



Media, viewer and storytelling: Subtlepowers.

The media, the spectator and the narrative: Subtle powers.

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ABSTRACT:

Since the proliferation of mass media, society has undergone major changes. One of them in terms of power. In this essay I analyze the power relations between the mass media and their viewers, as well as their mechanisms and consequences. I argue that this mechanism is narration, understood as a form of deliberate selection of information in order to endow events in the world with aesthetic feelings. This manipulation of reality generates a power relationship to the extent that the citizen has no other ways of knowing complex social realities, generating a monopoly of information, information that can be manipulated both in its content (facts) and its form (narration) to make the viewer see something that is not always the case. This would generate changes in public opinion that can be easily instrumentalized.

Keywords: Power. Media. Politics. Aesthetics.

ABSTRACT:



Since the proliferation of the mass media, society has experienced drastical changes, one of them in regards of power. In this essay I analyze the power relationships between the mass media and their spectators, as well as their mechanisms and consequences. I sustain that this mechanism is the narrative understood as a way of deliberately choosing information with the purpose to provide aesthetic feelings to the events on the world. This manipulation of reality generates a power relation as far as the citizen lacks alternative ways of knowing complex social realities, generating an information monopoly, information that can be manipulated both in its content (facts) and in its form (narrative) to show the spectator something that is not always the case. This would generate changes in public opinion which could be easily instrumentalized.

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The Media, the Viewer and the Narrative: Its Subtle Powers.

The man of the XXI century is shown before a peculiar era. Despite suffering from fewer shortcomings, he always seems to need something more. With the movements of the century and its technological advances the circumstance of the common mortal has been dressed in new colors. Not only is the gap between the wise and the ignorant narrowing, but the powers of man are expanding. The sky is no longer the limit, but the stars. Naturally, life in this high-speed society modifies the customs of each culture. The citizen modifies his catalog of ideas more regularly than in other times. The changes of the century are not only material, they are also cultural. New power relations emerge from necessity. In this essay I intend to examine an exclusive power relationship of this era: that of the mass media and the individual. I intend that you, dear reader, accompany me on this journey in which, in an abstract way, we will study how this relationship has occurred, what is its mechanism, its conditions of possibility and, therefore, its consequences. For this, it is necessary to begin with the foundation that sustains this peculiar relationship that, I maintain, is none other than the narrativity of reality. I will divide this essay into three sections: In one I will analyze the type of power that, I maintain, the media has; In another I will analyze the conditions of possibility of such power that, I maintain, is found in the individual of the twenty-first century; Finally, I will analyze the mechanism



by which this power manifests itself which, I maintain, is through narratives. Without further ado, let's get started.

A subtle power

Representation, it is often said, is the pillar of contemporary democracy. Despite its necessity, it doesn't seem to be entirely clear what exactly this means. Taking this question as such will not do much, better to reformulate it: If representing necessarily involves a represented and a representative, who is it that represents? and Who is represented? In these two questions is the answer to the first. In a partisan democracy, the representative manifests himself through the party or candidate who holds "ideas" and "interests." This party is assigned legislative power (limited by other parties) to look after specific ideals and interests. From bills to voting on issues concerning the state. This is the reason for the party's existence. On the other hand, the "represented" manifests itself in the individual who chooses such parties or **candidates**. The characteristic of the individual in this type of representation is that he has a worldview, a system of values, beliefs, interests. We have to consider something key: The individual chooses, yes, but why does he choose what he chooses? It is clear that the ideas of each one, that is, the worldview is what motivates. But how do you build a worldview? Individuals wandering the world encounter their circumstance. The internal forces of a biological being are opposed to the forces of its environment. Individuals are born in a place, live certain experiences, breathing native airs; they create links with other people, they unite their lives. Ultimately, they seek to find meaning in the world around them. It is a fact that things do not speak for themselves, it is necessary to frame reality in a framework of ideas that gives it meaning, this is the principle that opens to hermeneutics, every individual interprets. It is in this need that the worldview comes into play, which is nothing more than that framework of ideas from which an individual interprets reality. Sometimes the line between worldview and identity is very thin, sometimes "one is your ideas." Curious spirits will seek to forge their own worldview, but it is inevitable that their worldview will be influenced by other worldviews, usually inherited from the culture in which they were born. Therefore, the individual when deciding which candidate or party



represents him, what exactly is he looking for? Of course, a party that is in accordance with what the individual autonomously holds. The individual trusts that his interests are sufficiently aligned so that the action of these representatives in the legislative branch does not adversely affect the individual. In other words, worldviews must be compatible. In principle, there seems to be no problem with this system, because in the end the individual manifests his voice through the representative, exercises his individual power through the vote." However, this conception of representation does not seem to hold intact. The problem with this conception is to assume that what I will call "perfect representation" where the representative shares the same worldview as the individual. It is clear that this is not usually the case. The representative will hold certain general ideas with which to approach individuals and unite them under the same group. Otherwise there would be a risk of not having popular support and lacking effective power. This implies a simplification of their worldview, ideas are generalized, and therefore the representation does not seem to be so "representative." Faced with this problem, social groups independent of the political game are usually created that bring together "unrepresented" people under increasingly specific and detailed interests. These groups are the mechanism by which failures of party representation are corrected, generating politically active groups that adjust the interests of plurality.

So far, he does not seem to see a problem with this system (saving the expected abuses of power already established towards the minor political groups). But the ways of conveying ideas have changed. As we will see later, this change has profound consequences on the social fabric and the way of doing politics. Ideas have always been transmitted through the family, the school, the community, the market, the church; social ties. Little by little these factors (which are nothing more than the circumstance of the individual) end up influencing the worldview of the individual. It is from the adoption of these ideas that an "identity" is born. When it comes to politics, ideas are subtle protagonists, these are at the bottom of every political movement, beyond charismatic leaders. Political identity is an extension of personal identity. What new mechanisms does this technologically advanced society possess to produce and reproduce ideas? We can say newsreels, reports, opinion programs, movies, radio capsules, web articles; in the end it all comes down to the same thing: Media.



It is a fact that this novelty has illuminated the minds of many who in the past lacked access to all kinds of information, but this does not give amnesty to the damages that these have dragged. The problem is that these media that transmit ideas have owners. What we call "the entertainment industry." It is industry because it mass manufactures entertainment pieces for a market. Manufacturing is not democratic, but depends on a small group of owners plus shareholders. The so-called "mass media" are not disinterested spheres. Fashion stories propose fashion values, their heroes reflect an ideal of a new man, conflicts in stories mutate with each new social movement. If these ideas floated in the same space, with equal diffusion, there would be no problem because these ideas would be obliged to be discussed, to be purified. The problem arises when these industries (including the media) are monopolized, because, as we will see, the centralization of the media implies a centralization of power.

Why do I maintain that it is a monopoly? Perhaps the most appropriate word would be "oligopoly" because it is true that not every media is controlled by a single entity. But it is also true that the media are not entirely democratic because not everyone who wants to has the ability to spread their ideas to the general public. In these media we can see a limited number of worldviews that may or may not be in conflict with each other. It's easy to get lost in a false dichotomy when there are only two big owners of the discussions. A very clear example is the political environment of the United States, divided between Republicans and Democrats. The media in that country is often divided between Republican and Democratic media as well. It is easy to see how these generate false dichotomies. It is this phenomenon that I refer to when I speak of oligopoly in the media.

By acquiring control of the media, inevitably, one acquires the power to modify public opinion through narratives (we will explore this mechanism later) that sustain worldviews related to the interests of those media. Political issues are no exception, these are also disseminated through narratives and these narratives have an owner. The oligopoly of the so-called "media" holds a special position among all accumulations of power. They produce and reproduce narratives (discourses) with the peculiarity of "situating themselves in reality". To cite an example: Newscasts report on certain "facts"; certain "topics" are discussed, others are avoided; "data" of certain people is revealed, "data"



that affects the image of those involved, people do not take long to suspect; The media has the power to choose how to represent reality, in other words they "produce reality." Consequently, they favor or disfavor some interpretations of reality, they have the power to select them. Well, if the newscasts show us images of reality, compromising photographs, signed documents. It is true that their evidence seems convincing, their stories coherent and their motives just. The great work of these media is not that of research *per se*, but that of the "manufacture" of a product provided with information, attractive and easy to consume. And the subject has to consume it with tranquility because how to doubt? As Adorno and Horkheimer have already pointed out, this "cultural industry" induces a state of passivity to the viewer because it motivates little or nothing to question the realities shown, but to the acceptance of what is already established (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2003). This is the power of the media, that of public opinion, to modify worldviews. The problem that arises from such an oligopoly is that of an accumulation of power by private groups of people with particular interests, there is no guarantor that forces such an oligopoly to see for the common interest, but there is always that possibility of a particular interest sculpting the perception of the viewer. As Aristotle said:

Good forms of government are those in which a single person, a few or many govern with an eye to the common interest; Governments that contemplate particular interests are flawed (Aristotle, 1982, p.301).

Certainly the media are not governments, but they have undeniable power over them, as they can seriously influence the voter base that supports or despises a certain group or party. It is a *de facto* power.

This is evident on television, film and radio. But it is not so much in the so-called "social networks". It is true that, to some extent, they suffer from the same evils as the traditional media with some aggregates. These networks, being private entities, reserve the right to regulate those interactions in their networks that they consider inappropriate. It is not surprising that in the terms and conditions that the user accepts when entering these networks they usually find so-called "community norms" that establish limits to what can be expressed in those networks. This already



poses a problem to freedom of expression. The tensions between this right and so-called "hate speech" are a debate that, over time, will gain more weight. However, there is a radical difference in networks and traditional media. The network is not unidirectional, it is a virtual space where multiple individuals share something of themselves, their ideas or their lives. In the beginning, these networks consisted of text forums specialized in a topic or created with a sense of "virtual community", that is, they were focused on some topic or interest. But technological advancement soon made it possible to transmit images and sound. That's when social networks focused on "personalities" took flight. In principle. Such a platform is ideal for discussion because there is no centralized control that decides what opinions should be distributed, but this evil did not disappear, it simply transmuted. Social networks are not used as platforms for debate and discussion, they are used as an expansion of the "personal image". This point is evident when we observe that the common individual, when he decides to share something, decides to share his photographs, his tastes, his dislikes, his forms of entertainment and, until the end, his opinions. The social network is designed based on the notion of "popularity", from this concept derive the problems of networks as discussion forums. It is easy to realize this by the way in which such networks decide to highlight some opinions and bury others (who more visits, likes, favorites, shares, etc. hold, more visibility will acquire). There are those who can live by simply being popular on such networks. The characters with greater popularity tend to monopolize much more of that virtual space than the one that little participates in that game of the approval of the masses. This defeats any intellectual motive that a social network could have (saving specialized groups that decide to play under other rules) because the nature of a discussion is measured and extensive, it implies an effort to know the words of the other, as well as those assumptions that are imbued with such opinions. If we add to this the "personal" nature (that is, focused on individuals and not on topics) of the social network, which results in the ability of each individual to censor the other from their virtual space, it becomes easier to flee from such a conversation (blocking the individual or ridiculing him before the masses) instead of exploring his ideas. The power relationship is decentralized in terms of the ownership of the forum, but it is re-



centralized in terms of the popularity of opinion and it is evident that popularity does not equal rationability, there is a lot of room for *doxa* but little for *episteme*.

I would like us to explore, before moving on to another topic, another subtle power that networks hold, or rather, the owners of networks. These networks are given "free" to the common individual, but nothing is free in life. If we assume that companies are private for profit, then it has to be economically remunerable. Really the good that is extracted is "information". This is not very difficult to check, you just have to review the types of permissions that social media applications on our mobiles require. Information is extracted, it is argued, to know the habits, tastes and preferences of an individual, from where it is preferred to go to eat to the political causes that are supported. All this to deliver advertising according to that person. Certainly the product that networks sell is this data and there is no shortage of buyers! Well, what is more useful for a company than the knowledge of its market? If the individual's preferences are known, it is easier to manufacture products likely to be consumed by them. Now let's remember that the media also manufacture products with the appearance of reality (later we will analyze this product) Wouldn't this information tempt you? Political radicalization through the networks is not a fiction, because it is not very difficult to convince the moderate by showing him certain "realities" endorsed by the traditional media. Information as a commodity is a problem. This aside, it is obvious that these problems have two roots. Yes, the media play a role, but the passivity of the twenty-first century individual is the very condition of possibility of all these problems.

The individual is not innocent

I would now like to focus my attention on the media audience, for it is not blameless. It is true that each individual forges his interpretation of reality based on his very intimate experiences, but the man who inhabits this follow is a different man. He did not carry the yoke of a lord in feudal times, he did not suffer the horror of being the slave of a citizen or a state, he lives in a liberal democracy that whispers tenderly "you are important, your opinion is worth", in a capitalist economic system that every fortnight provides him with pleasures, exotic commodities, status; in a world of



consumption and production, where it is enough to give 9 hours of the day to enjoy comforts. If an ancient Roman saw our society, he would find it deeply selfish. The world seems to revolve around the individual and his desires, because liberal democracy puts the individual at the center of the political game, likewise the economic system places at its center the individual, who with his interests moves markets, who votes with his money to the products that have to survive. This is not a calamity *per se* it is progress compared to fiefdoms or slavers, but it does not come devoid of vice, freedom easily turns into arrogance. Following Ortega y Gasset's thesis:

This leads us to point out in the psychological diagram of the mass man two first features. The free expansion of his desires and, therefore, of his person and the radical ingratitude towards what has made possible the ease of his existence (Ortega y Gasset, 2012, p.310).

Continuous:

My thesis, then, is this: the very perfection with which the nineteenth century has given an organization to certain orders of life is the origin of the fact that the beneficiary masses do not consider it as an organization, but as nature." (Ortega y Gasset, 2012, p.312).

Ortega y Gasset's inspection, I argue, remains almost intact today. The individual takes his democracy and technology for granted because he was born with them. This makes it lazy in necessity because a pleasant life requires infinitely less effort than in the past. This decrease in effort is not only physical, but intellectual. If the individual needs to know something, it is only necessary to take a mobile phone and write the question. As their questions are usually mundane, the answers are usually easy and simple. The individual settles for this simplicity and extrapolates it to all knowledge, including knowledge of reality. It is assumed that the media tells him the whole truth, because he has no reason to doubt him. Doubting the world around you requires effort, it is not desirable. It is easier to believe



those who specialize in informing us about what is happening in our world, assigning truth to the facts by virtue of the one who says it, not by their correspondence with reality. Democratic societies need participation, it is true, but not every society makes good democracies because political issues require care and attention. The thousands of years of political literature are proof of the complexity of the fabric of human organizations, of how we traveled a hard road of wars and tyrants to achieve relative peace. One must be a type of person in order to adopt a democratic life, a society radically different from that of the man of the twenty-first century. This man does not need to question his democratic life, because he lives surrounded by it, he believes that this democracy is self-sustaining, that it does not need attentive eyes, souls open to dialogue. Not only that, but it also takes an altruistic impetus in its interpretation of reality, lacking in such individual generations. A democracy, as Aristotle put it in the past, needs its rulers (the people) to see for the common interest, not for the private interest. But how to ask the man of the twenty-first century to do such a feat? If his whole life revolved around him, if the information always had it in the palm of his hand, how can I ask him to doubt? As Montesquieu recalled:

It was a beautiful spectacle to see the powerless efforts of the English in the last century, to establish democracy among them. As those who participated in business lacked virtue, as their ambition was exasperated by the success of the most daring. And since the spirit of one faction was only repressed by that of another, the government changed endlessly (Montesquieu, 2015, p.61).

We have fire and gasoline. We have the combination of the media, so interested and the individual, so devoid of doubts. The explosion that will spawn "intellectual secrecy" is inevitable. As Ortega will explain:

I know that many of those who read me do not think the same as me. That too is very natural and confirms my theorem. Well, even if my opinion was ultimately wrong, there will always be the fact that many of those dissenting readers have not thought five minutes about such a complex subject. But believing himself entitled to have an opinion on the matter without prior effort to forge it, he manifests his exemplary belonging to the absurd way of



being a man that I have called "Rebel Mass". This is precisely having obliterated, hermetic, the soul. In this case it is intellectual secrecy. The person encounters a repertoire of ideas within himself, decides to be content with them and consider himself intellectually complete. By not missing anything outside of himself, he settles definitively in that repertoire of ideas" (Ortega y Gasset, 2012, p.319).

And it is to be expected. Individuals cannot know all the realities, they have to obtain them from interested media, they do not have the time to question them. Naturally they will be easily manipulated, obliterated. The figure that this individual will take will cease to be that of a cultured man in democracy and will become that of "useful fool" to the interests of the powers that facilitate his comfortable existence.

It is difficult to find a single cause for this twenty-first century individual to have moved his soul into such secrecy. Neither liberal democracy nor abundance alone explains this phenomenon. Sartori already pointed out how it is that the media supplanted abstraction by vision, diminishing the individual's ability to create ideas autonomously (Sartori, 1998). I think he is not wrong, because the ease of consumption of an audiovisual product leaves little space for reading that requires a degree of interpretation, understanding and abstraction sufficient to keep this lazy individual away. But something is certainly missing and I think I know it is.

Instrumentalized storytelling

So far we have investigated the media, we have investigated the people, who are the object of these media, but we lack the gear that connects these two spheres: The discourse (narration). It is evident that a good part of the worldview of the human being consists of aesthetic feelings. The experience of these feelings is not reduced to simple judgments of taste, but is lived by pursuing these feelings. It's no surprise that stories told in industrialized films gross millions each year. From Homeric poetry to comics of the last century, they have provided humans with heroes to follow, worlds to imagine and stories to tell. It is characteristic of the human being to tell stories. Not only does it stay in the



realm of myth or fiction, stories can also be told on pillars of reality (I mean, it's a legend but this). It was obvious that something so human, sooner or later, was going to find some way to be instrumentalized. Given this reality, it is pertinent to ask ourselves: How is it that political groups and parties present themselves to individuals? How do they justify their cause? Through speech. Speech is the link between representative and represented. This mechanism has the characteristic of being unidirectional, that is, it goes from the representative to the represented. The discourse in these times is not given in forums, it does not go to the square to listen to the representative, but it is manifested in a virtual space strongly inhabited by the media. The discourse is manifested not only by slogans or tedious advertisements, but by a whole process almost literary, a narrative one. Let's see: The media What does it communicate? Information? More than that: Narratives. Narration is, above all, an expressive structure, it is a way of telling events. The peculiar thing about the narrative is that it is covered with aesthetic feelings as well as a background thesis that gives meaning to the narrative. These theses are always guided by the author's own worldview. The great literati characterize their thesis in the form of characters and the relationships between them. A story is told in the eyes of some character, their struggles, their achievements, their aspirations are narrated; always from an aesthetic category: The beautiful, the sublime, the comic, the tragic, the disgusting, the amazing, the brave, etc. It is under these categories that the viewer can relate to their characters. A brave, humble and determined character inspires the viewer empathy, support in his journey. Contrary to the grotesque, vulgar or malicious character that pushes the viewer to repudiate his actions. A character is given "prominence" when it is implied that the narrative is aimed at that character, when events revolve around him. Events, characters, places, artifacts and little else are what we call "the world of history." The way in which the artist expresses his worldview in a narrative is through his characters, the story of a character condenses a thesis that is about showing the viewer

The media can also be artists and indeed they are. It is assumed that the media transmit information that is consistent with reality, it is not unreasonable to say that they intend to "show the reality of the world in which we live" through news, opinion channels, documentaries, reports etc. What do I mean by the "reality" or "realities" that these media present? Those events (social, cultural,



scientific) to which the viewer cannot have direct access and which contribute to the formation of the idea of "world in which I live" or, in Ortega jargon, "circumstance". To the state of society, its shortcomings, its glories, its challenges; Groups of people, their identity, their values, their struggles; The state of the markets, their participants, their crises, their causes. This inadvertently endows them with a subtle power: The power to choose which stories to tell and which to ignore. This, consequently, grants the power to influence the worldviews of individuals. This manifests itself in the concrete realities they communicate, transforming them into "the world of a narrative"; They take people, groups or entire peoples and transform them into protagonists or villains; They take the relationships between the manufactured world, its characters, even the narrator himself and transform it into "the story" that has to give meaning to such a world. In it they endow certain characters with virtues and vices to others. Such a cautious selection generates aesthetic feelings in the viewer that will inevitably motivate him to support the protagonists and despise the villains, consequently promoting an acceptance of the theses that manifested in said protagonists. The media, whether in the form of newscasts, opinion forums, social networks or any similar media feed their viewer with these narratives. And it is not surprising that it is the favorite way to communicate facts, because it covers with aesthetic feelings the interpretation of reality, feelings so vital in human experience. We do not reproach the artist for covering the reality of aesthetics, because it is necessary for his artistic expression. It is often clear that whatever the artist represents, it does not have to represent anyone. Such realization does not happen with the media. The representative benefits enormously from the fact that his cause is more than a simple worldview, but that it is protagonist. As I said before, the narrative assumes a "world" in which the characters develop. The artist manufactures the world and gives it meaning with the story that has inevitably been told. The media have the power to "build worlds" in which representatives have to operate. The difference between the world of the artist and that of the communicator is that one is presented as the creation of an author, while the other is presented as the real world. It is true that the media "build reality" because it is from them that the ordinary citizen feeds to build the worldview of such a complex world. This is clearly a power relationship to the extent that these narratives shape public opinion, a sacred element



in a democracy. I do not think there is any need to cite examples of this technique. The propaganda of twentieth-century authoritarian states is sufficient evidence of how an entire nation can be manipulated into believing a narrative: the capitalism-communism struggle and Aryan-Jewish antagonism are bitter memories.

As I said before, the human being necessarily interprets his reality because things do not speak for themselves. These narratives weigh on the possible interpretations of citizens and by extension, on their identity. This is the mechanism that representatives use to generate supporters. The problem is not *per se* the existence of the narratives, but their claim to reality. An individual can read a novel and decide to agree or reject its proposals, because that novel is the product of an author, the reader is aware of this. However, when a media outlet presents the narrative as reality, can one reject the proposal? If so, the individual would run the risk of holding "false beliefs." This construction of the narrative can be evidenced by the selection of "crimes" that have to be shown to the public, pointing to the group to which the "criminal" belongs, feeding the notion of protagonism-antagonism; the selection of which protests to show and which to ignore, expressing to the viewer which are just and courageous, which are ruinous and perverse; Scrutinizing every word of certain representatives, showing which are perverse and immoral, which are measured and conscious; Select which documentaries to produce, showing which groups we have to support, which to despise. All this is only problematic if you rely on the honesty of the media. In the end, what allows the media to sustain that power is none other than the vote of confidence.

This is the masterpiece of media manipulation, storytelling. It is no surprise that the media supports certain parties, reveals compromising information from their adversaries, upholds the fairness or unfairness of an act, speaks about the character of a representative, highlights their virtues, and frames their discourse in the great history they have carefully written for years. The narrative is not exclusive to the media, political groups that are shown as the "oppressed" (protagonists) and show other entities as "oppressors" (villains) tend to fall into narratives. The problem with this way of telling events is epistemological. Narratives always have an end and it is not necessarily "the truth". Great writers tell stories in worlds that do not exist to communicate



something to the reader, just as political groups and the media send a message through their narratives. These aesthetic feelings will inevitably motivate the viewer to choose such representatives whose story is being told. The difference between the writer and the media is simple honesty. The writer creates his worlds or borrows them from reality, the media will maintain that the world of storytelling "is" reality and that the moral and aesthetic conclusions that derive from that story are as real as the world we live in. One aims to show, another to demonstrate. The viewer is aware of this when reading a book, that the theses derived from history or the ends to which it tends are the product of the author, but he is not aware that the conclusions derived from a means of communication are also the product of the media, not of reality.

The media has a subtle but significant power in the political game, for they have the oligopoly of narratives that inevitably shape the worldviews of unwary viewers. Remembering what I said several paragraphs ago: The power of the media is only possible thanks to the trust you have in them. Any truth released by the media must be considered, at best, provisional. It is healthy to be skeptical of reality, even if it is not the most comfortable. Knowing the way in which narratives are constructed gives ammunition to the individual to find narratives in speeches, like someone who learns a martial art to be able to defend himself from others. Certainly a democratic life needs individuals skeptical enough to doubt its sources, but altruistic enough to want a common good. This good must be achieved by refining ideas, contrasting, not discarding. In the end, as Rousseau will say, "The people unfailingly want their good, but they do not always understand it. The people are never corrupted, they are often deceived and it is then when they seem to want evil" (Rousseau, 1985, p.58).

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