

The Power of Images

How mass media can influence the human mind

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ABSTRACT. Do the mass media condition and educate their audience with clever manipulation? In the current era of expanding digital technologies, our environment is often dominated by the power of images. Human tragedy in modern society is that our scientific-technological automatisms drive us too far from real and pure authenticity of feelings and emotions of the human being. Images and mass media systems determine passivity in the human mind and they do not develop experience, real motivations, spontaneity, creativity: they are not able to form creative and critical minds. In the sociological theory of Jürgen Habermas, the mass media are seen as being controlled by political and economic forces, which have an interest in manipulating the audience. The first rule for understanding «the human condition is that men live in second hand worlds». They are aware of much more than they have personally experienced and their own experience is always indirect. The quality of their lives is determined by meanings they have received from others. As Wright Mills suggested, we do live in a «second hand world», in which many of the things we know, were learned from others rather than experienced first hand. This means, quite simply, that more than ever we are dependent on the meanings given us by the mass media and through mass communication.

KEYWORDS: *Appearance, human mind, images, mass media, reality, strategies of manipulation*

Appearance, reality and fiction

The term «image» (from Latin language: *imago*) is always connected with visible appearance. Images are external aspects of reality as they are perceived by our sense of sight. Subjects and specific contents of images proposed by mass media can be divided into two principal parts: reality and fiction, facts and fantasy. All kinds of programs are

connected with this distinction, even if modern communication strategies of television can produce some programs where it is sometimes difficult to understand and maintain clear boundaries between reality and fiction.

Many times we can notice that images of violence seem to have a preference in the choice of news selected and presented by mass media information. The principle of negativity is expressed in a modern journalistic attitude: bad news is good news for the audience. Bad news is connected with a conflict or drama. Conflict produces a state of tension about the future. Drama involves the human mind and the public's emotions with phenomena of identification, showing subjective, personal, human aspects of defeat, victory or tragedy. «Images of violence in mass media are sometimes connected with competition. Public information decides to propose shock situations or strong images of violence to increase the audience» (Wallner, 2018). The specific choice of images of violence is caused by a principal reason which characterizes mass media. Television news programmes are by now a «spectacle», as all other television programs are today a «spectacle» and they want to attract the highest possible audience. This simple fact explains the preference for news that contains action, human drama, conflicts and suggestive images able to excite deep, strong emotions and to involve the human mind.

Mass media images of publicity are also proposed from this kind of perspective. We can always find images of advertising and publicity that deal with fact and fiction, reality and fantasy. If on one side images of publicity exist in function of the market, efficiency and fashion, on the other side «these images are used to convey the idea of success: they are proposed and publicized as models to appear with success» (Logan, 2016). Mass media images of publicity sell objects, but also sell dreams, desires, feelings. They use whichever image does the best job to convince the highest number of people. These images are often solely concerned with appearance, and can be chosen without consideration for the negative feelings and emotions they may stimulate.

Perception and «visual communication» in Gadamer

In an interview published by “Die Woche”, Hans Georg Gadamer declared that «television is the chain of slavery where modern humanity is tied. The contemporary élite of information own the key to this chain and its specific aim is to reduce humanity to slavery through images». Images proposed and publicized by television many times are against human dignity and do not promote real, deep and authentic motivations in human beings. According to this point of view, the political, cultural and social function of television is to «control» and «accustom» the human mind, human ideas, emotions, feelings and human capacity of judgement.

From this perspective, Gadamer's criticism is against the mass media «system» which threatens, through industry of communication and information, to transform democracy into oligarchy. «A culture connected with real and deep education of our soul and our mind is now disappearing more and more in modern society. In this horizon, we have to outline the end of culture and of the experience of dialogue. With every day the end of the experience of dialogue causes the end of the forming of a critical mind» (Gadamer, 1995).

In another interview published by “L'Unità”, Gadamer declared also that «in our mass media system there is no spontaneity and no creativity (Gadamer, 1996). Almost everyone is passive. The political function of television is to control human mind and to accustom human capacity of judgement and

human thinking. This process is one of the forms of society bureaucracy defined by Max Weber». Gadamer recognizes that in our society the forms of «social bureaucracy» are by now «inevitable». But human «tragedy» is that our modern scientific-technological «automatizations» (Gadamer, 2014) of the internet and modern mass media drive us too far from pure authenticity of the human being, from authenticity and spontaneity of our feelings and emotions. Mass media do not develop experience, real motivations, spontaneity: they are not able to form creative and critical minds. «Education systems in our modern society are characterized by a deep crisis.

The reason is because we are losing the meaning of dialogue. Television is the opposite of dialogue: only one person speaks to millions of people who do not say anything. It is a system of slavery. I am against a closed system, I am against – says Gadamer – a system of slavery. I want to support human thinking and dialogue as forms against the manipulation of the audience» (Gadamer, 1995).

In an article published by “Giornale di Sicilia”, Massimiliano Cannata asked Gadamer some interesting questions about the connections between mass media, images, democracy and the human mind. «Images and mass media systems – says Gadamer – determine passivity in the human mind.

Democracy is a critical point. Democracy is by now a form of despotism and the new modern despotism is mass media despotism. My criticism is not against mass media operators, but against all the system, which threatens to transform democracy into oligarchy, through the industry of communication and information. Freedom, critical mind and democracy are the most important points in our society. [...] To an unthought-of extent, information is being pumped into our lives, and this flood of information must be channelled such that it does not destroy our culture, the *cultura animi*, the culture of the human soul and mind, but fosters it. Are we not exposed to an excess of mediations?» (Gadamer, 1994).

Gadamer reminds us that mass media contain «an *apparatus* of endless mediation and intrication; thus the immediacy of spontaneous judgment and spontaneous address is threatened again and again». What is critical about mass media is the excesses of mediations, excesses in the use of language, which bears no significance to real issues. The media is a kind of filling up the boredom in this life and the solution is to re-fire it. The sorrow it shares is a chain that binds the shaping of our lives. The augmentation of mediations and the immediacy it has is what sickens our souls in the world. When we turn on the internet or television, the information is immediate and it immediately drowns us to its world. This «immediacy», according to Gadamer, is what we should be aware of. We have always been interested in «what images mean», but in the current era of expanding visual technologies, the question is critical. Visual intelligence is recognized as an aspect of intelligence that is crucial to understanding our world. The increasing role of visual images in our society necessitates increasing *critical skills* in the reading and understanding all the aspects connected with «visible appearance».

Strategies in «manipulating the audience» in Jürgen Habermas

As in Gadamer, also in the sociological theory of Jürgen Habermas, the mass media are seen as being controlled by political and economic «forces», which have an interest in «manipulating the audience» (Habermas, 2013). This compromises the legitimacy of the communicative power exercised by the

mass media. The political manipulation is a kind of opinion making, where the media not only transmit debates, but also create and shape them. The commercial manipulation uses the carefully designed and tested psychological methods of advertising. The media explore themes and identification possibilities that appeal to the unconscious dispositions of the audience in order to attract attention.

In the conclusion to his *Further Reflections on the Public Sphere*, Habermas makes a distinction between «the communicative generation of legitimate power on the one hand» and «the manipulative deployment of media power to procure mass loyalty, consumer demand, and ‘compliance’ with systemic imperatives on the other» (Habermas, 1992). Such a distinction can be analytically made and strategically deployed, but in Habermas’s use, the media are excluded tout court from the realm of democracy and the possibility of democratic transformation, since they are limited by definition in his optic to «systemic imperatives of manipulation», governed by media of money and power, and thus are excluded from the possibility of contributing to the politics of a broader societal democratization.

In *Transformations*, he sketches the degeneration of media from print-based journalism to the electronic media of the twentieth century, in an analysis that, as his critics maintain, tends to idealize earlier print media and journalism within a democratic public sphere contrasted to an excessively negative sketch of later electronic media and consumption in a debased public sphere of contemporary capitalism.

This same model of the media and public sphere continues to be operative in his most recent magnum opus *Between Facts and Norms*, where Habermas discusses a wide range of legal and democratic theory, including a long discussion of the media and the public sphere, but he does not discuss the normative character of communication media in democracy or suggest how a progressive media politics could evolve (Habermas, 1992; 2013). Part of the problem is that Habermas’s notion of the public sphere was grounded historically in the era of print media which, as McLuhan and Gouldner have argued, fostered modes of argumentation characterized by linear rationality, objectivity, and consensus.

Habermas’s argument is that language itself contains norms to criticize domination, oppression, and a force that could ground and promote societal democratization. In the capacity to understand the speech of another; to submit to the force of a better argument, and to reach consensus, Habermas found a rationality inherent in what he came to call «communicative action» that could generate norms to criticize distortions of communication in processes of societal domination and manipulation and cultivate a process of rational discursive will-formation. Developing what he called an «ideal speech situation», Habermas thus cultivated «quasi-transcendental grounds for social critique and a model for more democratic social communication and interaction» (Habermas, 1981; 2017).

The political scientist Peter Klier criticizes Habermas’s manipulation hypothesis because absolute objectivity does not exist. Klier thinks the amount of information in modern society is so huge that the media as well as citizens and politicians have to make a very strict *selection*. But what does «selection» mean? How can we define a «selection process» of the human mind?

Members of the public can neither grasp the many topics, nor penetrate sufficiently deep into a particular topic to fulfil the role that they are supposed to, according to the norms of democracy. Klier thinks this *selection* is such a big problem that no manipulation hypothesis is needed to conclude that democracy has a legitimacy problem. He stresses that people’s reality image is more determined

by the media reality. The more they are dependent on selective media and the less their chances are of getting corrective information from primary sources. Klier advocates this obvious observation as a *counter thesis* to the manipulation hypothesis of Habermas. But this so-called counter thesis confirms the very fact that the media produce a skewed image of reality. We are only left with the question of whether this distortion deserves to be called *manipulation*.

Mass media as a self-referential and «autopoietic system» in Luhmann

From this perspective, in his social systems theory, Niklas Luhmann sees communication as a fundamental process in any social system. «Communication forms a triple selection process: a) selection of information by the sender; b) selective attention by the receiver; c) the selecting effect of the received information» (Luhmann, 2018). Luhmann describes the mass media as a «self-referential» and «self-maintaining» (autopoietic), almost «autonomous system».

In Luhmann's self-referential theory, the phenomenon of the organizations is marked by the description of the «systemic differentiation». Following the arguments of Niklas Luhmann, it is possible to say that highly differentiated societies are formed by numerous types of organizations, in such a way that they form the social dominant form whereby the activities are developed.

The social systems correspond to systems that operate in an autopoietic way, based on communication, and Luhmann distinguishes three levels of these systems: *functional systems, interaction systems and organizational systems*. The organizational and interaction systems, both originate from the social complexity of present-day societies and correspond to the set of systems of interaction, guiding communication for a specific end.

Niklas Luhmann states that *autopoiesis* refers to all operations (and structures) that occur in the system, while the idea of *self-reference* refers to the formation of structures inside the system. The concept of self-reference comes directly from the theory of communication and mechanisms of reflexivity of meta-communication; it also forms the nucleus of the systems to be formed by communications, as well as referring to how a system operates in relation to its environment.

Therefore, the «autopoietic systemic» hypothesis starts from the assumption that the actions of the organizations have not been previously determined by the environment, but, initially, by a precise «internal logic». In the perspective of the social systems theory and the idea of self-reference, it is recognized that the organizations have a *systemic intelligence*, therefore, a management of organizational knowledge. Based on this line of argument, the organization is understood as a «system formed by its history», system of rules, processes of management and forms of transaction.

All of his work about the systems theory is based on three core theories. First, systems theory as societal theory, second communication theory and last evolution theory. The core element of Luhmann's theory is communication. Social systems are systems of communication, and is the most encompassing social system. Communication gives meaning to a system. The different modes of meaning processing in systems, constitutes the boundaries between function systems. Without communication there would be no system, so the system theory of Luhman, «is the rise of order out of chaos» (Luhman, 2018). Being the social system that comprises all (and only) communication,

today's society is a world society. A system is defined by a boundary between itself and its environment. Luhmann turned away from action and towards communication and this is how he differed from Talcott Parsons. Luhmann saw social systems not as systems of action but as «systems of communication». He saw social systems as an «organic system capable of self regulation», and it was namely this «self regulation» area of his theory that led him to develop *autopoiesis* in the sociology term. Social systems are systems that make sense of their environment.

While Luhmann in his writings deals a lot with power as a medium in general, it is important to note that while the medium of power is not specific to the function system of politics, it is only in that system that power becomes political power and serves as «the symbolically generalized medium of communication». Borrowing the term from Parsons, yet re-specifying it in his own theoretical context, Luhmann conceptualizes symbolically generalized media of communication as media that condition the likelihood of an otherwise improbable acceptance of communication. However, the fact that each function system is characterized by one symbolically generalized medium of communication, and that these media therefore are functionally similar, must not lead to the conclusion that different symbolically generalized media of communication are similar in all other respects. Thus, most notably, it would be wrong to assume that power works in the same way in the political system as money does in the economic system. Both money and power condition the likelihood of the acceptance of communication, yet in the political system the medium addresses the specific problem of «how to bring others to accept decisions on their decisions, although the world offers different possibilities» (Luhmann, 2000).

Agenda setting, framing and priming

There are many different scientific, cognitive theories about how mass media can influence the human mind, human thinking, as well as people's attitudes, worldview and behaviour. While historical as well as contemporary observations are full of examples attesting to the power of the mass media to influence people, early experimental studies have failed to confirm the assumption that mass media have a strong power to change people's attitudes.

This discrepancy between experiments and real world observations was solved with the introduction of theories of cognitive processing, such as *agenda setting*, *framing* and *priming*. The human cognitive capacities are limited. The news media contain huge amounts of information, much more than any person can possibly handle. It is therefore theorized that humans are economizing the processing of the information they receive from news media as well as from other sources.

The first step in handling information is *selection*. People choose which news media to read, watch, and listen to, according to their needs and preferences. They screen the media for interesting information, ignoring topics that appear to be irrelevant to them, redundant, boring, or too complicated to comprehend. People routinely reject stories that appear too remote or too complicated simply to save time and energy. Stories that catch people's attention are those that are relevant to their personal interests, but also general human-interest stories such as reports about crimes and accidents, health, sports, entertainment, and celebrities.

The producers of news have learned to snare people's attention by giving most stories a personal touch. Once a story has been selected for attention, the cognitive processing of the story is further economized by *schematic thinking*. Humans use what has been called knowledge *structures* or *schemata*

as mental templates that people and events are fitted into. This process facilitates the integration of new information into existing knowledge.

Since news sources usually present the news in isolated snippets without sufficient background, the schemata allow the receivers to embed the news into a meaningful context. This process also facilitates discarding redundant information that already exists in the schema as well as information that conflicts with previous knowledge that still appears to be sound. People often misunderstand stories, either because they do not have an appropriate schema to interpret the story, or because they apply the schema that comes first to mind rather than the schema that is most appropriate. Well-informed people have a rich collection of schemata that makes it easier to process new information. The effect of agenda-setting is epitomized in the famous quote by Bernard Cohen, saying that the press «may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about». People need to orient themselves in a complex world full of complex issues. In the absence of other cues, people tend to judge the importance of issues from their salience in the media and to focus their attention on those presumably most important issues. There is plenty of evidence that the media have strong influence on people's perception of which issues are important and which problems they want their government to do something about.

Another cognitive effect in our *mind*, which may be explained as a consequence of schematic thinking, is *framing*. Framing refers to the frame of reference within which an issue is described. As every story must have a frame, whether the journalist pays attention to framing or not, we cannot assume that the effects of framing are always intentional.

Several theorists make a distinction between frames in the media and frames in the minds of the audience. A media frame is a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events. Audience frames are defined as mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals' processing of information.

Following all these considerations, we can notice that a lot of images proposed by mass media can influence the human mind, human thinking, as well as people's attitudes, worldview and behaviour. Images proposed and publicized by mass media and the internet many times are against human dignity and do not promote spontaneity and real, deep and authentic motivations in human beings. If we stop and believe only in the appearance of images and we never try to go beyond these limits, our mind will always be a prisoner of material and external aspects of our life and we will never find those interior values which could give a sense to our own life. «The first rule for understanding the human condition is that men live in second hand worlds. They are aware of much more than they have personally experienced; and their own experience is always indirect. The quality of their lives is determined by meanings they have received from others» (Mills, 2014). As the sociologist Wright Mills suggested, we do live in a «second hand world» in which many of the things we know were learned from others rather than experienced first hand. This means, quite simply, that more than ever we are dependent on the meanings given us by the mass media and through mass communication.

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