediary role as the medium for public critical-rational debate.

Nonetheless, the idea that mass communication is a medium for public debate and opinion has become a bromide to the majority. Mass media today appears to be no longer the medium for reproducing public opinion. It has formed part of the structures that manipulate and manufacture public opinion. Indeed, historically mass media was regarded as the most potent medium for liberating the masses from the government's autarchy. It has become a mechanism for subjugating and pacifying the masses to follow the whims and intentions of the ruling power. "The press was once regarded as the decisive instrument for the liberation of the individual from absolute government, and nowadays we are more inclined to ask ourselves how we can liberate the individual from the

spiritual despotism of mass communication media.”<sup>19</sup> Initially, the role of mass media communication is to question the prevailing orthodoxy and to guarantee the freedom and development of the people through honest and truthful information dissemination. However, what transpired at present is the exact opposite. The free press has become the primary tool of the few elites to manipulate and create a false consciousness to control the citizens.

In a functioning democracy, the people are asked to express their thoughts about politics that would serve their purposes. In the same way, they are guaranteed to be listened to by the government. That is, the ruling power accepts and listens to the legitimacy of the people’s appeals. On this note, mass media comes into play as the medium upon which the dialogue between the citizen and the government occurs. Indeed, if the citizens are to partake in meaningful political discussions, they need an institutionally guaranteed forum wherein they can critically engage and question the ruling orthodoxy. Mass media communication necessarily constitutes the forum where rational-critical debates occur between the citizenry and the established power. “Thus the debate about public involvement of citizens in political communication leads to questions about the media as a public sphere where the relations between an established power and the citizenry take place.”<sup>20</sup>

The process of democratization exemplified in the political communication between the citizenry and the established power takes its full realization through mass media being the public sphere where such relations occur. The role of the press in democratic deliberation is to show that the central democratic values of liberty and equality are respected during the deliberation procedure. Moreover, mass communication media must function as the balance that enables the contending voices of the masses to participate in the democratic dialogue. Likewise, the free press must articulate quality information and relevant social choices to inform the people properly. Finally, the media must participate in democratization by facilitating public deliberation procedures. “Failing all these functions, democracy will be undermined. In such a case, the

media will maintain the status quo by legitimating the power center, marginalizing the contending voices, diluting critical information, precluding genuine options, shortening public debates, and demobilizing collective behaviors.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Mass Media and the Demise of Public Opinion**

Initially, the printing press was regarded as the integral to the public sphere for reproducing public opinion. The free press was tasked to render possible the liberal expression of the people’s sentiments and public opinions over shared political interests. Public opinion, in this respect, was identified with the autonomous self-realization of the people engaged in the processes of democratization. It involved the public’s active participation in the critical resistance to political domination through public reason. However, as the ruling power continued to extend its control over the state’s political institutions, they have somehow succeeded in infiltrating the media institutions as well. This absolute control of the polity’s fundamental social and political structures has led to the refeudalization of the public sphere. Habermas explains that this refeudalization of society is brought about by linking the private and public realms with their underlying interests in commerce and social labor. They are subsequently being controlled under the monopoly of societal powers.<sup>22</sup>

It is not the political authorities, but a ruling orthodoxy which now possess the power to manipulate and subjugate the masses and stage the public sphere. Chomsky identified them as the specialized class or the business community that manipulates, decides, analyzes, and governs the economic, political, and ideological systems.<sup>23</sup> The citizens are made to think that they are free to reform and promulgate their political interests and make political authorities accountable for their decisions. But insofar as they do not form part of the system of control, the public is subtly excluded. Habermas writes, “Here organizations strive for political compromises with the state and one another, as much as possible to the exclusion of the public; in this process, however, they have to procure

plebiscitary agreement from a mediatized public utilizing a display of staged or manipulated publicity.”<sup>24</sup> That is because the ruling powers understand they cannot use force to insist on their interests over the masses; they use the most potent instrument for mass inculturation and information. Mass media has become the most powerful tool for mass subjugation, inculcating a false consciousness on to the incognizant public.

Mass media’s “opinion management” has created the false consciousness that the public consumes in the public sphere. The critical stand of Habermas’ assertions on the role of mass communication media in the proliferation of public opinion is derived from the presupposition that the public sphere presented in mass media is nothing more than an illusion. Public relations in this respect is limited to sheer adoration and conformity to the persona that represent power, similar to the kind of publicity expressed by the Kings in the past whose embodiment of divine attributes the people recognize and embrace. Publicity is no longer identified with the public’s use of critical reason meant to resist domination in a public debate. “Publicity once meant the exposure of political domination before the public use of reason; publicity now adds up the reactions of an uncommitted friendly disposition.”<sup>25</sup> This systematic shutting down of publicity, in the sense of the critical exposition of political domination in the public use of reason, has led to the eventual demise of public opinion in the public sphere. “The world fashioned by mass media is a public sphere in appearance only. By the same way token, the integrity of the private sphere, which they promise to their consumers is also an illusion.”<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, with the aid of modern mass media, the ruling orthodoxy has successfully created a pseudo-public sphere where the society of incognizant and mediatized private individuals exist. Mass media has successfully disorganized the masses by instigating a false sense of freedom of political engagement to the people, which is limited to a minimum based on the appeal of the ruling elites’ private political interests. Furthermore, the media’s transformed the private individual’s public attitude, from the public’s rational and critical dispositions towards the state, to a passive

consumer consuming public culture. Habermas explains, “When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and social labour also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception, however, uniform in mode.”<sup>27</sup> In this manner, private citizens are no longer seen as self-sufficient, self-determining individuals capable of entering into critical rational discourse with the government. Instead, they are conceived as the mere consuming individuals.

Habermas further explains that creating the pseudo-public sphere through the news propaganda proliferated by the ruling orthodoxy is necessary to maintain the illusion of the existence of a critically and rationally attuned citizenry. “Public relations fuses both: advertisement must absolutely not be recognizable as the self-presentation of private interest. It bestows on its object the authority of an object of public interest about which – this is the illusion to be created – the public of critically reflecting private people freely forms its opinion.”<sup>28</sup> Managing opinion inevitably causes the demise of public opinion in the public sphere. It involves ordering political events and the restructuring of the people’s psychological dispositions to fit into the desires and interests of the specialized class is the nature and function of news propaganda. This form of the engineering of consent is masked under the guise of public interest. The idea is that the public is still actively and critically engaged in the democratization process. However, Habermas emphatically asserts that a staged public opinion is designed to secure the public interest.<sup>29</sup> He writes, “The awakened readiness of the consumers involves the false consciousness that as critically reflecting private people, they contribute responsibly to public opinion.”<sup>30</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the democratization processes, mass media holds a vital role for educating the people by providing truthful information and a proper venue for a rational-critical debate to challenge the the prevailing power.

It was always regarded as the most potent instrument for proclaiming truth and questioning the ruling orthodoxy. It was intended to be the public sphere where the critically reflective public can critique and challenge the absolutism of the government. Publicity, in this respect, was formerly conceived as the rational resistance of domination by the public use critical rationality. However, things changed when the specialized class of elites emerged on the scene. The business community entrenched itself in power by manipulating everything in the market and politics.

With the aid of modern mass media communication, they successfully created the false consciousness needed to keep the masses passive. Mass media hid the ruling orthodoxy's interests under the presupposed liberty of critical engagement and public opinion. The illusion was created is that the public is still capable of contributing to creating public opinion in the public sphere. As Noam Chomsky writes, "The specialized class, the responsible men, carry out the executive function, which means they do the thinking and planning and understand the common interests. Then ... the bewildered herd [whose] function in democracy ... is to be spectators, not participants in action."<sup>31</sup> In the process of the engineering of consent, the masses are reduced to a "bewildered herd" whose role in the entire democratization process is to sit and watch.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, the manufactured public sphere, which mass media and the few elites have created, has led to the disintegration of the public into self-centred private individuals. Public opinion, in this respect, bears nothing of its original sense being the product of rational deliberation and contestation against the ruling power. Public opinion is a staged opinion created by the specialized class and mediated by mass media propaganda to maintain their control.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Jurgen Habrmas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Trans., Thomas Burger, (The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1991), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.m 15.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>10</sup> Dennis McQuail, "The Rise of Mass Media," [Article online] Available from <https://UK.sagepub.com>, access in December 15, 2022, p.24.

<sup>11</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>13</sup> Dennis McQuail, "The Rise of Mass Media," 26.

<sup>14</sup> UNESCO report on World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development 2017/2018. UNESCO: Paris. 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 188.

<sup>16</sup> Micheal Parenti, *The Culture Struggle*, (Seven Stories Press, New York: 2005), 133.

<sup>17</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, (Seven Stories Press, New York: 1997), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, "Mass Communication Media and Public Opinion," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol.36, Issue 4, December 1959, p., 402.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Livingstone, S., and Lunt, P., "The Mass Media, Democracy and the Public Sphere, *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate*, 1994, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Mohammad Sahid Ullah, *Free Media, Democracy and Democratization: Experiences from Developing Countries*, *Journal of Global Communication*, vol. 2., no.2, 2009, p., 345.

- <sup>22</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 231.
- <sup>23</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, 13.
- <sup>24</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 232.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 161
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, 13.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

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