

Mass Media and the Crests of Human Destruction

Jim Feast

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Cultural theorist Raymond Williams has suggested that the technology for television was available years before it was utilized. It was held back because the conditions for it were not ripe yet.

Those conditions were urbanization (which masses an audience in one place), the regularization of employment, the homogenization of culture and the concurrent erosion of communities, the need for communication to customers of large concerns (such as department stores) and the need for insipid entertainment for drones whose jobs leave them physically unimpaired but mentally drained.

But there is a totally different, less benign reason for the birth of individual forms of mass communication, which entails an altered approach to patterns of struggle against media distortion and encroachment. When a new mass medium (radio, TV, Internet) is born, it is as a riposte to militant activities of the working class, which are disturbing and threatening capitalism. What is needed to collapse this threat is a new form of “alienation,” here defined not as individual anomie but a separation between the workers’ base and an area of everyday practice, a separation which each new medium delivers.

The U.S.’s first universal media was the mass press, inaugurated in 1883 when Joseph Pulitzer bought the *New York World*. At this time, working class radicalism was at a peak, as illustrated by three examples. The first was the 1877 railroad strike which spread throughout the nation, and included the looting and firing of the Pittsburgh rail yards and a general strike in St. Louis. In affected cities, the whole lower class massed behind the nascent railroad brotherhoods.

The second was the rise to prominence of the Knights of Labor, one of the early major US unions, who came to fame via a railroad strike but had bigger ambitions. They pioneered the call for one IWW-like big union with CIO-like, industrial organization for each trade; racial and sexual equality, and the cultural overturn of capital, which could be taken down by establishment of workers cooperatives, patronized by workers educated through the Knights’ panoply of secret society binding rituals and a provision of coop-supplied material culture.

The third was the radicalism of Midwestern German immigrant craftsmen and women. They populated anarchist and socialist circles and shared the cultural emphasis of the Knights. They had developed a proletarian public sphere, drawing on their homeland’s long artisan tradition, including picnics, gymnasiums, theater, parades, choral societies, and the *Lehr-und-Wehr-Verein* military units.

In the 1880s, a vast sea of workers were being exposed to explicit anti-capitalist ideas which sought to transform the economy in a more equalitarian direction by unseating the buccaneer power elite and their government lackeys. It would not be until the rise of Progressivism at the turn of the century that this ferment would be dampened. The Progressives softened the business order and revised city government structure, taking it out of the hands of neighborhood-based machine politicians and putting it in those of commissions of business-controlled experts.

The pattern of this shift in power in city government was first encoded in the *World*. Newspapers like the *World* crafted the shears with which the working class would be clipped. The mass media promoted the first articulation of a new form of alienation, which in the future would be instated when there was a change in the structural parameters of the economy.

Previously newspapers had been partisan. Michael McGerr in *The Decline of Popular Politics* wrote that, "Party faith was the foundation of a journal, something to declare on inaugurating the paper, to reaffirm after a change of publishing partner or at the start of a new year." Pulitzer's wager, however, was that he could depoliticize journalism. His paper introduced the crusade. On the front page, the investigative reporter would expose a scandal, police brutality or lack of funds to build the base of the Statue of Liberty, and on page four (the editorial page) school-master Pulitzer would explain the abuse in a liberal reading of political economy and initiate a *World*-organized campaign to set it right.

The paper introduced an alienation in community governance. If the paper's policies took hold (as they eventually did), neither the socialists and anarchists nor the unions and cooperatives nor the machine politicians would have input into the direction of the society.

Was the advent of the Internet any different?

The regirding of the U.S. and world economy around 1969 through 1972 resulted in the shift from Fordist to flexible production. Whereas Fordism was based on an economy with high wages, stable employment and government subsidies, flexible production and post-Fordism relies on part-time and seasonal workers, the dismantling of social services and the removal of state or national limits to capital flows.

One major response of the lower classes to this downgraded work status was to make a virtue of necessity, and craft a DIY culture, which dipped away from the mass media pillars, which had been molded to Fordist exigencies. From punk to break dancing to grunge to hip-hop to Xeroxed zines, the cultural forms of the 1970s and '80s were cheap-, handmade or hand-me-down approaches that swaddled non-commodified networks of alternative spaces and lifestyles that eventually began to threaten the legitimacy and hegemony of mass linkages (such as TV and pop music), whose ideological curbs became even more necessary to enchain the portion of the work force that had been spun off from full-time occupation.

From this perspective, the Internet can be seen as an effort to control and regularize the proliferation of alternative spaces, which would now be routed through a central grid. Moreover, by reducing social intercourse in this agora to written signs, it can be said to be diverting people from more direct types of personal contact, such as phone trees, parties, rallies, informal gatherings, raves, and so on that have been key to countercultural formation. This alienation is that of the gradual or abrupt obliteration of the auto-poietic informal social networks, which will be taken out of the hands of their occupants.

Combating these incursions involves three aspects. The first is that, since the media's new alienations were introduced to curtail the power of the underclass, then these powers should be better appreciated and, hopefully, enhanced. The second is that our understanding of the media needs to be redefined as always involving encroachment, and so its intrusion should be made into a visible development. Third, we need to create an outline of the community practices which have been damaged by the introduction of mass media forms, from newspapers to radio to the Internet. Then a graduated plan to address and roll back the systematic alienations introduced by each of the media through history should be initiated.



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