

## Chapter 9

# Social Impact of Digital Media and Advertising: A Look at Consumer Control

**Gregory O'Toole**  
*Pennsylvania State University, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*Around the world today we have convenient, fingertip access to continual, informational content. At first the free flow of information seems convenient, empowering, and endlessly beneficial for those world citizens with access to it. This chapter takes a closer look at this relationship in terms of today's consumer and the mediated information they are exposed to and asks the question of whether or not this is necessarily a good thing. The chapter looks at the historical relationship of power and information for guidance in this examination while considering active and inactive audience, corporate and independent media texts, and the possible relationships between Victor Frankl's 'existential void' and mediated messages today.*

*People can be very moral, but they are acting within institutional structures, constructed systems which only certain options are easy to pursue, others are very hard to pursue. -Noam Chomsky*

*We shape our tools, and then our tools shape us. -Marshall McLuhan*

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### THE INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE STAGE

#### Theoretical Cultivation Analysis

Everything is information. The good news is that in our current information age we have convenient, fingertip access to continual, global content; the bad news is that in our current information age we have convenient, fingertip access to continual, global content. At first the free flow of information seems convenient, empowering, and endlessly beneficial for those citizens with access. We take great pains to bridge the social

agency and access digital divides. Companies are continuously inventing and marketing smaller pocket-sized devices with which can communicate instantaneously and in a variety of ways. We spend vast amounts of money every day for more connections, faster networks, and ubiquitous wifi. All of this can only be a good thing, right? Not so fast. Upon a closer look, we have to wonder if more content can ever be too much content. Are we mentally, emotionally, critically, politically, and techno-psychologically prepared to deal with the amount of information that comes at us once the flood gates are opened wide, and continue to open ever wider? Who is in control? What are the consequences of information overload and how do we deal with this properly?

Historically, information production and distribution has always equaled a certain amount of power for those in control of these processes: in the one-to-many relationship of mass media producers control what the *inactive* viewers see, hear, and read. It has been shown that through the event of broadcast, news outlets have had the power to shape the relative importance a viewer may apply to certain content (Gerbner, 1969). This process can even influence which issues are thought to be most serious and most important to the viewing public. This historic imbalance between the agencies of media producers and those of media consumers is changing as a result of our available media communication technology, creating a new type of media consumer: the *active* viewer. As a result of this influx, as media consumers in the Internet age, we are in need of a critical regiment to control and understand what we choose to digest as part of our own media diets. Through experience we know that too much of anything is not a good thing. As with the over-consumption of sugar, fat, cholesterol, and salt for our bodies, today, as media consumers, we have the individual responsibility of our media diets and in dealing with the potential for information glut.

Further, there is a media outlet available for every point of view that exists. Sure, we can find a blog entry on just about any topic, including posts that fall on both sides of any story. How do we know where to find the facts that the American media is supposed to provide for us in order that we become and remain informed, knowledgeable citizens? Where is the objectification that the media is supposed to lend us in order that we make informed decisions on our own? There is any number of bloggers out there, but which one is correct? CNN runs their content distribution twenty-four hours a day, but is what they are pouring into our living rooms, our computers, our cell phones really important for us to know? If not all of it, how much of it? Today, in the Internet age, these are the questions that can only be answered by each individual as a living member of planet Earth. Gone are the days of a “good,” informed citizen needing only to subscribe and read the local newspaper each morning, and the evening edition at night. In our current information epoch we have many more decisions to make, and the power to make the right ones. With a little thoughtfulness and effort, we can do this to the benefit of ourselves and our communities: The good news is that in the information age we have continual, global information content at our fingertips. The bad news is that in the information age we have continual, global content available at our fingertips.

In our contemporary media-rich world, there is now, more than ever, the need for an applicable theoretical investigation on these questions which involve the ideas of past thinkers like Karl Marx, renowned psychiatrist Dr. Victor Frankl, self-educated sociologist Eric Hoffer, and other writers whose work on the nature of media, power, information and mass movements contribute to an advanced academic foundation in media theory and can help us to understand the effects of the prevailing condition of our world today.

Our cultural condition, as it is, certainly is a difficult one to navigate. Known to be in a Post Modern era, as individuals in a larger community, we can no longer rely on the grand narratives we once could to show us the way. When the nuclear family has broken up, where do young people turn for guidance? When our religions cause wars and endless controversy where do we turn for spiritual guidance? When our community leaders, politicians, and company CEOs spend more time defending themselves from fraudulent and other illegal charges, who can we trust? When a daily avalanche of consumerist messages point us toward consumption as the way to happiness from where do we find the strength to resist?

As Professor Sut Jhally of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst points out that “today’s hyper-consumerism is driven by ever more sophisticated advertising and public relations techniques. The specific product is secondary. What they’re really selling is lifestyle (and) ideology . . .” (n.d.). It is essential for us in these investigations to look at the wide potential for acceptance of the messages of mass media texts. It is equally important to inquire into how, as a culture, we have the potential, consciously or otherwise, to allow these mediated messages to actually, in many ways, become at least part of the significance of our daily existence, and to keep in mind that ultimately we the citizen need to remain in control of the information we access, how we react to it, and what we hold dear and true. One might warn the audience member to do their best to think critically on every topic they consider and do their best not to be swayed in any way by beautiful actors, big budgets, slick graphics, or political agendas: a task that is much easier said than done to be sure. The objective of this chapter is to offer these thoughts as theory and as a catalyst to a larger discussion.

## **THE HISTORIC CONDITION: POWER STRUCTURES, MEDIA, AND THE INACTIVE AUDIENCE**

### **Information is Power**

In a subsection called “Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas” of *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx held that “the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force” (Marx, 1975). Historically, those members of a society that retain the means (i.e. money, power, ability) to create and distribute intellectual content hold influence and sway over those who do not. Simply put, historically, a class struggle has always existed between two entities: media producers and media consumers. The consumers, most of us, are those readers and viewers who are subject to the intellectual force of the other, the production class. Today, we may witness the truth in this theory when examining cultural hegemony in the context of mass media messages and their production processes. Further we see that “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (Marx, 1975).

Within this historic context we cannot help but wonder if it is possible that the messages – the shows, advertisements, and news – of mass media conglomerates have become so prevalent today that they are influencing their viewers to the point of affecting what is and what is not an important and significant part of viewers’ lives? Can the omnipresence and wide-ranging establishment of a message in turn affect its own relevance? Is it true that “the mass media in general, and especially the electronic news media, are part of a ‘problem-generating machine’ geared to entertainment, voyeurism, and the ‘quick fix’” (Altheide,

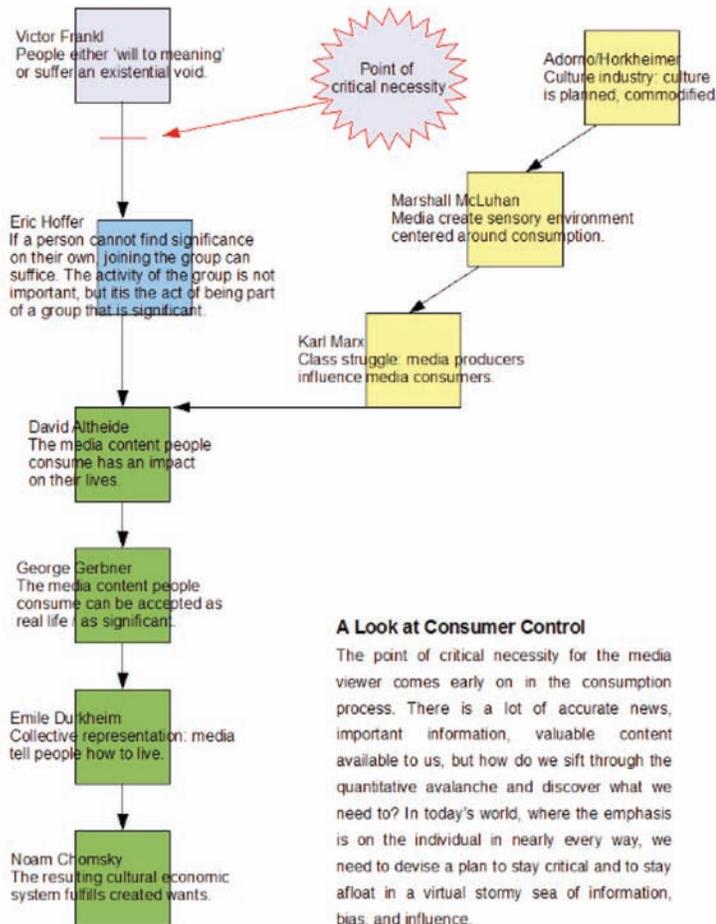
1996) and not necessarily as a tool for distributing truth and fact, and as means of generating social change? And finally, in the Internet age, does the advent and availability of today’s media communication technology obliterate Marx’s ability to define a class which lacks the means of material production?

**Culture Industry and the Existential Void**

Altheide and Grimes authored that the “Iraq War challenges sociological theorizing about social change and policy, and raises fundamental questions about the role of knowledge and critique

in social life when public discourse and agendas are partially shaped and communicated through entertainment-oriented mass media” (2005). An industry of culture arises out of this type of environment and in the end, audience and viewer control may be at risk. Theodore Adorno writes that “the power of the culture industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness” (Adorno, n.d.). Every day in the United States these distractions come to us via mass media in the form of television shows, entertainment-news channels, multimedia advertising, the Internet, radio, mobile telephones, personal media, and film. This creates what Adorno and co-writer Max Horkheimer refer to as a culture industry in their

Figure 1.



*Dialectic of Enlightenment.* The culture industry is a sociological condition where reification, or the commodification of everything, has set in and culture is bought and sold as is any other commodity. Uniquely, the process is one which “fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan” (Adorno, n.d.). It is through such a process that the content of media enters into our daily lives. Through such an assessment of historic, cultural-sociological studies we see that “media contribute to (...) people’s perceptions and interests in everyday life” (Altheide, 1996).

Victor Frankl and his renowned Logotherapy posit that the *existential void* is only filled by the will to meaning, that all persons have an inherent need to feel significance of some kind (Frankl, 1959). At the same time, self taught sociologist Eric Hoffer, who studied and wrote about the nature of mass movements, suggests that in order to satisfy basic human social needs we may need to be a part of a social movement – regardless of the ways in which the movement is constituted (Frankl, 1959). This participation can substitute for a lack of personally developed significance in our lives. This replacement is key to this chapter, and shows that when individuals are not capable of satisfying themselves, that their existential void can be, and often times is, filled by joining the movement in order to give them not only hope, but substance. Spoon fed ideologies across hundreds of television channels, magazine ads, billboards, newspapers, personal media, and all types of Internet web sites can be pretty convincing to the individual, especially the individual who is susceptible to mass movements or one who is not satisfied with their own results in the ongoing philosophical pursuit to fill their own existential vacuum.

George Gerbner’s cultivation analysis in the late 1960s turned out a Cultivation Theory based on

human reaction to prolonged television consumption. The theory states that, after time, a person will begin to perceive the actual, real, experiential world around them more and more like the world they see on TV (Hoffer, 1951). That is, the ways in which these media outlets portray the world, are accepted to viewers as the way things in the world really are. Gerbner’s theory only strengthens the idea that the messages transmitted by our mass media have great influence on their audiences. This phenomenon cannot any longer be denied.

Additionally, it is agreed by research scholars David Croteau and William Hoynes that “the ideological influence of media can be seen in the absences and exclusions just as much as in the content of the messages” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). Thus we see the strong and ever present influence of media texts not only in what is presented to us, but what may not be presented as well. All of these ideas combined show great influence of what we see and read in the media can have a great effect on our lives.

Theodore Adorno’s warnings of the authenticity of culture – mediated culture – comes into play now, as we view these less active mass audiences as groups of individuals who are pummeled by and hence distracted by the consumerist messages we are bombarded with every hour of our days. Corporations and private sector think tanks are formulating their own agendas, year after year, while the people are numbed with twenty-four hour coverage of material goods, pop stars, television heroes, various social phenomena, conceptual national enemies, unending talk of every frazzled end of a natural disaster, or a kidnap victim in Aruba. It is in this state of distraction, Adorno says, that the inactive, non-critical viewer is duped into consent. When current ideologies are presented through mass media as hegemony there is little discourse about what is right and wrong, about what is significant and what is not.

Karl Marx’s idea that the dominant class is the ruling class, which is the class that defines, is also important. Because corporations are the

powerfully influential force in global commerce today, the American corporation is not only a part of, but largely makes up Marx's dominant class of the current day. If CNN is of this description, which it is, then the CNN television channels and their Internet news site are their clarions. It is both relevant and important, then, to examine how these news outlets convey meaning of ideas to their audiences.

### **Collective Representation**

If cultural sociologist Emile Durkheim is correct, CNN has the power and very well may be utilizing their potential to inform the general public on how to live, on how to understand, and in what ways they may be successful in their pursuit of happiness. According to Durkheim, this collective representation followed by a mediated identity-forming process informs us of what to wear, what to eat, how to speak, how to spend our time, how to spend our money, and even what to believe is important. From birth we are enmeshed within a "whole system of representations by means of which men understand each other" (University of Chicago, n.d.). And if, time after time, we are told by CNN, MSNBC, Fox, HBO, Hollywood, NBC, and People.com what it is we need to know, and -- according to these producers of media content -- how we are to feel about what we are being told, does this not influence our daily lives? Kinder and Iyengar show that media "news shapes the relative importance Americans attach to various national problems" and that media outlets for news "powerfully influence which problems viewers regard as the nation's most serious" (1987). The question then must be asked: Can the same affective empowerment be attributed to the advertisements these media outlets run?

The same premises that Adorno outlines in "On Popular Music" (1941) are not only applicable to popular music but to all mass media today, including American corporate owned Internet web sites as sources for news and the high paying

advertisements they project. As structure for this argument, we look here at how Adorno outlined the negative effects of pop music in three main points. One, the music, once it reaches an audience, has been highly standardized, and gives off an ideal of pseudo-individualism where the art of the process, the creativity that makes art unique, i.e. the individuality, has been removed. Second, the popularity element promotes what Adorno calls *passive consumption* and *consent* to adhere without critical thought on the part of the consumer or listener. Third, the negative psychological consequences: *rhythmic obedience* and *emotionality*. Rhythmic obedience, as Adorno explains it is the distraction of the rhythm of the music, not paying attention to the words, not caring what the actual message of the media text even is, or if it contains a message at all. Emotionality is the distractive qualities of the text, an obsession with the impassioned drama, tugging on the heart strings, and a replacement of the state of affectivity in place of critical examination. This process creates "a society of children who are only concerned with their own immediate, emotional, and physical gratification" (Ahlkvist, 2006).

What is important to keep in mind is that the media industry and the marketing firms of American corporations work together as a highly profitable business relationship, and the top players in these corporations are the ones making the rules, doing the distracting, and pulling the proverbial wool over consumer America's eyes. Is it possible then that the result is a nation largely constituted by Adorno's ill-advised sheep?

Because it claims to be a hard news and trustworthy journalism-based organization, without being critical of its content, viewers can and will accept what is playing on the major media outlets as an important event; and act, speak, and live accordingly. The National Leadership Index completed each year at Harvard University shows dramatically steep decline for 2007 and 2008 in the trust viewers have toward the journalism of American media (John F. Kennedy School of

Government, 2007; John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2008). Often times we don't even trust the news we're getting, however, it still has an impact on our lives. What we are talking about here is the content being broadcast and how, by default, it becomes fodder for our daily thoughts. Radio research has shown that in the United States 72% of mass media audience members will take the content they are given as valid information as to what is going on in the world; 11% will seek out independent sources, look for a more fair media environment, construct their own content, or self program; and 17% will self program eventually (Davis, 2006). Based on this study then the numbers are largely in favor of mass media audience members accepting whatever content their favorite stations, channels, or sites are supplying. Finally, with the lines in place, private sector think tanks and other corporation-based profiteers on all levels are capable of carrying out their agendas: to make profit via mass consumption.

### **Created Wants**

Professor Noam Chomsky of MIT points out that ideally, for the corporation, the population has to be "turned into completely mindless consumers of goods that they do not want" let alone need. In developing what are called *created wants* the corporation's goal is to impose on people a "philosophy of futility," to "focus them on the insignificant things of life, like fashionable consumption" (Achbar, Abbot, & Bakan, 2003) in order that they desire these things for life's improvement and, in turn, purchase these products for this reason.

McLuhan posited that media aid in creating a "sensory environment that produced Western capitalist societies – an environment that was bureaucratic and organized around mass production" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). This process suggests a great influence of social structure and some but very little human agency. It is not to say that this theory falls into the realm of technological determinism, that "people exist only

as rational employers of technology or pieces of the proverbial chessboard who will be moved by the requirements of the technologies" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003), but a moral life, outside of the grasp of these influential media messages is difficult to attain. Chomsky makes it clear that "people can be very moral, but they are acting within institutional structures, constructed systems which only certain options are easy to pursue, others are very hard to pursue" (Achbar, Abbot & Bakan, 2005).

Today, we see accessibility, influential power, and God-like omnipresence of mass media, which, to the unsuspecting mind can provide Hoffer's necessary ingredients required to "satisfy the desire for self-advancement" in those who "find a worth-while purpose in self-advancement." Additionally, those "who see their lives as irremediably spoiled cannot find a worth-while purpose in self advancement. The prospect of an individual career cannot stir them to a mighty effort, nor can it evoke in them faith and a single-minded dedication." To these individuals, the counterfeit meaning of mass media offers its ability to quench the underlying "passion for self-renunciation," or the potential to be "reborn to a new life" (Hoffer, 1951). We can see from Professor Altheide's "fear" paper that "from the standpoint of media content as cause, researchers ask whether news reports can "cause," or "lead" people ... including the extent to which relevant values and perspectives may be "cultivated" (Altheide, 1996). From this perspective, the mass media play a large role in shaping public agendas by influencing what people think about (Altheide, 1996), and "encourage, perhaps even dictate, particular ways of talking and thinking" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003).

Indeed it seems that it is the media and the ensuing onslaught of messages which are somehow falsely filling Victor Frankl's existential vacuum – an existential-psychological phenomenon which he describes as the void which occurs in the absence of an individual's will to meaning. A new web site, recent "reality" television, another

record-breaking attempt at the next fascinating PlayStation2™ game are easily accessible, but highly temporal filler for the void, and therein lies the samsaric distress, and the instamatic placebo elixir for Frankl's existential vacuum. From the advertisers perspective, ideally we as media consumers will constitute a society made up of "individuals who are totally disassociated from one another. Who's conception of themselves, the sense of value, is just how many *created wants* can I satisfy?" To counteract this process, we must be mindful of what we read, critical of what we watch.

### **Images and Reality**

Historian Daniel Boorstin studied the effects and relationships of media images to the viewing audience who regularly interacted with these media. He found that the "pervasiveness of visual images was changing the very meaning of "reality." That news and entertainment images are becoming "so embedded in our consciousnesses" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003) that it is repeatedly difficult to discern between image – what we are given by media producers as reality – and the reality we know to be actual: Reality.

Emile Durkheim's collective representation idea may perpetuate this now-embedded system, allowing for a cultural practice that unites its practitioners. We want to feel – some scholars say we have to feel – that we belong to a community, like we are a part of something. This collective memory (*How are we to be good Americans in our global society?*) of how we are supposed to act, feel, speak, and carry on furthers the idea, and the difficulties, of what Durkheim calls fragmented identities. We are living in a postmodern, post journalistic society where mass media formats and information technology make it difficult not only to distinguish between journalist and event (Altheide, 1996), but even more so to retain our own identities.

### **News of the Day**

In accessing news of the day we have to deal with "spin," the added layer of subjectivity to fact. In accessing news, spin is the killer and everyone denies having a hand in it. Then there is "hype." How do we navigate through the hottest story of the day? The more you look into Post-modern information theory, the more you see that at this late stage of the game, there are no centers from which to stand and make an objectively informed judgment.

Today's news organizations are posters for exploiting the spectacle. During the O.J. Simpson "white Bronco" event of 1994, as an example, 95 million viewers tuned in (Kim, 1994). When the trial was over 142 million people listened on radio and watched television as the verdict was delivered, an astounding 91% of viewers (Jones, n.d). Some say this was the event that took television news shows and magazines from the role of news informer to news maker and created a new genre of television content: Infotainment. Although this may make the news more fun to consume, in considering our dilemma, this type of news coverage overloads the viewer with content.

What some of these shows are good for is having an obsessive operation of posting and broadcasting a high amount of coverage on what is happening around the world, and using new and innovative methods of dissemination and delivery. This high quantity of data is not all bad, all of it is information, it's just that there is an outlet for everyone nowadays, no matter what your point of view is. There is a lack of, or absence of what philosophers like Fredrick Jameson call the "meta narrative," meaning there is no big picture by which to structure our observations and assessments.

In the past we've had our world religions for moral and spiritual guidance. Today we have enough information to inform us of all the wars and endless controversy religions have caused. Where

do we turn for this moral and spiritual guidance? In the past we've had our community leaders, politicians, and maybe even business executives to offer political and economic advisement. Today are bombarded daily with stories breaking of these so-called leaders' who seem to spend more time defending themselves from fraudulent and other illegal charges than they do being leaders. In this type of environment, who can we trust? These are some of the meta narratives which we once had as a resource on how to get by and how to live happily. Now we see the emphasis on the self and the only meta narrative that we are offered on a mass scale is consumerism. When a daily avalanche of consumerist messages point us toward consumption as the way to happiness, it becomes increasingly difficult to sort through the content and find real significance, after all, it seems we are unable even to agree on what really matters.

So what happens? We find ourselves floating around taking in all of this information. And what Fox says might be somewhat factual, and what CNN posts is somewhat factual, but another issue is the angle they choose, the words they use, their terminology. For example: Considering the conditions in the Middle East, a major news network was found to use the word "terrorist" when talking about the deaths caused by Palestinian militants. When talking about the deaths caused by Israel militants the same network used words (i.e. euphemisms) such as "fighters," "soldiers," "army," etc. When a news broadcast acts in this way, it is skewing the data. The question we have to ask is why are they doing this? Is it for their own interests? Are they being influenced by national hegemony?

To get a more complete set of facts one must go outside mainstream media. Today, often times, this can be as easy as turning on the television as long as you know which channel to dial in. *Democracy Now!*, the television and radio current events and news shows produced by the Corporation for Public Broadcast can be far more

informative and, simultaneously, far less biased in their content and delivery. For example, I often cite Professor Chomsky who has appeared many times on the *Democracy Now!* network. Chomsky explains the law of concision on mainstream media news. To be concise is very important to commercial media. Because of the advertising time that pays the show's bills, the content a show airs must fit well between commercial time slots. In most mainstream media outlets in the United States, this can mean anywhere from two to ten minutes. Within that two to ten minutes a story, weather forecast, sports update, or guest speaker must be able to introduce their topic, make their point, and conclude clearly before it is time for another commercial break. That is why, Chomsky points out, you see over and over again these news stories and reporters "towing the party line." I don't believe that it is ABC who sets out to fool anyone, or to neglect an important point of view on a controversial topic, but it is what McLuhan refers to as our mediated sensory environment and Western capitalist rules of the free market that help to create this bureaucratic system which results in this way. Viewers miss out on the full story on commercial media. This is an important difference between commercial media and public media. Because public media are not reliant on commercial breaks, they are not restricted from reporting more of a longer-winded, discussion format account of news events.

If a news outlet has the time to tell the full story viewers have a much better chance of getting the full story. It is from Noam Chomsky which we learned that George H. W. Bush, for example, sold Saddam Hussein the chemicals he used on the Kurds, one the deeds, according to the George W. Bush administration, which Saddam was vilified for and which served as catalyst to invading Iraq. Etc. This important information was not talked about on and of the major media outlets in the United States. But this is key information. They will start their reporting after the fact, stating the

administration wants to declare war on Iraq and Saddam in order to save the Kurdish people from this villain, which could be true, but which is only part of the whole story. But, with only part of the story, the “good” part, people think “Yes, this is good. War is necessary. Saddam is a killer.” And maybe he is. He was. But the problem with American corporate media as we witnessed over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that they won’t tell you how Saddam became a killer: he was a killer in part because the United States leadership sold him the weapons to do so, to carry out his plan. The entire story lacks concision and cannot be told between commercial breaks.

We see this over and over and over and over with US corporate media news and issues they cover. It’s a business plan. They say they give you what you need to be informed, but they give you what you need to be informed unless it could be bad for their profit margin. How many United States citizens are aware of the fact that the United States Department of Defense has over 200 military bases in foreign countries? That is incredible, considering there are roughly the same number of countries in the world. Left leaning entertainment talk shows are starting to use the term “empire” in referring to what has historically been referred to in other Presidential administrations as our campaign of responsibility which works hard to spread Democracy around the world.

That is what we are dealing with: multiple points of view and a media outlet for anyone who cares to listen. That is the difficulty in getting the “whole story.” With the outlets we are bombarded with every minute, you will not ever get the whole story. The whole story lacks concision, and if the story does not fit nicely in between commercial breaks, you won’t see it aired. That is one reason you see all the talking heads up there towing the party line: their arguments have concision.

## **THE CURRENT RESPONSE: POWER STRUCTURES, MEDIA, AND THE ACTIVE AUDIENCE**

Thanks in large part to Web 2.0 we are living currently in a world which is growing in its numbers of active audience members. However, we still can imagine, within an ever-increasing population, a large group of less active individuals who are not taking advantage of these more personalized and useful media platforms to create and transmit and share information, but sit back and take what is handed them.

The traditional mass media format of conventional newspapers online offers an example of the more passive one-to-many relationship of transmitting information much the same way television and radio have functioned for decades. The blog, on the other hand, and many other applications of the Internet, are examples of the many-to-many relationship of information transference widely available on the new media platform. It is a central thesis to this chapter that a more open exchange of information occurs as a result of the Internet, new methods of journalism, and personal media development, particularly the attributes of Web 2.0. The Internet is the first widely used communication technology to provide two-way interaction on a truly mass scale. The one-to-many relationship of radio, television, film, and newspapers that has been enjoyed for so many decades by business and its advertisers is coming to an end. This is not to say that these media will go away, in fact, I don’t think they ever will, but there is now a strong alternative which has been and will continue to influence these other media, their producers, and audiences in significant and fundamental ways.

This multi-directional flow of communication is the blueprint for the success of a coming democratization of information. This movement includes the combined uses of emerging personal media

communication technologies by individuals, grassroots organizations and independents. These processes are applied across the World Wide Web and the Internet largely on web sites and personal mobile media devices instituting all-media blogs, podcasts, and geographic information systems to allow for what Dan Gilmore calls “Citizen Media” or “Citizen Journalism.” We see this emergent from the youth of the global culture.

Currently, through educational institutions across (but not limited to) the United States and Europe, and emerging media studies departments, we are experiencing a growth in education to promote a new generation to retain the skills required to contribute to the new media landscape of blogs, photo blogs, podcasts, vlogs and other emerging forms of personal multimedia production, interaction, and delivery. Specifically, the integration of wireless, mobile hardware such as cell phone capture and publishing, Palm, Blackberry devices, video cams, still cams, laptops, Wiki’s, and XML formatting RSS 2.0 broadcast are changing the vary formats in which individuals can and do receive their information about the world around them. These numerous digital devices and services are now changing the ways in which individuals express themselves and participate in their communities. Through these changes, we see the impact of personal media on the fields of journalism, publication, mass media broadcasting, and alternative media. We are witnessing first hand a new mode of citizenship and participatory politics.

As Marx wrote in 1845, “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that ... the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it ... therefore, as they rule as a class ... (they) rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.” Perhaps we are seeing the transformation of “the class which has the means

of material production,” of who really has the power “as producers of ideas ... and distribution of the ideas” of our age. What we still refer to as “new” media, it is the current and emerging media communication technologies which enables this transference of the power of the voice.

## **THE CONCLUSION AND SOLUTION: CRITICAL NECESSITY**

In Buddhist philosophy, the word *samsara* is defined as “the total pattern of successive earthly lives experienced by a soul” (Saiva Siddhanta Church, 2006) and is supplemented often with the idea of the individual’s experience of daily life harboring this “cycle of ignorance and suffering” (Smith, 1999) without the relief of enlightenment, a significant reason for being, and a break from the purposeless circuit. It is the goal of a Buddhist to achieve enlightenment and to escape from *samsara*. “The Vipassana meditator uses his concentration as a tool by which his awareness can chip away at the wall of illusion and cuts him off from the living light of reality. It is a gradual process of ever-increasing awareness into the inner workings of reality itself...It’s called Liberation...the goal of all Buddhist systems and practice” (Jones, n.d.). It is my thought that this idea of *samsara*, well studied by Buddhists and scholars around the world, and documented for millennia in Eastern texts, which characterizes the progression of an overwhelmingly large percentage of Americans today. Today, as media consumers with endless resources at our fingertips, it is the content with the highest distribution budget, the loudest audio, and the most famous celebrities that garner our attention. It is constant and it is nearly absolute in the ways it consumes our attention. This is the cycle that needs to be broken. We are thinking individuals who have the means to do just this.

There is a lot of accurate news, important information, valuable content available to us, but how do we sift through the quantitative avalanche

and discover what we need to? How can we function most efficiently in our data rich environment without allowing for all the content of the Internet; television characters and shows; mp3 players and podcasts; magazine, web, and television ads; and mobile message soliciting into our lives to act as “substitutes either for the whole self or for the elements which make life bearable and which the individual cannot evoke out of their individual resources” (Hoffer, 1951).

I am convinced that there is just too much information in the world: far too much ease of production and distribution, too much easy access to some of it, and too much with mediocre, time-consuming access to it, to make much of a good judgment call on any of it. We know that even “the most trusted name in news” needs to be examined closely before we take what it says to heart. In today’s world, where the emphasis is on the individual in nearly every way we need to devise a plan to stay critical and to stay afloat in a virtual stormy sea of information, bias, and influence.

I suggest taking the time to seek out those scholars, institutions, and organizations that you feel are being straight. Always ask yourself “who might benefit?” from a story or news cast and what the relationship might be to those paying the bill.

The Internet is loaded with easy access methods to good, informative information. Many site now employ a “what’s new” type of data feed. RSS makes it easy load in widely used Web browsers like Firefox. Also, people have to listen to NPR more, *Democracy Now!* more, Robert McChesney at the University of Illinois is doing tireless work on issues such as media and democracy, something we all need to know more about. His web site offers book links, articles, and the updated podcast to his weekly radio talk show “Media Matters” in which he holds discussions with leading cultural, intellectual, political, and business figures from around the globe. Find these resources, be critical of why you choose them, and be creative in how you access them. For example, I usually listen to McChesney’s audio podcast while running.

Additionally, my suggestion to everyone is to never think of TV (especially the news shows) as anything but pure entertainment. Read a big newspaper a few times a week, regularly, and use the Internet to look into issues using university domains, Amnesty International, the UN, on and on. That is what I meant about some outlets being “Mediocre” in accessibility and time-consuming as well. It is very time consuming to get the whole story and most people cannot do it, or don’t know how to do it. I know how, now you know how, and I spend a lot of time researching this for Ph.D., but I still don’t have a lot of time for it. That is a big, big factor on why the current model continues to pervade. And, I think it is only going to get worse. Obama cannot do anything about this.

Does a mass media machine like CNN and its constant bombardment of these types of messages have an effect on the culture which is subject to it twenty-four hours a day? Many scholars would say it does, in the form of mass movements, and that to satisfy basic human social needs joining the movement – no matter what the movement is – can substitute for other personally developed significance in our lives. Instead of seeking out religion, community, or moral sustainability, today’s individual far more easily acquires the corporations created wants. This replacement of what is of value is a key to the premise of this theory. Hoffer states, and I question in the context of mass media, when individuals are not capable of satisfying themselves, that their “existential void” – their drive to find reason for being – can be, and often times is, filled by joining the movement in order to give them not only hope, but substance. Spoon fed ideologies across hundreds of television channels, magazine ads, billboards, newspapers, personal media, and all types of Internet web sites can be pretty convincing to the individual, especially the individual who is susceptible to mass movements or one who is not satisfied with their own results in the ongoing philosophical pursuit to fill their own existential vacuum.

We can hope that this somewhat blind consumption is not the case, and that people of the world purchase and consume only the things they need to live a simple and content life. However, simple observation will show that, with a limited number of exceptions to the rule, this is not how American society operates. With the advent of the Internet, it may be the best of times and the worst of times for the accessibility and importance placed on information. Perhaps a new socialization is evolving as a result of this emphasis and the mass media devices available to us. In an environment that contains such omnipresent media – and their messages – turning up the personal information filter is not an option, but a requirement, where the individual needs to be highly critical to keep afoot of a search for truth in a vastly hypertext – and image-based – world.

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