

Media and Media Power

Perspectives from
the Engelsberg seminar

2004

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- Conventional media which have set up web sites but not used the potential of the new communications medium.
- Internet services like Google and Yahoo which collate material from other sources or run a news agency ticker on line and are thus, distributors, not media originators — the equivalent of wholesalers and retailers, not newspapers.
- Partisan sites set up to peddle a viewpoint which present their messages as if they were information, without acknowledging where they are coming from.
- Services designed solely for the web but which — with honourable exceptions — lack journalistic credibility or the experience and standards needed to create something worthwhile and to sustain their operations to achieve credibility and frequent return use.

In an age of lowering standards and increasing information anarchy, the danger of what amounts to little more than rumour on a global scale is obvious. The present situation for on-line information is as if, on television, we had only choice between presenters reading out radio scripts and a swirling circus of snake oil salesmen and people pulling funny faces for their own gratification. This may be, in part, simply a reflection of the early years of any medium, and the unexplored on-line space may evolve its own methods and standards, as television did. But the web has become a part of everyday life for many millions of people far faster than other media did. As a result, there is a definite danger of a disconnect between the internet's size, speed and reach and its evolution, or non-evolution, as an information tool. A failure to develop it as more than a technical communications channel would be to throw away an opportunity to make the most of a medium that offers potential on a unique global scale. It is high time that the existing media, and new media practitioners, turned their attention to bringing the internet of age as far as news, analysis and comment are concerned.

THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN

Media Speed: notes on an accelerating culture

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The main news item in the Norwegian press in early summer 2004 was a celebrity marriage. Two unusually prosperous individuals made their solemn vows in the presence of a crowd incorporating an exceptional amount of economic and political power in the country including, prominently, the Prime Minister, a Christian Democrat known chiefly for his willingness to make pragmatic compromises on most issues. Presumably he had nothing else to do on that sunny Saturday in June.

The bride, Ms Mille-Marie Treschow, was heiress to a large family fortune and thus represented old money. The groom, Mr Stein Erik Hagen, was a self-made man whose wealth was a result of his success in the retail trade. His chain of budget supermarkets, RIMI, has in the space of less than two decades spread like cancer in the country, making pennies by the truckload for its founder.

The celebrity marriage is interesting in two ways. Its coverage by the press reminds us of the priorities of the media. And since, in this case, the event featured Mr Hagen of RIMI fame, it also inspires a reflection over the values that presently govern society. In fact, it can be argued that the successful business model of RIMI (and similar retail chains) accurately reflects the dominant values of contemporary society, with very serious results indeed in the area of news.

Every year, the market share of a few large grocery chains increases, and locally-owned shops face bankruptcy. This is a trend throughout Europe and beyond, and it has four consequences relevant to a discussion

of the news media. First, because of standardisation and bulk savings, the food prices decrease: ever taller piles of industrially produced food are rolled out of the storerooms at an ever higher speed. Efficiency increases. Secondly, variation is reduced as a result of standardisation. Each supermarket in a chain looks pretty much like the next, and limits itself to carrying foodstuffs that can be mass-produced cheaply. Thirdly, food producers are under pressure to reduce costs, usually by increasing volume and speed. In the same way as local grocers are phased out or metamorphosed into branches of RIMI-like corporations, small producers amalgamate or disappear. Fourthly, customer preferences are influenced, so that properly cured ham or properly smoked salmon become niche products available only from a handful of expensive specialty shops in the largest cities — most consumers have to make do with surrogate products injected with salt water to create the illusion of a process of maturation. One becomes accustomed to a situation where salt and sweet are the only tastes one can expect to encounter.

The logic of production governing the retail trade can be found in many other parts of our societies. Its main characteristics are increased productivity and the primacy of quantity over quality, as well as a loss of variation because of mass-production and ensuing standardisation. A further trait is acceleration as a main device to increase productivity.

I spoke about groceries, but the example might just as well have been taken from our universities and colleges, which have for years been undergoing policy-directed transformations — from quality to quantity, from slowness to speed, from intangible to tangible values. Most university subjects, however, can only be learned in one way, which is slowly. And most interesting research is a result of trying and failing, fuelled by existential concerns and a work regime which fails to conform to regular working hours. A colleague of mine, an elderly professor committed to the old regime, said that he did not object to prolonged absences which were not accounted for, provided the staff member in question returned with an interesting manuscript. Such a staff member would have difficulties finding a job today.

In general, those of us who are successfully coping with the new regime, probably slightly more than half of the population, have become musicians in a symphony orchestra who have just been told to play twice as fast. The rest — the more or less superfluous part of the population — are offered television, Valium and lotteries as a compensation. In Nor-

way, about a quarter of the population receives welfare benefits of some kind.

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In order to assess the role of the media, and in particular news media, in society, it is necessary to distinguish between mass media and elite media — between the budget supermarket and the specialty shop. Magazines like *Axess* and *Prospect*, weeklies like *The Economist*, and the obligatory sprinkling of quality dailies, are serrano ham to RIMI's salted meat. If we wish to take democracy seriously, not only as a principle of government but also as an ideal for communication, it is necessary to look seriously at the mass media.

In Austria, the *Kronen-Zeitung* is read by almost a third of the population; in Norway, *VG* is read by more than a quarter, and the two Swedish tabloids have a circulation that the two national quality papers could only dream about. In other words, if we are interested in what the average citizen reads, we might as well admit that the British press is not *The Guardian*, the American press is not *The New York Times*, and the Italian press is not *La Repubblica*. These are not the places where a majority of the citizens are informed about the state of the world.

Michael Moore knows this, and this is a key reason for his success. His films and books are not superior to other social criticism in terms of content, but Moore is a master of the telling one-liner, the shocking image, the revealing anecdote. He seduces more than he convinces, and that is why he has become the most significant critic of the Bush II regime.

Some years ago, I regularly took part in an extended news programme on Norwegian radio. The channel was P2, which is considered more high-brow and upmarket than P1 and P3. For a long time, I was thrilled at the opportunity to expound at length on issues of public importance, believing that I, and the others discussing current affairs on *Dagsnytt 18* (news at six), were addressing the country. One day I accidentally discovered that the average number of listeners to this programme was around sixty thousand, which is minuscule even in a country of less than five million inhabitants. From believing that I was part of a national discourse, I rediscovered myself as a member of a counterculture struggling to escape the feeling that it was moving fast into a cul-de-sac.

We should be talking more about the way the popular media transmit news if we are interested in the enlightenment of our fellow citizens. And we should probably be looking at speed first. If news becomes obsolete too fast, even the simplest messages are difficult to take in; if each news item flickers across the screen at CNN speed, the message is lost on the way, in which case form becomes more important than content. It must be many years ago that we last saw ugly presenters on television news programmes. And as the late Neil Postman told us two decades ago, in his *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, context is lost in a situation of accelerated news programming. In a telling example, he described the so-called “Iranian hostage crisis” of 1979. Most Americans had an opinion on what should and should not be done at the time, but Postman suspects, probably correctly, that few Americans knew which language Iranians speak, what the term “Ayatollah” refers to, who the Shah was, or even had any degree of familiarity with “any details of the tenets of Iranian religious beliefs”. More recently, the lack of evidence of any links between Saddam Hussain and Osama bin Laden did not prevent half of the American population from believing that Saddam was somehow implicated in the 9/11 attacks. That is the kind of cultural ambience Michael Moore is – rather successfully – plugging into.

Multi-channel television is a peculiar medium for conveying information. The producers are aware that viewers are nowadays armed with remote controls, ready to switch channels at the first indication of inertia on the screen. Programmes must therefore be made as continuous series of cliff-hangers, presented in a restless, intense mode, but with no real internal development or cumulative argument. The soundbite rules.

There is another serious problem with the popular media seen as a means of enlightening the public about current affairs, namely the seeming lack of criteria for prioritising between different kinds of news. At the time of the aforementioned RIMI wedding, the humanitarian catastrophe in Darfur was under way, which was well known to politicians and NGOs worldwide. The RIMI wedding may have received two hundreds times as much attention in the Norwegian media as the Darfur crisis. And even if the two events had been granted approximately the same amount of column space or airtime, a reader or viewer would get the impression that they were of roughly the same importance. (As an NGO worker darkly commented in the summer of 2004, the starving children in Darfur should have had the good sense to send a delegation to the World Trade Centre.)

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I cannot, however, take on all the shortcomings of the popular media here. So let us return to speed and its consequences. Bourdieu wrote, in his scathing, and perhaps overly pessimistic, pamphlet *Sur la télévision*, about a category of people he described as “fast thinkers” (using the American term for effect in France). The demands of multi-channel television, and in particular its need to get to the point fast lest the rating drops, stimulates, he argues, the emergence of a new kind of intellectual – the well-groomed, quick mind able to expound instantly for a minute or so on virtually any topic presented to him. Now it can be objected that fast thinking is better than no thinking at all, but the point is well taken. Before the advent of multi-channel television, politicians were quite clearly slower in arguing their points of view than they are now. As late as the 1970s, we Scandinavians were governed by sallow, ageing politicians who might take as much as five minutes to develop an argument. However, those of the viewers or listeners who had not fallen asleep at the end of their droning monologues would, as a reward, have had the opportunity to understand that political decisions are complicated things which necessitate compromises, long-term planning, balanced consideration for different social groups and an awareness of possible unintentional side-effects.

The typical contemporary politician, attuned to the demands of multi-channel television, tends to be fast (if not necessarily a fast *thinker*) and well rehearsed before he or she enters the studio. If politicians want to be successful, they should ideally present memorable one-liners, confidently and self-assured, of the generic kind: “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists,” which could be quoted by other media later.

The traditional path towards presenting a new policy in a European political party, such as the Norwegian Labour Party, was slow and cumbersome. The proposal had to be discussed in the politburo and its extended networks, and it would usually have to be sent on for a hearing at local party organisations before a policy proposal was finally drafted by a central committee. In the late 1980s, coinciding with the spread of the remote control in Norwegian homes, a new breed of Labour politician, personified by Rune Gerhardsen (ironically the son of the postwar nation-builder Einar Gerhardsen), appeared on the national arena. When he had a political idea, be it about the future of a sports stadium or the

way the state treated immigrants (with too much “kindness,” in his view), he went directly to the mass media instead of taking the long detour through the party organisation. As a result, lots of people noticed a freshness about Labour, a willingness to take risks and to set new debates in motion; Mr Gerhardsen seemed colourful and engaged, a far cry from his tedious and responsible colleagues.

The temporal regime represented in Mr Gerhardsen’s hands-on approach to politics conflicted with the old regime. Its merit consisted in its urgency — more than one commentator noted that he seemed to be the only major politician able to match the right-wing populist, Carl Hagen, in his ability to appeal directly through the media. The disadvantages of this fast temporality are equally evident: it lacks the thoroughness, cohesiveness and even-handedness of policies developed slowly through discussion and compromise.

Mr Gerhardsen had many detractors in Labour, and failing to be nominated for a secure seat in Parliament, he left politics (temporarily, as it would later turn out) to become an information consultant, thus entering a profession specialising in making the concerns of its clients seem newsworthy.

Bourdieu’s essay recalls Bruce Springsteen’s admittedly catchy oneliner “there’s fifty-seven channels and nothin’ on,” a comment on the American media very much in the spirit of Postman. An even darker vision than Bourdieu’s is apparent in Paul Virilio’s writings on contemporary mass media. Virilio, a theorist of speed (he speaks of his own science as *dromology*), has many anxieties about the contemporary era, and above all, he is worried about the infantilisation of contemporary culture. Positing Bill Gates, *le dieu-enfant* (the god-child), as the symbol of our era, Virilio suggests that our present mass culture is unwilling to leave behind its childhood, as if it existed in a collective Peter Pan syndrome. Differing slightly from Virilio, I would argue that it is puberty, not childhood, which is presented as an ideal for everyone. A result of an all-encompassing presentism, the cult of youth disdains both past and future. The adolescent is ashamed of the past (when he was a child) and unconcerned with the future (he has not yet discovered his own mortality, thus the future is vague), but as a compensation he has a very intense experience of the present, which is filled with excitement and immediate rewards. It is the seventeen-year-old adolescent, not the child, that is the icon of our time.

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The temporal structure of an eternal puberty actively discourages cumulative growth and responsible compromise, instead boosting fragmentation, compression and stacking. When communication is free of friction, information has become almost free (in the sense of *gratis*), seeping into all available holes and cavities of the human body twenty-four hours a day, there is no shortage of information. There is enough to go around for everybody. Yet, are “people” better informed? That depends, of course, on whom you are talking about, but there can be little doubt that the instantaneity and exhilarated excitement typical of adolescent life-experience are represented comprehensively in contemporary media.

The only American newspaper which has been successful in breaking into the market in recent decades, is *USA Today*, a newspaper imitating multi-channel television. Consider the contrast between an old-fashioned black-and-white kind of television serial and a more recent soap opera. In the early 1970s, *A Family at War* was an immensely popular drama serial in many European countries. Based on John Finch’s novel, it was a deeply serious and emotionally gripping story about a Liverpool family, the Ashtons, during the Second World War. Now, if one had been unfortunate enough to miss an episode, the ensuing episode made little sense unless a helpful family member updated one before the show. The reason is that the story unfolded in irreversible, cumulative and linear time. In order to understand what the characters were up to in episode 32, one had to know what they had been through in episode 31.

Now think, as a contrast, about any popular soap opera from the 1980s or 1990s. My main reference is *Dynasty*. When it was first screened in Norway in 1983, my friends and I watched the first few episodes: this was our first encounter with American soap opera, and we were curious. After a month or so, we drifted off to other activities. Six years later, I embarked on anthropological fieldwork in Trinidad. It quickly became apparent that Trinidadians had a soft spot for American soap operas, and *Dynasty* was among the most popular shows. Realising this, I had to start watching *Dynasty* again, speculating on how it might be understood in the Trinidadian cultural context. I had been absent from the programme for six years, and was now taking it in surrounded by an unfamiliar cultural ambience. Yet how long did it take me to get into it again? Less than thirty seconds.

Examining examples like these, and they are potentially innumerable, we encounter a transition from the linear, cumulative time of development and growth, to an instantaneous, ahistorical time lacking direction and duration. In the realm of news transmission, the result is catastrophic. If the temporality of our culture has reached a point where it stands still at a frightful speed, then all news transmissions must begin at point zero, where nothing has been learned before, nothing can be taken for granted, no sediments of prior understanding can be assumed in the audience. Everything becomes chapter one, page one.

The popular media offer answers to questions nobody in his right mind would dream of asking. They remind us every day of the importance of limiting one's information out of consideration for one's knowledge.

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Whenever something fast meets something slow, that which is fast is bound to win. Depth and understanding lose; efficiency and the superficial tidbit wins. Unless, of course, one has a premeditated strategy to prevent it from happening.

Nobody who reads these lines would be likely to disagree with this argument. There is nevertheless a profound dilemma here. We can, naturally, try to persuade the media giants — the RIMI of the post-Gutenberg world — to encourage reflection and depth, to make socially responsible priorities in order to enlighten and not just entertain the citizens (who increasingly appear to have been transformed into customers). But it is difficult to see how we can force them without compromising the liberal principles our societies ought to be founded on.

The dilemma could be described as the Solzhenitsyn paradox. When the famous author lived under constant surveillance and harassment from the Soviet state, the world went silent and listened whenever he opened his mouth to make a public statement. Eventually, Solzhenitsyn escaped to Switzerland, and suddenly he could say anything he liked anywhere and anytime. At the same time, interest in Solzhenitsyn's opinion immediately waned. His views were drowned in the white noise of democratic cacophony. All of a sudden, sports results, traffic accidents and royal dresses seemed to get all the attention.

In Milan Kundera's beautiful novel *La lenteur* (Slowness), an unemployed Czech entomologist is watching television in a hotel. Having

grown up in a society where information was portioned out with caution, carefully filtered before it reached the masses, this man was accustomed to digesting information critically, pondering its significance and relating it to a greater picture. Catapulted into the multi-channelled information maze of the West, he found it impossible to make sense of what he saw on the screen. As soon as a topic had begun to build up, it was stopped short and replaced by something else. (Postman reports somewhere that the average attention span of Californian schoolchildren is seven minutes. That is the time between commercial breaks on television.) Kundera's scientist speculates that Beethoven's symphonies will be compressed for efficiency, until one plays only the first eight bars of each movement — ultimately, perhaps, playing just a single note. Kundera may not have been aware of the fact that Paul Hindemith did something similar decades ago, in his Christmas Cantata, which consists of a potpourri of familiar Christmas songs, but only a few bars of each. Possibly intended as a celebration of modern efficiency, or as an ironic comment, the Christmas Cantata assumes that much is already familiar, and that the listeners' time is scarce.

This, the RIMI logic of speed and efficiency, seems increasingly to be the values according to which news desks present their goods. People are still killing each other in the Middle East. There is famine somewhere in Africa and floods in England. The weekend is going to be hot — remember sunscreen! Man U is still undefeated. The minister of integration is concerned with the below-average school achievements of immigrant children. Following a news programme of this kind, a poll agency rang up a representative sample of the Norwegian population. Their first question was, have you seen *Dagsrevyen* (the main televised news programme) this evening? If the respondent affirmed that they had indeed done so, which more than half did, the follow-up question was: could you please mention at least one news item from that programme? Most of the respondents were unable to do so.

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But, one might object, isn't there a great unacknowledged need out there for depth, thoroughness and contextualised knowledge? Will citizens be satisfied forever with unsatisfactory, shallow infotainment? Will not the old fable about the hare and the tortoise get the final word? Is it not the

case that perseverance and thoroughness usually gets the better of superficial enthusiasm in the long run? Let us hope so, but one cannot entirely rule out the possibility that there is no longer such a thing as “in the long run”. As long as editors and newscasters choose the path of least resistance, and their regimes — elected or not — are rather pleased with the state of affairs, lest the general public begin to interfere with their politics, it is difficult to see how things could change. In my hometown, which is graced with a rich variety of newspapers (eight dailies and several weeklies), there is an unambiguous inverse correlation between circulation and thoroughness. In June 2004, anybody in the country might have had ample opportunity to read long analyses of the financial crisis in the UN, Don de Lillo’s latest essay, knowledgeable articles about the weakened social mobility in the Norwegian working class, and critical assessments of the Norwegian state’s oil deal with Iran. But none of this was printed in a paper with a circulation exceeding ten thousand. The others? The front page of *Dagbladet* (circulation 300,000) announced the personal crisis of a local sports journalist and a reference to a feature story about group sex; *VG* (circulation 450,000) revelled in the possibility that Norway might win a gold medal in the Athens Olympics. So as long as citizens are accustomed to high speed and willing to opt for the path their mainstream media tell them to follow, there is no reason to assume that the mobile phone will not be the main news medium in the near future. When that revolution occurs, we may be writing wistful articles about the glorious past, when it might take upwards of four minutes to read about the latest developments in Iraq.

The consequences for democracy of the ongoing compression of news should be fairly evident. Democracy presupposes an informed public sphere which forms the basis of the moral community of society. While rights can be claimed instantaneously, trust and commitment take a long time to build. In the segregated media reality of today, only a minority are adequately informed about the forces that shape their lives and are thus in a position to make informed strategies to influence them. The majority are offered so-called discussion programmes on television where, at the end of the debate, they are invited to vote for or against something by SMS. The form of these programmes favours simplistic populism. Regrettably, they are not an aberration but conform quite closely to the norm of political discourse in our society.

Perhaps the most telling icon of our times is not Bill Gates, but the seventeen-year-old girl who was interviewed about her life in an Oslo newspaper some time ago. She was an ordinary girl, picked out as a typical representative of her generation. Speaking about the pros and cons of life, she ended by expounding at some length about her greatest dread in life. She said something like this: “Suppose you go to the movies with your boyfriend. Inside the cinema, you have to turn off your mobile. That’s okay by me. But then, suppose when you leave the cinema, you switch on your mobile, and there are no new messages! God, that’s terrible!” What she said was, in effect, that if nobody had reminded her of his existence, and confirmed his recognition of hers, in a two-hour period, she felt that the rest of the world had forgotten that she existed. That is acceleration.