

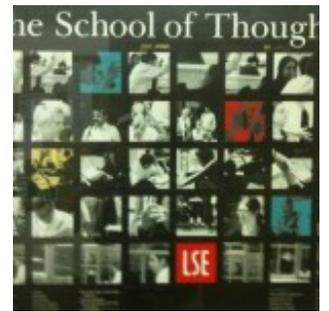
Living In A World Of Distorting Lenses (Guest blog)

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Some years ago, I came up with this naïve idea for a short story. The plot revolved around a group of people being locked up in a room whose walls consist of millions of distorting lenses. I never actually wrote that story down. But, thinking it over through the years, I kept asking the same question over and over again: Could our world be similar to this?



Over the years the globe has become smaller, forcing people like Marshal McLuhan admit that we are all living in a “global village”[1]. The new techniques that have emerged to serve the needs of market economy have affected our perception of two significant dimensions: Time and space compression, is, according to David Harvey, one of the major traits of this era[2].

Telecommunications and media played a major part in this outcome. In their attempt to facilitate capitalistic endeavors, it was media technologies that promoted the transition towards the overcoming of spatial barriers in the first place[3]. As history has shown, changes in technology might result in outcomes no one could ever have predicted beforehand.

Hey Mr Postman

Back in the golden years of television’s reign, Neil Postman created a genealogy of news’ mediums in America. Based on McLuhan’s idea that “the medium is the message”, he tried to prove that changes in media formats can actually affect the content of public discourse itself. Years and years before television or the web , he argued, it was the widespread use of the telegraph that dictated the shift towards what we call international news today.

The age of telegraphy meant that a bigger amount of information could be shared faster and cheaper, surpassing the difficulties posed by distance. If space was no longer defining the ways through which news were being distributed, why was it necessary for space to define news’ content? The shift from “local” to “global” content was the aftermath of this change. News stories’ no longer needed to be functional. Information input no longer intended to motivate the reader towards an output of action[4]. The events featured on a daily newspaper could be taking place in various corners of the world, and rarely could the reader do anything, other than to consume the stories, until the very following day, when the paperboy would knock on their door again.

This new media reality of massive loads of news being quickly consumed just for the sake of doing so, introduced journalism into the reality of fragmentation, bold headlines and striking pictures.

The It Thing

And here we are, dozens of years after telegraphy ceased to be the “it” thing, witnessing the same patterns repeating themselves over and over again through different means of communication. From the 24-hour televised news of the 90’s to the 140 character tweets of the 10’s, consumption of fragmented global news is the contemporary manifesto.

But what are the repercussions of this news media frenzy on the citizen? Let’s face it; democracies need their participants to be well informed. Choice-making is demanded of citizens, but choosing without knowledge can be detrimental for both a community and an individual. The concept of being well informed is based on one’s capability of relying on an array of well analyzed sources. Apparently, in a reality of fragmentation and incoherence, news

sources might be failing to accomplish their democratic goals, due to a lack of basic intellectual nutrients. Briefness may be efficient, but sometimes, it comes with a price.

Sea Of Irrelevance

The quantity of information to which a human is exposed nowadays is equally alarming. Postman is fierce, when he wonders whether our world has turned into a true version of Aldous Huxley's imagination "Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance".^[5] As destructive and monolithic as relying on one sole source of information can be, this vast ocean of information one is asked to swim through is equally dangerous for the citizen, since it simply blocks him from forming an opinion.

But, still, some people manage to deal with the waves. If objectivity is just an urban myth, as many people argue, sticking to the "sanctity and impartiality of some analytical sources might be useless, even dangerous for citizens. That is where the participatory alternative media step into the scene. Their purpose is not only to multiply the plurality of voices heard across the media spectrum, but to also enhance their diversity.

It is true that the rise of the so-called "new media" or "next media", as some prefer calling them ^[6], is resulting into the proliferation of participatory media models^[7]. By enhancing alternative media with new and less expensive tools, as Dan Gilmore argues, the capabilities given to people by new media appliances and applications are remarkable, contributing to attempts of sharing within (online) communities. We have to embrace the idea that people of a globalized background are both consumers and producers of the news, as this new situation might be the gear for a significant shift: "the trend towards media transparency is inevitable"^[8], Gilmore admits. And since media is heavily intertwined with politics, maybe there is a chance for citizens and democracies too.

Tourists And Vagabonds

In his book concerning Globalization, Zygmunt Bauman claims there are two types of people today: Tourists and Vagabonds^[9]. The first category consists of people who are capable of moving from place to place based on their free will, being welcomed wherever they arrive. The second category consists of people who are unintentionally forced to move and whose presence is never welcome wherever they arrive. In short, Tourists travel because they can. Vagabonds travel because they can't do otherwise.

I cannot help but wonder whether this paradigm could be applied to globalised media as well. Could it be that some people are willingly participating in this global celebration of news' consumption and production, while others, are "allowed" access to this system only as objects of observation? And, in addition, what would such a situation imply for the "citizen"?

According to Lillie Chouliaraki, there is undoubtedly a distance between the viewers and those who are being viewed. People enter the so-called "global village" (if such a thing really exists) from different positions: Some will be watching the news from the comfort of their own homes, while others will be suffering enough to be the news for the rest to consume^[10]. This relationship, which is often characterized by pity, produces a certain division and hierarchy by creating the Identities of "we" (the lucky westerners) and "the others" (the sufferers).

The question is whether, under such conditions, we can still speak of the existence of a true "cosmopolitanism", a form of global citizenship. Chouliaraki argues that a true form of cosmopolitanism is feasible, if this sense of pity is combined with an "emphasis on detached reflection, on the question of why this suffering is important and what we can do about it."^[11]

Now, let's return to the heroes of our short story. Through the distorting lenses, all they can see is a bizarre world of monstrous figures, a world of ugliness and pity. But, if such a thing as an intellectual earthquake is possible, they would be able to see something new. Through the cracks, they might have been able to discern that the people on the other side might not be really different from themselves. Maybe my story has not much to do with the issue at hand. But it surely provided me with some food for thought.

- [1] Postman, N., 1987, *Amusing ourselves to death*, Methuen London, p. 69
- [2] Harvey, D., 1997, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell, p. 285
- [3] Bauman, Z., 2000, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, p. 117
- [4] Postman, N., p. 70
- [5] Ibid., p. vii
- [6] Armitage, T., (July 31 2006), '2007 and the "next" big media thing', *New Statesman*, p. 2 of 2
- [7] Bailey, O., Cammaerts, B., and Carpentier, N., 2008, *Understanding Alternative Media*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, p. 4
- [8] Gilmore, D., 2005, *We The Media*, Sebastopol, CA: O' Riley Media, p. 64
- [9] Baman, Z., 2000, *Globalization – The Human Consequences*, Polity Press, p. 77
- [10] Chouliaraki, L., 2006, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, London: Sage, p.4
- [11] Ibid., p. 13

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