THE INFORMED CITIZEN:

TECHNOLOGY AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE INFORMATION AGE

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the justification and possibility of informed citizenship in the affluent liberal-democratic states. The approach is interdisciplinary, drawing upon literature in communication studies, the philosophy of technology, and political theory. The study focuses on how modern science and technology, and information technology in particular, affect the citizen's parameters of knowledge and action in unprecedented ways. It is argued that the main difficulty for informed citizenship is not the lack of availability of information as such, but rather the pattern of citizen attention to it, and this pattern is itself an outcome of specific social relations of information. In the affluent liberal-democratic states the social relations of information are primarily geared to privatism, i.e. an orientation to intensive commodity consumption, as a way of life. In this context, information procured through advanced technology serves not only to disclose the problems and suffering of a common world, but also to insulate citizens from these same problems. The thesis argues that as a first step toward a deeper understanding of the prospects for informed citizenship, the concept of information should be reformulated to reflect its ambiguous status within contemporary technological civilization. The study first of all outlines three perspectives on the citizen inherited from the modern Enlightenment: the citizen as pursuer of rational self-interest, as a member of a reasoning public, and as an object of technocratic manipulation. The following chapter discusses different approaches within democratic political theory to the question of informed citizenship and in particular the grounds for the citizen's

deference to expert knowledge. Then, there is a consideration of the prospects for world citizenship in the light of global technological threats to the conditions for sustaining human life, and the global electronic matrix of instant communication. The next chapter focuses on debates about the role of mass media, and television in particular, in stultifying rather than enhancing informed citizenship. Finally, four themes implicit in the concept of information are highlighted for their relevance to informed citizenship: information as fact, as form, as commodity, and as self-formation.

The flood of detailed information and candy floss entertainment simultaneously instructs and stultifies mankind.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno

Photography, telegraphy and the radio have shrunk the world. The populations of the cities witness the misery of the entire earth. One would think that this might prompt them to demand its abolition. But simultaneously, what is close has become the far-away. Now, the horror of one's own city is submerged in the general suffering, and people turn their attention to the marital problems of movie stars.

Max Horkheimer

But *more* information is not complete information; if anything, it makes information more and more incomplete.

Daniel Bell

As modern developments in communication have made for greater realism they have made for greater possibilities of delusion.

Harold Innis

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Lastly, and so importantly, it was my parents, Bill and Glen Cook, who mounted a decade-long logistical effort to keep me supplied with information, materials, and their own faith in the successful completion of this saga.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a truism today that we live in an age of information. One consequence of living in such an intensive information setting is that we are regular witnesses to the problems and suffering of the entire world. Whenever we open a newspaper or watch the television news, it is hard to avoid hearing about war, famine, terrorism, or pollution, to mention just a few examples. An abundance of further information on these topics can also be usually obtained, should we desire, from specialized magazines, libraries and other institutional sources.

The relative abundance of political information about local, national, and international issues has important implications for the theory and practice of informed citizenship in the affluent liberal-democratic states. Today the citizen is deluged with more information than ever before. Despite this availability of information, the relatively few empirical studies of the levels of citizen knowledge have tended to show that the bulk of citizens are not well-informed about even the most basic political facts.[1] Yet even if the citizen does not attend closely to the

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[1] See, for example, Russell W. Neuman, The Paradox of Mass Politics: Knowledge and Opinion in the American Electorate (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 14-17. However, it should also be noted that some studies also show that many citizens are quite sophisticated in their information processing strategies. See, Doris Graber, Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide (New York: Longman, 1984).

influx of information, an important change has nevertheless taken place in the modern world: the very fact that there are remote problems and sufferings is now a fragmentary part of the citizen's everyday background knowledge, even if the details are ignored or forgotten.

This dissertation is a theoretical study of how the relative availability of information in the modern world, along with some other changes in the world situation, affect the justification and possibility of informed citizenship in the present age. Some preliminary comments are in order about the meaning of informed citizenship as it is understood here. Informed citizenship implies more than the mere possession of information about a situation or event. It also implies the existence of motivations to become informed and the capacity to act (or refrain from acting) in some relevant fashion as a consequence of that information. The informed citizen is not only informed; he or she is also a citizen. The citizen is one who is recognized as an agent possessing interests, rights, obligations and responsibilities within a particular historical and territorial community. The citizen, *qua* citizen, cares for the common world which is the horizon of the public domain. The focus on citizenship also implies that on the basis of appropriate information and concern, the citizen should be able to initiate actions to influence the course of events. It is, of course, possible for a citizen to be informed but not to care about the reported situation, or to be unable to do anything to change it. Yet it is also true that simply being informed without care and without capacity for action is an impoverished state of informed citizenship.

What are the prospects, then, for citizens to attain a more enriched state of information, in which they can cultivate their knowledge and care about events in the world and are able, at least in some cases, to have some influence upon their course? There are good reasons to believe that informed citizenship is now a more desirable ideal than ever; however, at the same time there are also very strong factors which inhibit its accomplishment. Informed citizenship is especially desirable today because of the unprecedented interdependence of the world order, and its vulnerability to disruptive ecological changes and possibly even the destruction of the conditions for human life. Modern technology, embedded within (and produced by) social structures of domination and inequality, and combined with biosocial factors such as population pressure, threatens to undermine the conditions for the continuance of human life, either through gradual attrition or sudden catastrophe. These effects, potential and existing, do not respect national borders. The destruction of tropical rain forests, for example, is affecting the level of carbon dioxide in the global atmosphere as a whole; in the event of nuclear war, nuclear winter could cover much of the globe; similarly, industrially produced chemicals are eating away at the ozone layer. Thus the destructive power of modern technology provides a new impetus for caring for and about the world and those living in it.

Modern technology has thus fundamentally altered the nature of the historical community in which the citizen lives. It is no longer possible to think of communities as solely local, particular and isolated; they are now also permeated by the universalizing imperatives of modern technology. The native peoples of the northern Arctic, for example, must live with the polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs)

which are accumulating in the fat of the sea mammals upon which they subsist—PCBs produced thousands of miles away in industrial civilization. In a different vein, workers' employment prospects are these days intimately connected to the international flows of capital and the inter-corporate struggles that these provoke. Local communities and urban formations are increasingly drawn into the international division of labour. Modern technology is, therefore, already part of a universal substrate of global economic and ecological interdependence; the question, however, is whether citizens can come to recognize this interdependence in their everyday praxis. The difficulty is that these interdependencies are constituted through quite high levels of abstraction: the flows of capital are a social pattern of market relations which cannot be observed directly; the effects of pollution and environmental destruction are often diffuse in nature, being transmitted over great distances in manifestations which are often only detectable through scientific measurement. Today's informed citizen is therefore confronted with the problem of comprehending processes which are inherently abstract and several steps removed from everyday experience.

The Problematic of Informed Citizenship

It is in the above context that the present work attempts to rethink the problematic of informed citizenship. By the term problematic, I mean the set of questions, aspirations, and problems which cluster around an identified phenomenon, and which are capable of being opened up for further inquiry and elaboration. The

problematic of informed citizenship is part of a tradition of theoretical ideals, concrete aspirations, and practical historical struggles over the limits of democratic participation in governance; it is, moreover, part of a living tradition which must be responsive to the unique conditions of the present. One such condition has already been alluded to: the new global context of interdependence which makes it desirable to cultivate among citizens the enlightened understanding of themselves and others which is needed, in my view, to address the pressing social and ecological problems confronting citizens world-wide. This calls for citizens to recognize that they inhabit a common world which transcends the boundaries of particular states. The ideal of world citizenship is thus one aspect of the problematic of the informed citizen which is particularly relevant in the contemporary era.

It has already been noted that the incoming flow of world-wide information appears to have little overt impact upon the level of knowledge of most citizens. What is it that inhibits citizens in the affluent liberal-democratic states from becoming informed beyond a quite narrow horizon? In my view the problem is not a lack of availability of information *per se*, but the character and pattern of citizen attention to the available information.[2] It is perhaps not surprising if citizens focus mainly on information which most directly affects the planning and conduct of their everyday lives and the lives of those closest to them, and are less attentive to

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[2] I want to stress that I am not denying that the availability of information in the affluent liberal-democratic states is constrained by state and corporate secrecy, and media self-censorship. My point is that even taking these factors into account, there is still a great amount of information available bearing upon important social and political problems.

distant and abstract problems.[3] For much of human history this has been an appropriate response to the human condition. Only in relatively recent times have citizens had to face the influx of distant and abstract information and the accompanying web of interdependence. Moreover, the sheer availability of information, understood in a broad sense to include all of the information commodities procured by means of information and communication technology, now operates to distract citizens from focusing on particularly significant political and social issues.

There is an additional consequence of this new situation which may act as a disincentive to becoming well-informed. For even assuming that individuals had near-perfect information about numerous situations of adversity in the rest of the world, and that they cared very deeply about them, it may well be asked what ameliorative actions they could undertake. How much extra responsibility can a single person take on, before becoming completely overloaded and utterly helpless? Humans are not gods, and even perfect information may not be, and indeed often is not, matched by sufficient resources to initiate effective action. However, the issue is not just one of citizens acting in isolation from one another: it is rather a problem of collective and institutional action. Moreover, the problems of the world cannot be addressed all at once, and there must be some individual and institutional decisions about sequencing and focusing of resources and attention. However, the

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[3] For a systematic discussion of how the citizen's horizon of interests breaks the world into various zones of relevance which require differing degrees of precision of knowledge, see, Alfred Schutz, "The Well-Informed Citizen," in Collected Papers, vol. 2: Studies in Social Theory, ed. by Arvid Brodersen (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964).

fact remains that the kinds of problems mentioned above, which are inherently abstract and possess global dimensions, are particularly difficult from the point of view of inviting citizen involvement: their complexity and level of intricacy may require a roughly commensurate level of complexity and intricacy in the actions taken to address them. This difficulty of knowing what to do, and of being able to do it, is thus one further factor which may discourage citizens from becoming well-informed about such abstract issues.

The existence of an electronic global information network would seem to be a necessary condition for the cultivation of informed citizenship with a global orientation. Yet a case—indeed a number of cases—can be made to show that the information media are themselves part of the problem in impeding informed citizenship. There are several variants of this type of explanation. Some argue that the mass media are instruments of ideological domination on behalf of ruling classes: in this view, the media distort or self-censor relevant information, enabling the manipulation of the citizen's consciousness and beliefs, or shaping the framework of commonsense in a way which reinforces social relations of domination and inequality.[4] Another view claims that the intrinsic characteristics of certain media predispose them to be less suited to promoting informed citizenship. Television is often cited in this kind of argument: the information which television provides is said to be too rapid, too brief, and too fragmented to encourage learning and the development of skills in evaluating information. In contrast, the printed

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[4] For a lucid presentation of this perspective, see Stuart Hall, "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect'," in <u>Mass Communication and Society</u>, ed. by James Curran et al. (London: Edward Arnold, 1977).

word is considered to be much more suited to fostering democratic discussion and critical and analytic skills.[5]

If the information media are in some perspectives an impediment to informed citizenship, then still others hope that developments in information technology make possible an unprecedented increase in the level of citizen information. These perspectives range from fantastic visions of public educational facilities using the latest advances in information technology[6], to computerized information systems based in private residences. The latter would involve the installation of interactive, multi-purpose information facilities to provide the convenience of a telephone, personal computer, database, and television all combined into one. Interactive information networks could be used for polling, voting, or for accessing data banks and like-minded citizens.[7] With these devices citizens would be able, for example, to seek information which fits their personally-tailored profile: they might request to view all recent news items on acid rain, or low-income housing, etc. Or, during an election campaign they could request an independently-researched information package which compares stated policy positions and actual policy records of all the

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[5] This argument is advanced by A.P. Simonds, "On Being Informed," Theory and Society 11 (1982): 587-616.

[6] See Harold D. Lasswell, "Policy Problems of a Data-Rich Civilization," in Information Technology in a Democracy, ed. by Alan F. Westin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 197; Robert and Louise Thompson, Egoshell: Planetary Individualism Balanced Within Planetary Interdependence (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1987), pp. 24-26.

[7] The most complete recent survey is F. Christopher Arterton, Teledemocracy: Can Technology Protect Democracy? Sage Library of Social Research, vol. 165 (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications and the Roosevelt Centre for American Policy Studies, 1987).

candidates. Or, users could key into interactive "affinity networks" and computer bulletin board systems which serve various communities of interest across great distances.[8]

It is clear that advances in information technology promise many ingenious techniques for organizing and selecting the information available to citizens wishing to become informed. Equally clear, however, is that information techniques cannot by themselves generate citizen interest in their use for the purposes of political education and information. This is why, I believe, it is mistaken to pin high hopes on advanced information technology leading to great advances in informed citizenship. Even without using sophisticated computer systems, a great abundance of information is already available to citizens. As Theodore Roszak has observed, the average citizen could presently obtain a wealth of relevant political information without utilizing sophisticated computer systems, simply by investing a relatively small sum in the appropriate newspaper and magazine subscriptions.[9]

It is similarly mistaken to single out one medium, such as television, in order to claim that it is retarding development of informed citizenship. To do so is to ignore how television and other information technologies, such as newspapers and databases, are all embedded within overlapping patterns of social relations. In my view, the particular characteristics of different media, although important, do not

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[8] See Gerald W. Smith and Jerry Debenham, "Intelligent Voting Systems: Using Computers for Choosing Our Leaders," The Futurist (September-October 1988): 38-42; George Bugliarello, "Toward Hyperintelligence," Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization 10 (September 1988): 67-89.

[9] Theodore Roszak, The Cult of Information (New York: Pantheon, 1986), p. 162.

outweigh the significance of their incorporation within a common pattern of social relations. The contribution of particular information technologies to enhancing or inhibiting informed citizenship must therefore be viewed in the overall context of what I will call the social relations of information. The social relations of information are the set of conditions, constraints and resources which enable the production, distribution and reception of information within and between particular societies. The social relations of information encompasses the full range of information media in their various technical and organizational inter-relations. Also included are the various sets of routines and procedures within information organizations for selecting who shall be allowed to speak (or write) and under what conditions. Furthermore, each speaker is defined within the social relations of information as embodying particular types of discursive authority (e.g. scientist, physician, politician, journalist, parent).

In my view the impediments to informed citizenship are not to be found in the deficiencies of a particular technology such as television, nor in the manipulation of the citizen's consciousness and beliefs by the mass media. Rather, we must look for these impediments in the citizen's location in, and everyday experience of, the social relations of information. The main difficulty for informed citizenship is not the lack of availability of information as such, but the pattern of citizen attention to it, and this pattern is itself an outcome of specific social relations of information. In the affluent liberal-democratic states the social relations of information are primarily geared to privatism as a way of life. Privatism is defined here as a life primarily oriented to the private pursuits of career, family, and

consumption of commodities.[10] The pursuit of the fruits of modern technology, promoted through the commercially sponsored mass media, is one of the central activities of the private consumer lifestyle. Pre-occupation with the procurement of technological commodities tends to insulate and detach citizens from the affairs of the public world. Indeed, I will argue that the procurement of information as a commodity contributes to this detachment, particularly in the context of existing social relations of information. In this context, information procured through advanced technology serves not only to disclose the problems and suffering of a common world, but also to insulate citizens from these same problems. The thesis argues, therefore, that as a first step toward a deeper understanding of the prospects for informed citizenship, the concept of information should be reformulated to reflect its ambiguous status within contemporary technological civilization.

One of the positive achievements of privatism is to affirm the right not to be involved in politics, which after all has historically been a disputatious, coercive and often violent affair. Politics, in the privatist vision, is oriented to ensuring the continued and expanded procurement of commodities for private consumption. Participation in public or political matters is limited to voting in elections, which is itself a private act. The scope for informed citizenship in a regime of privatism is

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[10] The concept of privatism used in the present work has been drawn from the following sources: Jurgen Habermas, Legitimation Crisis, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), pp. 75-78; Raymond Williams, Television: Technology and Cultural Form (London: Fontana, 1974); and Conrad Lodziak, "Dull Compulsion of the Economic: The Dominant Ideology and Social Reproduction," Radical Philosophy no. 49 (Summer 1988): 10-17.

therefore limited. Matters of governance are left largely to professional politicians and their expert advisors.

The encouragement of privatism is not the only way in which the social relations of information impede the expansion of the horizons of informed citizenship. Complementary to privatism, the social relations of information construct politics as a spectacle of interactions between an array of experts and professionals, thus obstructing the cultivation of political participation and the questioning of the authoritative claims of expert discourses. Rather than being invited into political dialogue, private citizens themselves become the targets of persuasive political information strategies which are formulated upon the basis of careful measurement of citizen opinions and attitudes. Vigorous and thorough public debate tends to be supplemented and to some extent undermined by image-making strategies calculated to modulate public opinion. The social relations of information thus institute a dualistic situation: a private sphere in which there is intense promotion of and intimate participation in commodity consumption, and a public sphere which is remote, spectacular, populated by dauntingly articulate experts and professionals, and the source of image-making strategies which treat the public as a mute object to be measured and calculated. The problematic of informed citizenship in our time is really about how, or to what extent, this dualistic situation can be bridged, and the citizen's zones of relevance cultivated to encompass caring for our common world.

The Approach of This Study

In order to go about this inquiry into informed citizenship, it has been necessary to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. First of all, political theory has provided perspectives on the role of informed citizenship within democracy, and particularly within the affluent liberal-democratic welfare states. In one respect the literature in this area is large and diffuse, including not only liberal and democratic theory, but also studies of public opinion, and jurisprudential studies of the rights of speech and expression. However, the focus of the present study upon the justification and possibility of informed citizenship tends to narrow the relevant literature. In particular, the present work focuses on the concept of information rather than opinion, and thus is more directly concerned with questions of political competence and rationality of opinion.[11] When the problem is defined in this way, there are surprisingly few theoretical studies which address the issue of informed citizenship. There appear to be no full-length theoretical studies devoted specifically to this topic, and extensive search has revealed only a few published papers which are explicitly devoted to it.[12]

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[11] For a valuable discussion of the rationality of public opinion which draws critically upon Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative competence, see John Keane, "Elements of a Radical Theory of Public Life: From Tonnies to Habermas and Beyond," and "Elements of a Radical Theory of Public Life (II)," Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory 6 (Fall 1982): 11-49, and 8 (Winter/Spring 1984): 139-162. In contrast to Habermas, the present work focuses on the concept of information rather than that of communication.

[12] The studies are: A.P. Simonds, "On Being Informed," Theory and Society 11 (1982): 587-616; Geraint Parry, "Citizenship and Knowledge," in Democracy, Consensus and Social Contract, ed. by Pierre Birnbaum, Jack Lively, and Geraint Parry, Sage Modern Politics Series vol. 2 (London and Beverly Hills: Sage

The second area which this study draws upon is the literature in communication studies. Works focusing on the social, political and cultural dimensions of mass media are of course relevant. Communication studies has also contributed sources for the study of the concept of information. The ideal of informed citizenship is, moreover, often implicit in many studies of political communication and in studies of the balance and objectivity of political journalism. Indeed, it was the absence of explicit discussion of the underpinnings of this ideal in the political communication literature which contributed to the interest in undertaking the present study.

Finally, the field known as the philosophy of technology has helped clarify the implications of modern technological civilization for informed citizenship. Two ideas from the philosophy of technology are particularly significant for the present study. First, the idea that technology is not simply an object, an artifact: it is also embedded in social relations and, moreover, has important effects upon the constitution of the self—its modes of awareness, feeling, perception, knowing, and acting. The implication of this for informed citizenship may become clearer when we consider that the citizen is in a sense the public self of the individual, and that

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Publications, 1978); Clifford G. Christians, "Jacques Ellul and Democracy's 'Vital Information' Premise," Journalism Monographs No. 45 (August 1976); Christian Bay, "Access to Political Knowledge as a Human Right," The Human Context 7 (1975): 388-398; Jacques Ellul, "Information and Propaganda," Diogenes (June 1957): 61-77; Alfred Schutz, "The Well-Informed Citizen," in Collected Papers, vol. 2 Studies in Social Theory, ed. by Arvid Brodersen (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964). Here I am referring strictly to works which explicitly thematize the question of informed citizenship. Of course other works touch on aspects of the question, but are not centrally focused on it. For comments on the lack of theoretical research, see Simonds, p. 594, and Parry, p. 48.

the technological order of society will have definite effects upon how that self perceives and takes up with the world. The second contribution of the philosophy of technology is the idea of what is sometimes called the irony of technology. There are several versions of this thesis, but what they all have in common is the idea that modern technology initially held out a promise of liberation from toil and the enrichment of the quality of human life. The irony of technology emerges in its failure to unambiguously fulfil this promise, yielding instead a variety of disappointments, destructive effects and pathologies, in conjunction with genuine improvements in human welfare.[13]

Drawing upon these three disciplinary areas has enabled deficiencies in one area to be filled in by work from another. Thus political theory provides the ethico-political justificatory context for informed citizenship, but it has very little to say about the differential implications of levels of technological development. Communication studies, in contrast, focuses strongly on the structures and socio-political effects of communication media, but lacks the justificatory theory with which to explicitly address the problematic of informed citizenship. Philosophy of technology, finally, goes some way to bridging the gap between both of these disciplines: it is at home with justificatory theory, and also with the effects of technology upon cognitive, affective, and perceptual modes.

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[13] See, Manfred Stanley, The Technological Conscience: Survival and Dignity in an Age of Expertise (New York: The Free Press, 1978), Chapter Two; Albert Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), p. 76; William Leiss, The Domination of Nature (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), passim; Ian H. Angus, Technique and Enlightenment: Limits of Instrumental Reason (Washington, DC: Centre for Advanced Research in Phenomenology and University Press of America, 1984), esp. Chapter Four.

Chapter Outline

An outline of the argument presented in the following chapters can now be given. Chapter two, "The Enlightened Citizen," provides an overview of the contribution of the modern Enlightenment to our contemporary understanding of citizenship and knowledge. Although this thesis is not an account of historical changes in the conception of informed citizenship, but rather focuses on the contemporary situation, nevertheless the modern Enlightenment has affected deeply the expectations which we hold about the liberating and enriching powers of knowledge. It is argued that the heritage of the Enlightenment is not a single cohesive conception of knowledge, but consists of several strands each with different consequences for citizenship. In particular, the enlightened citizen may acquire knowledge for the rational pursuit of self-interest, or, secondly, for participation in scientifically-informed discussion oriented to common interests, or, finally, the citizen may in fact be the *object* of knowledge for the sake of technocratic strategies of opinion control.

Chapter three, "The Democratic Citizen and Expertise," endeavours to lay out the main positions concerning the possibility of informed citizenship in modern democracies. The dilemma of informed citizenship for democracy is first of all noted: the success of democracy depends upon informed discussion and decision-making, yet the underlying principle of democracy also requires that citizens not be excluded from political participation merely because they are relatively uninformed and politically incompetent. The discussion then proceeds to discuss the work of

two important figures in the debates about informed citizenship: from the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill, and from our own, Anthony Downs. Mill and Downs propose very different solutions to the problem of political competence in complex, large scale industrial states with a specialized division of labour. Mill advocates a developmental approach to citizen education, hoping to cultivate through occasional citizen participation in governing roles at least the capacity for informed deference to experts and professional decision-makers. Downs, in contrast, argues that it is rational for most citizens to remain ignorant of political affairs; therefore large-scale apathy and ignorance are an inescapable characteristic of liberal-democratic states, and ill-informed deference to elite decisions the preferred strategy for most citizens.

Chapter four, "The World Citizen," introduces two aspects of modern technology which, it is argued, create new parameters of action and knowledge for the modern citizen, and alter the aspirations and conditions of informed citizenship. These are, first, the deployment of technologies which threaten the destruction of the conditions for human life and, second, the emergence of a global electronic matrix of instantaneous information and communication. These two developments together motivate a discussion of the meaning and feasibility of world citizenship. This is followed by more specific attention to the implications of the threat of world-destruction for democracy, and following this, an assessment of McLuhan's idea of the global village.

Chapter five, "The Informed Citizen and the Mass Media," is an assessment of the cultural and political role of the mass media, and the extent to which they

enhance or inhibit informed citizenship. This chapter begins with the landmark work of A.P. Simonds on informed citizenship. Simonds argues for a shift of focus away from the content of communication, and its supposed role in ideological domination, and towards the communicative context in which citizens conduct their daily lives. I argue that this valuable insight is partially obscured by Simonds' attempt to create a contrast between the alleged superiority of the printed word over the televisual form of representation. Simonds' notion of communicative context is nevertheless important, and is appropriated and reinterpreted here as the social relations of information. Further insight into the character of contemporary social relations of information is pursued in an interpretation of the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse. Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the culture industry provides a starting point for a perspective on the distraction function of mass media, the impoverishment of public discourse, and the media's contribution to feelings of political cynicism among citizens.

Finally, the dissertation concludes with chapter six, "The Concept of Information." This chapter identifies four distinct aspects of the term information, with a view to showing how they each shed some light on an aspect of informed citizenship. The discussion of the first sense, information as fact, shows that the process of informing is an asymmetrical communicative relation with an informant who is perceived to be in a position to know. Information is premised on relations of authority, not truth. Furthermore, these relations are masked by the ideology of objectivity in journalism and science. It is contended that journalism should recognize more explicitly the historical process of its own creations, while science

needs to acknowledge significant areas of its own ignorance in the face of world-destructive problems. The second sense, information as form, focuses on the influence of the scientific conceptualization of information as the pattern of organization of matter-energy, and the special role of information in the control of living systems. This understanding of information is, it is suggested, contributing to a new ontology in which information is viewed as an index of the availability of the world for human use and experience. This idea is further pursued in the third sense of information as commodity. Here we appropriate the work of Albert Borgmann in the philosophy of technology and return to one of the root meanings of commodity as convenience. Borgmann's perspective on the commodity illuminates how information devices conceal the processes through which the information commodity is created, bringing about a relation of disengagement and detachment of the user from the content and context of information. Furthermore, the proliferation of information commodities serve to distract citizens from the pursuit of political and cultural enrichment. Information devices actually contribute to making the world seem more opaque and impermeable, even as they are the focus of claims which celebrate the maximization of information options. The idea of information as commodity thus demonstrates the irony of information technology: what promises to make the world transparent and open to knowledge, also contributes to making it impermeable and a source of confusion. However, this tendency is, in my view, exacerbated by particular features of the social relations of information which are to some extent capable of change. Finally, the sense of information as self-formation highlights a little-discussed aspect, at least with respect

to informed citizenship. Information as self-formation refers to the sense which each individual has of the meaning and worth of his or her life, and the kinds of projects and purposes which make life worth living. The process of self-formation is a continuous process of interpretation of self, others, and of events in the world. The predominant conception of self in modern industrial societies is premised upon a life of intense commodity consumption. The prospects that information about world problems and sufferings will motivate individuals truly to become world citizens will depend at least in part upon whether they can overcome the distracting and disengaging mode of self-formation engendered by intensive pursuit of commodity consumption.

Chapter Two

THE ENLIGHTENED CITIZEN

The ideal of informed citizenship is premised upon the superiority of knowledge over ignorance, a belief which can be traced to the beginnings of philosophy. Every epoch, however, has given rise to specific views on the *kinds* of knowledge which are appropriate for citizenship, and these in turn have had implications for how the rights and responsibilities of citizenship are understood. The contemporary ideal of informed citizenship is, for example, influenced by the predominant conceptions of knowledge which have emerged in the modern epoch, which we understand as commencing in 17th century Europe. In this chapter we will seek to show how the modern Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries brought about some radical changes in conceptions of knowledge, which have multiple implications for citizenship. The legacy of the Enlightenment, it will be argued, is not a single, coherent conception of knowledge, but an inherently unstable constellation of various strands emphasizing three distinct themes: the rational pursuit of the citizen's self-interest, rational discussion among citizens oriented to public welfare, and technocratic control of public opinion.

The Varieties of Enlightenment

The impact of the modern Enlightenment upon the ideal of informed citizenship can be more clearly appreciated if contrasted with the ancient (or classical) perspective on citizenship and knowledge. Geraint Parry, in one of the few surveys specifically focusing on citizenship and knowledge in the Western political tradition, encapsulates some of the main concerns found in the classical political theorists such as Aristotle, but which also found concurrence from later republican thinkers such as Hume and Rousseau. All agreed that good citizenship required education and knowledge:

> The citizen needs not merely a general education but a specifically political education. Following Aristotle's list of citizen qualifications he needs to understand enough of the established constitution to be able to appreciate what loyalty to it entails, he needs to know what duties are involved in the citizen office he holds, and he needs to recognize the principle of justice underlying the state if his conduct is to manifest the appropriate quality of justice. This is an education in 'knowing how' and 'knowing what'. The politically educated citizen knows how to move around in his society. He knows how to put forward a case for public action. He is sensitive to the possibilities of victory and defeat for his own proposals. This is the sort of practical knowledge which can generally only arise through political action. But such a citizen will also possess a considerable amount of factual knowledge about political rights, about the constitution and its various offices, and about the capacities and limits of government. Aristotle, Rousseau and Hume also agree that the citizen (as distinct from the good man) will need a knowledge of the attitudes and expectations of fellow citizens. He must learn how to fit in, how to appear but a fraction of the whole, how to win esteem.[1]

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[1] Geraint Parry, "Citizenship and Knowledge," in <u>Democracy, Consensus and Social Contract</u>, edited by Pierre Birnbaum, Jack Lively, and Geraint Parry, Sage Modern Politics Series, vol. 2 (London and Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1978) p. 40.

All this knowledge, Parry points out, helps the good citizen carry out his two roles (and citizens in past times were almost invariably men), summarized in Aristotle's famous dictum that the citizen is one who shares in ruling and being ruled.[2] The citizen must know how to rule as well as how to obey, since only in this way can free men avoid becoming tyrants or slavish dependents. Each individual citizen must gain experience in both roles, either concurrently or in turn, to avoid a hierarchical division between different groups of citizens.[3]

The rise of modern liberalism has had an important impact upon classical theoretical conceptions of the citizen's requirements for knowledge. Herman van Gunsteren has pointed out that during the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, a new conception of the sources of political society emerged. "Earlier schools of political thought had conceived (the idea of) the just society as *given*—by revelation, grace, tradition or the Legislator (founder)—in the form of substantive arrangements and substantive rules of law. In contradistinction to this, Enlightenment thinkers saw the just society not as given, but as *produced* by the free activities of rational individuals (e.g. in the form of a social contract)."[4] The liberal theory of social contract made the rationality of the state dependent on the free and rational choice of individuals to give up some of their own powers in order

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[2] Aristotle, The Politics of Aristotle, trans. with an introduction, notes and appendixes by Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 1283b.

[3] Parry, "Citizenship and Knowledge," p. 41. Cf. Aristotle, Politics, 1277a, 1295b.

[4] Herman van Gunsteren, "Notes on a Theory of Citizenship," in Democracy, Consensus and Social Contract, ed. by Birnbaum, Lively, and Parry, p. 12.

to guarantee the protection of their life, liberties and property. On contractarian premises, then, the citizen should in principle have sufficient knowledge to judge whether the state is fulfilling its side of the agreement, and thus still deserving of the citizen's consent.

The new emphasis on rational individual choice in political theory led to a concomitant focus on the role of interests in political life. In the 17th century an important transformation began in Western political thinking: the adoption of 'interest' and 'interests' as the central terms for analysis of the political actions and motivations of states, groups and individuals. Chivalric heroism, Christian altruism, classic virtue—the concept of interests began to supplant all of these as the proper object of political analysis and action.[5] Sheldon Wolin has argued that an important part of this change involved the substitution or displacement of individual interest for individual conscience. The idea of conscience was put forward by religious non-conformists in order to garner some protection from persecution by hostile communities and organized religion. This protective function of the notion of conscience was also present in the concept of interests, which "symbolized what was most valued by the individual and what was to be defended against the group or society." Thus with the rise of religious toleration, conscience was "detached from the inner life and used to protect what a growingly secular society most treasured; namely, wealth, status, or more briefly, 'interests'."[6] Coincident with this

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[5] See Albert O. Hirschman, The Passions and the Interests (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), Part One.

[6] Sheldon Wolin, Politics and Vision (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1960), p. 338.

transformation, was a recognition of the importance of individual knowledge and understanding for the rational pursuit of interests. Acting according to self-interest implied a calculative rationality which took into consideration the likely consequences of actions including the advantages of deferred gratification, and the difference between short and long-range benefits.[7]

The new emphasis on the pursuit of self-interest gave rise to a duality which was to become one of the perpetual tensions of liberal thought—that between public and private interests. Could pursuit of private interests be reconciled with the attainment of the common good? The problem was that the theory of self-interest, along with the de-mythologizing effects of the new science, undermined the objective character of traditional moral frameworks. There was no longer a theory of "the good" which was commonly agreed upon. Just as, in Locke's analysis, "conscience stood for a form of conviction rather than a way of knowing," so an individual's judgment about his or her interest was dependent solely on subjective belief: neither truth nor religion could be dictated by traditional authority.[8]

Liberal thinkers, particularly those of the Scottish enlightenment, advocated a new model of political and economic order which did not assume that citizens need have knowledge of the common good. The idea that individuals act according to discoverable (or revealed) moral and political truths began to be supplanted by a social vision of individuals each acting within their own horizon of interests which

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[7] William Leiss, "The Social Function of Knowledge in the Liberal Tradition," in <u>Liberalism and the Modern Polity</u>, ed. by Michael J. Gargas McGrath (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1978).

[8] <u>Politics and Vision</u>, p. 339, 340.

would be coordinated in society as a whole in the manner of a spontaneous process.

Knowledge of the common, public, or absolute good was in this view irrelevant, counterproductive, if not impossible. The single individual's ability to fathom the nature of reality was considered to be limited by the contingencies of the world and human nature. However, each individual was regarded as the best judge of his or her interests, which were increasingly viewed as a matter of taste or preference. Sheldon Wolin provides a lucid summary of this view of the role of reason: "The lesson liberals learned from Hume and Smith was that reason was not the source of moral judgments nor the main spring of human conduct. Morals were the products of human feelings. They originated in desires and needs and were approved by the passions. Reason was delegated the role of determining the most efficient means to achieving the ends proposed by feeling."[9]

At a broader level, these changes in the outlook of political theory were accompanied by the promotion of a new conception of scientific knowledge. The Enlightenment initiated an active conception of knowledge which identified reason with power: theoretical knowledge, most preeminently the knowledge of the physical sciences, was now to be oriented towards prediction and control. In order to accomplish this, the natural world, and even the world of human action, had to be seen anew, unencumbered by traditional explanations based on religion, myth, folklore—now branded as superstition and ignorance. E.J. Hundert provides a lucid summary of the character of this change. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, says Hundert, "forged a lasting cognitive ideal, knowledge freed from contingent

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[9] Politics and Vision, p. 332.

historical solidarities and affective social performances. They secured an image of an autonomous self which could detach from any particular point of view, step backward as it were, and critically judge that standpoint from a privileged epistemological space."[10]

The language of the Enlightenment created a new set of terms and criteria for the distinction between true and false knowledge: "The world of ignorance," says Hundert, "was the Enlightenment's most ideologically important antagonist . . . All areas of consciousness not yet pacified by scientific knowledge were in principle part of this world, which was filled with mythic conceptual designators devoid of empirical content."[11] This led to an intense focus upon the fallacies of the beliefs and customs of 'the people,' to such an extent that in cultured circles the term 'popular' connoted error. A zone of enlightened public opinion, institutionalized in various forms in coffee houses, salons, academies, and the periodical press, was constituted as a new arena for rational and critical discussion among an expanding group of literate and urban intellectuals, administrators and professionals.[12] Derision for the superstitions of the common people was accompanied by attempts to explain

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[10] E.J. Hundert, "A Cognitive Ideal and its Myth: Knowledge as Power in the Lexicon of the Enlightenment," Social Research 53 (Spring 1986): 132-157, p. 157.

[11] Ibid., p. 153.

[12] Ibid., pp. 140-145; see also, Jurgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere," reprinted in Communication and Class Struggle, vol 1, edited by Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub (New York: International General, 1979), pp. 198-201. For a valuable discussion of the development of the concept of public opinion in 18th century France, see, Keith Michael Baker, "Politics and Public Opinion under the Old Regime: Some Reflections," in Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France, edited by Jack R. Censer and Jeremy D. Popkin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

the deficiencies: "Popular mentalities were metaphorically consolidated into human types, the savages, children, mentally ill, and archaic peoples whose actions were impelled rather than chosen, who blindly obeyed rather than critically examined. These were the literal prisoners of the Baconian Idols and thus of their own cognitive infancy."[13] But, as Hundert notes, the attempt to scientifically "defamiliarize" the common people in order to explain their delusions also gave rise to hopes that their situation could be improved: "For as popular mentalities came to be understood as expressions of the infantile and primitive, those in possession of systematic knowledge could more readily view the healing and reform of these conditions as one of the specialized tasks for which intellectuals were uniquely suited."[14] The humanitarian ideals of the Enlightenment coalesced with its proponents' self-defined role to educate the masses and improve social conditions in order to eliminate social ignorance: in other words, to create conditions for a wider distribution of enlightened public opinion. The Enlightenment therefore contributed a new method of validation for knowledge, which also authorized its practitioners fervently to criticize popular beliefs and to strive to help the common people evolve to a higher type of knowledge. This rational educative ideal based on scientific method is a key component of the modern ideal of informed citizenship.

The idea of social improvement through the actions of a more informed and autonomous public is, however, only one strand in the heritage of Enlightenment. Another strand did not place its trust in a popular enlightenment; instead, it

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[13] Ibid., p. 154.

[14] Ibid., p. 156.

envisaged that a knowledge elite would have to intervene to employ the newly

developing scientific knowledge to engineer social and political progress. The

political implications of this viewpoint were to be found in the technocratic thought

of Saint Simon and August Comte. The technocrats did not agree with the British

liberal sceptics that the orderly pursuit of self-interest would spontaneously produce

an efficient and harmonious social order. Technocratic thought shared the

assumptions of Enlightenment rationalism with its model of cumulative positive

knowledge, its hopes for a systematic moral science, and faith in the social and

political benefits of scientific progress. However, as Thomas Spragens argues, the

technocrats radically changed the norms which were to be the aims of moral and

political science. The ideals of order, social harmony and proper functioning

replaced the classical liberal norms of liberty, autonomy and natural rights.[15]

Realizing the difficulties of providing an objective foundation for ethics through

scientific reason, the technocrats applied the mechanistic models of the natural

sciences to society itself, likening the proper functioning of society to that of a

smooth-running and efficient machine.[16] Thus liberal scepticism reduced judgment

to preference, while technocratic modes of thought overcame the problem of

judgment altogether in favour of controlling social actions of the general population

through knowledge of their causes. Politics, in the mature technocratic

vision—which can be found as much in Lenin as in Comte—was manipulation of

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[15] Thomas Spragens, The Irony of Liberal Reason (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 122-125.

[16] Ibid., p. 125.

mass opinion to further the goals specified by the theoretical knowledge of the elite.[17]

Enlightenment and the Informed Citizen

We have surveyed three strands in the heritage of the Enlightenment: self-interest as the motivating force in politics, enthusiasm for a widespread public enlightenment based on the new science, and, conversely, faith in technocratic social reform. These themes coexist uneasily today in our vague everyday understandings and in more theoretical statements of the significance of informed citizenship. The ideal of the informed citizen is, therefore, not a single coherent set of aspirations, but a loose and sometimes contradictory amalgam deriving from different theoretical strands, but all owing much to the modern Enlightenment. Furthermore, each strand offers a different perspective on the contribution of knowledge and information to citizenship. In the first case, the pursuit of self-interest is considered axiomatic in politics: citizens are not expected to base their actions on knowledge of the good; rather their actions are assumed to be driven by opinions and preferences which are not open to rational inspection or transformation. As a consequence, liberal citizenship has taken on an increasingly voluntaristic stance, dependent on the arbitrary, subjective, non-rational exercise of the will.[18] Information is viewed as instrumental to the calculation of the best means to attain one's self-interested aims.

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[17] Ibid., p. 143.

[18] van Gunsteren, "Notes on a Theory of Citizenship," pp. 17, 20.

This perspective receives its most systematic expression in public choice theories of politics—an example of which will be discussed in chapter three. The second strand identified above, which emphasizes a reasoning and enlightened public, finds its theoretical expression in, for example, the works of John Dewey and, more recently, Jurgen Habermas in his theory of communicative action which attempts to found an ethics in the presuppositions of human speech and dialogue in the public sphere.[19] Finally, the technocratic approach to political life does not aim to develop a reasoning and critical public; rather, it assumes that citizen opinions can be molded through the use of scientific techniques. In this case the idea of citizens gaining knowledge for the sake of *autonomous* action seems largely irrelevant, and instead information is aimed at appealing to the affective contents of the citizen's existing preference structure, in order to induce the desired course of action. This perspective underlies much of the theory and practice of scientific opinion measurement.[20]

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[19] John Dewey, The Public and Its Problems (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1927), p. 174; Jurgen Habermas, Legitimation Crisis, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), Part III. There is undoubtedly a pivotal role for communication in Habermas' theory, although it is less clear what role **information**, particularly technically mediated information, would play in the "ideal speech situation". This latter question is the focus of the present work.

The attempt inspired by the Enlightenment to raise the level of public reasoning to a scientific or quasi-transcendental standard of rationality should be contrasted with the more ancient tradition of civic humanism which also rejects the self-interest model of politics, but adopts an agonistic and rhetorical model of discourse. Hannah Arendt's The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), remains one of the significant recent works in this tradition.

[20] See, Benjamin Ginsberg, The Captive Public: How Mass Opinion Promotes State Power (New York: Basic Books, 1986), Chapter Three, "Polling and the Transformation of Public Opinion," esp. pp. 83-85.

The technocratic strand of the Enlightenment exemplifies dramatically the way in which the Enlightenment created a radical separation between what we now know as facts and values, *is* and *ought*. Ancient and scholastic philosophy had thought of humans as striving towards the fulfilment of their essence as defined by a larger metaphysical order of objective being.[21] The Enlightenment challenged, if not destroyed this framework by denying that this knowledge of essence could be gained. Instead, reason was to be put to work in observing facts and calculating mathematical relations. Now that the metaphysic of objective being had been dethroned, Enlightenment thinkers were left with the task of constructing a rational ethics. Although at first approached optimistically, the difficulties of this task became increasingly apparent to later Enlightenment thinkers. Thus the appeal of a society which coordinated itself on no more than each individual's ability to perceive and pursue his or her self-interest. The technocrats, in contrast, wanted to construct a society on the basis of scientific understanding of human nature and social mechanics. Both of these tendencies, when played out to their conclusion, are self-destructive. The self-interest model resolves into what has been variously called irrationalism, emotivism, voluntarism, or decisionism: the self pursues its interests which are apprehended as pure acts of the will and not subject to rational articulation or clarification. The self creates its own values which cannot be related to any objective or public criterion of goodness or truth. Alternatively, technocracy strives for total control of mind and society according to functional concepts of

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[21] This interpretation is based upon Max Horkheimer, Eclipse of Reason (New York: Continuum, 1947), Chapter One; cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 53-59

machine and system, professing at the same time to be value-neutral. The aim of total scientific control of mind and society is a nightmarish one in the absence of principles of human dignity, autonomy, and self-respect, which are subordinated in technocratic thought. It is perhaps fortunate that one of the problems with the technocratic vision is that it appears a long way from attaining the knowledge necessary for effective social control, and indeed technocratic ideology suffers from overblown pretensions.[22] Despite its internal imperfections, however, the technocratic point of view is a powerful contributor to modern approaches to the management of public opinion.

The Enlightenment, then, has bestowed a highly ambiguous legacy. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno addressed this legacy in their famous thesis of the "dialectic of Enlightenment."[23] In their view Enlightenment, as a process of demythification, actually began in ancient Greece, although the later northern European Enlightenment represented a great intensification of previous trends. Enlightenment progressed out of a desire to control nature, and to that end scientific knowledge, or "instrumental reason," had to overcome the falsity of myth, which impeded more effective control. Initially instrumental reason had an enlightening effect as it challenged and refuted traditional authority based on myth, superstition, and religious faith, exposing their arbitrary character. But as traditional belief

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[22] MacIntyre, After Virtue, Chapters Seven and Eight.

[23] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. by John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972 [1944]). The following discussion is also indebted to Ian Angus, Technique and Enlightenment: Limits of Instrumental Reason (Washington, D.C.: Centre for Advanced Research in Phenomenology and University Press of America, 1984), esp. Chapter Four.

systems became fragmented and relativized it was apparent that instrumental reason was a runaway train. Instrumental reason eroded traditional limits in first one, then another traditional domain. Traditional cosmological ordering principles which had once appeared as an objective demand upon the subject have become reduced to isolated pockets of residual conventions which only loosely cohere.[24] In the place of objective reason comes "naked, prowling" self-interest.[25] Self-interest provides the only cohesive motivation once the objective power of tradition is dissolved; a self-interest, moreover, which Horkheimer and Adorno believed to be remarkably susceptible to manipulation with social and psychological techniques.[26] This, then, is the dilemma of enlightenment: as the ability to design ever more efficient and powerful techniques increases, instrumental reason destroys the capacity to construct a binding social ethics which can stabilize the new-found power over nature: scientific reason is incapable of offering such an ethics and yet relativizes all previous ethical frameworks to a matter of personal choice, an act of will. All instrumental reason can offer is the authority of its own power in an ideology of efficiency and technocratic expertise. In one of Horkheimer and Adorno's most concise formulations: "The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive."[27]

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[24] Horkheimer, Eclipse of Reason, p. 34; on the distinction between residual conventions and traditional cosmology, see Angus, Technique and Enlightenment, pp. 95-96.

[25] Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), p. 150.

[26] Horkheimer, Eclipse of Reason, pp. 19-20.

[27] Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 4.

The thesis of the self-destructive character of enlightenment is illuminating, if not disturbing; however, the idea that instrumental reason has been allowed to run its full self-destructive course unimpeded is not entirely accurate. Or, it has not yet been fully accomplished. Instead, as far as the political domain goes, the Western liberal-democratic welfare state has sought to reconcile three competing visions of citizenship, none of which has entirely predominated or been entirely destroyed: the market model of citizenship as pursuit of self-interest, which seeks to maximize freedom in the private sphere, in effect claiming a right of *non*-involvement in politics and minimal state intervention in social life; the model of a reasoning public which values dissemination of scientific knowledge and factual information; and the technocratic model, which is not a model of autonomous citizen action, but of control of citizen behaviour and attitudes in order to ensure support for elite decisions. Each of these models are present to varying extents in discussions of information and citizenship in the modern world.

Chapter Three

THE DEMOCRATIC CITIZEN AND EXPERTISE

In the ancient conception of citizenship, the citizen is one who is accepted as a member of the demos, and who is thus granted rights of political participation. In the Athenian polis, slaves, women and some free men were excluded from citizenship, which by modern standards makes the Athenian demos less than fully democratic. According to modern democratic principles, a truly democratic polity should not exclude individuals from citizenship on what we now believe to be discriminatory grounds: how much property an individual owns, their gender, or race. During most of the history of political theory, however, it was taken for granted that such exclusions were valid. Even the modern theory of democracy retains some grounds for exclusion from the demos: transients or citizens from other states may not be admitted, or admitted only after a long application process.

Modern democracy also retains some criteria of *competence* for inclusion in the demos: children and those adults with serious mental illness, for example, are not included. Aside from this, however, the distinctive feature of democracy is that it does *not* exclude on the basis of an individual's level of knowledge, or political competence. This criterion, political competence, poses a most crucial dilemma for a democratic polity: If citizens are not required to possess anything beyond a minimal level of competence (i.e. to be an adult not suffering from

serious mental illness), what assurances are there that a democratic polity will support wise policies and leaders? In other words, what guarantee is there that democracy will be a superior form of government to a meritocracy or technocracy: rule by a knowledgeable elite? Democracy faces the dilemma of requiring knowledgeable and competent citizens if it is to function properly, but also requiring that citizens not be refused political participation rights solely because they are ill-informed or ignorant.[1]

At stake in a theory of democratic citizenship is a belief that in the long run, individual adults are the best judges of their own interests, and should therefore be granted equal rights to effectively participate as citizens in the process of governance.[2] More than this, democracy is intended to provide the conditions for every human being to live in dignity and self-respect. In short, the democratic citizen is defined by autonomy and judgment: autonomy to make decisions relating to his or her own life, and the capacity to exercise sound judgment in making such decisions. Autonomy in this context does not necessarily imply that the citizen should be thought of as totally abstracted from his or her particular socio-historical traditions, although this is a view encouraged in earlier liberal conceptions of autonomy. In van Gunsteren's words: "Autonomy is not the same as having no ties, as being dependent on no one except oneself; exercising judgment is not the same as stating one's subjective and arbitrary opinion. Autonomy and judgment are

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[1] This discussion owes much to Robert A. Dahl, "Procedural Democracy," in Democracy, Liberty, and Equality (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986), which systematically formulates the problem of competence for democratic theory.

[2] See especially Dahl, "Procedural Democracy," 213-223.

both conditions for and intended outcomes of citizen action."[3] If autonomy must recognize conditions of interdependence, then judgment too is something which can be exercised more or less well. This latter point is reinforced in Dennis Thompson's description of the two presuppositions of democratic citizenship as comprising autonomy and *improvability*: "A belief in the capacity of citizens in general to improve their judgment about what is in their interest is the basis of the presupposition of improvability. This presupposition, an attenuated version of older democratic doctrines of progress, encourages us to attribute deficiencies that citizens may have to social and political conditions, which can be improved."[4] Thus it is not assumed that the democratic citizen will necessarily exercise his or her judgment well, only that the competence of all citizens to make sound judgments can, under the right conditions, be improved to an acceptable level.

This chapter will survey the main debates about the extent to which widespread citizen competence is possible or even necessary in modern liberal-democratic states. In particular, one of the main themes of the discussion will be the possibility of informed citizenship in an age of expertise and complex social division of labour, when regular deferral to the judgment of the expert and the professional seems to be demanded.

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[3] Herman R. van Gunsteren, "Admission to Citizenship," <u>Ethics</u> 98 (July 1988): 731-741, p. 732.

[4] Dennis F. Thompson, <u>The Democratic Citizen: Social Science and Democratic Theory in the Twentieth Century</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 14.

J.S. Mill and the Cultivation of Competence

The significance of the presupposition of the improvability of citizen competence is especially evident in the political writings of John Stuart Mill. Mill's work is relevant for several reasons: he was, first of all, writing at a time of intense debate about extension of suffrage, in which discussion about the qualifications for citizenship played a large part. Mill's discussion of representative government was oriented to the conditions of a large scale industrial society characterized by deep class and gender inequalities, rather than a small community of independent property holders which had been presupposed by many preceding political theorists.[5] Secondly, Mill's position was distinctive in that he claimed that the main criterion for equal rights of citizen participation should be knowledge and competence, rather than property. Mill was not a democrat, but his discussion of citizen competence remains an important contribution to the idea of improvability of citizen judgment, as well as a challenge to the idea in democratic thought that all citizens have an equal right of political participation. Mill was a liberal who embraced an ideal of individual self-development and who believed that knowledge of the common good was an essential part of political competence. In these respects Mill went beyond utilitarian and self-interest theories of politics, although as many have discovered, this leads to ambiguities, if not incoherence, in his thought.[6]

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[5] C.B. Macpherson, The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 10, 20.

[6] See, for example, John Dunn, Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 52-53.

Mill's political thought is characterized in part by a tension between a belief that rule is best carried out by the most wise and knowledgeable citizens, who are necessarily a minority, and the belief that this knowledge elite should be responsible to the rest of the citizenry for its actions. Mill accepted the necessity, even the desirability, of bureaucracy and professionalism in government, yet was aware of the danger of abuse of power by minority elites if there was no means of popular accountability. Equally, Mill feared that an excess of democracy could lead to tyranny by an ill-informed majority. For Mill, there were thus two evils to be avoided:

> The *positive* evils and dangers of the representative, as of every other form of government, may be reduced to two heads: first, general ignorance and incapacity, or, to speak more moderately, insufficient mental qualifications, in the controlling body; secondly, the danger of its being under the influence of interests not identical with the general welfare of the community.[7]

To overcome these evils of dominance by sectional interests and incompetence in the governing body, Mill advocated a system of popular accountability combined with a requirement that all citizens possess at least some amount of political competence so that they would choose wise leaders:

> It is not necessary that the many should themselves be perfectly wise; it is sufficient if they be duly sensible of the value of superior wisdom. It is sufficient if they be aware, that the majority of political questions turn upon considerations of which they, and all persons not trained for the purpose, must necessarily be imperfect judges; and that their judgment must in general be exercised rather upon the characters and talents of the persons whom they appoint to decide these questions for them, than upon the questions themselves. . . This implies no greater wisdom in the people than the

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[7] John Stuart Mill, Considerations on Representative Government, in Collected Works, vol. XIX, edited by J.M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 436. (Hereinafter cited as Representative Government).

very ordinary wisdom, of knowing what things they are and are not
sufficient judges of.[8]

Mill's solution to the problem of competence, then, was to argue that most citizens

needed only sufficient knowledge to judge when they should defer to the wise.

Even this level of knowledge could not be attained by most citizens, however,

without cultivation through instruction and political participation, as we shall now

discuss.

In his thorough explication of Mill's political theory Dennis Thompson shows

how Mill's thought contains an inner tension between the principles of participation

and competence.[9] Participation is, according to Mill, necessary to protect the

interests and well-being of each and every citizen from abuses by the ruling

government. Even in the case of benevolent rulers who genuinely sought to act in

the interests of their subjects, it would be possible for the interests of some

individuals or groups to be ignored simply out of oversight or lack of information

on the part of the ruler. The way to avoid sinister or benign exclusion of interests

in government, barring direct democracy, is to allow for the representation of all

group or class interests. The assumption here is that individuals and groups are the

best guardians of their own interests, not in an absolute sense, but in the sense that

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[8] J.S. Mill, "Appendix to Dissertations and Discussions, vol 1 (1859)," in
Collected Works, vol XIX, p. 650. This passage was written earlier than the later
work on representative government; however, it accurately represents Mill's position
on the function of competence as that of knowing when to defer to the more
knowledgeable, as it is discussed in the later work. See, for example,
Representative Government, pp. 474, 478.

[9] Dennis F. Thompson, John Stuart Mill and Representative Government
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

they will be more capable of protecting their interests if they have an opportunity for participation and representation than if they are excluded.

In addition to its protective function, Mill argues that participation plays a positive educative role, by fostering an active national character in both the economic and political spheres. Specifically with respect to the educative role of political participation, Mill saw three benefits: an increased sense of autonomy for individual citizens, an expanded political knowledge and sophistication of opinion, and appreciation of the common good and the value of public-regarding attitudes.[10] Mill believed that a public-regarding spirit could only be developed out of free and critical discussion. The educative rewards which Mill attributed to political participation were, as Thompson notes, ambitious and ambiguous. "Describing the goals of participation, he often vacillates between political education and intellectual education, evidently assuming that the development of general critical intelligence and extensive knowledge accompanies the growth of political skill and political knowledge. Yet Mill offers little reason to believe that for most citizens this general intellectual education is a likely result of political participation or that, indeed, it is even necessary (beyond a minimal level) for effective participation."[11]

The principle of competence reflects Mill's view that a democracy is best served if citizens agree to defer to the most knowledgeable, wise, and virtuous among them. Like the principle of participation, the principle of competence serves both protective and educative ends: it is protective because government by the wise

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[10] Thompson, <u>John Stuart Mill and Representative Government</u>, p. 37-38.

[11] Ibid, p. 49.

is the most socially beneficial, and it is educative because the wise should, according to Mill, have a responsibility to educate the less competent so that they too can participate in politics and enjoy the pleasures of knowledge. Thompson distinguishes two kinds of competence which are implicit in Mill's theory: instrumental competence and moral competence. Instrumental competence refers to the ability to discover the best means to achieve posited ends, and also to discover ends which are most consistent with individuals' interests as they understand them. Moral competence is "the ability to discern ends that are intrinsically superior for the individual and society."[12] Moral competence requires understanding the importance of acting for the general good.

Mill expected that there would always be differences in the social distribution of competence, but he also believed that the educative effects of political participation among the lower classes would lead to an overall improvement in the levels of competence. This is the critical point of intersection between the principles of participation and competence which make Mill's theory a *developmental* one: the competence which is necessary for good government can be improved by the equally necessary participation of citizens. As well as having considerable moral influence on government, the competent minority ought to be responsible for educating the less competent so that they may improve the level of their political participation. It is this educative role of the competent elite, plus the explicit role given to citizen participation, which sharply distinguishes Mill's later thought from technocratic or elitist varieties, which exclude the masses from

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[12] Ibid., p. 55.

knowledge and participation. Mill's competent elite had as part of its duty the education of "minds of a lower grade."[13] According to Thompson, "the influence of the competent derives not from deference to superior status and prestige or to authority simply because it is unanimous, but from well-informed respect for superior knowledge and judgment. And . . . the competent have a responsibility to help citizens gain the knowledge on which to base such respect."[14] Moreover, while the competent minority possessed moral power, they had limited political privileges within Mill's theory of government, and thus had finally to rely on the results of rational public discussion being in their favour, which depended ultimately on the effectiveness of their own educational efforts. In keeping with most thinkers of his time, Mill believed in the continual progress and unity of the natural and social sciences, but this did not lead him to adopt a purely technocratic theory of government, since Mill hoped for the extension of competence to an ever-larger number of citizens.

What is never satisfactorily clarified in Mill's theory, according to Thompson, is how the principles of participation and competence can be reconciled in specific situations. How much competence in government is Mill willing to sacrifice for the sake of participation, granting that competence will gradually increase as a result of participation? Thompson suggests one response to this problem would be a "priority rule" which gives the principle of participation precedence over competence: increases in competence could only be sought if they

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[13] Mill, Representative Government, p. 539.

[14] Thompson, John Stuart Mill and Representative Government, p. 85.

also were likely to bring about, in the long term at least, increased participation. The principle of participation is given precedence because, says Thompson, it is more comprehensive than the principle of competence. Participation will in the long run bring about increased competence, but by itself the principle of competence does not require the extension of competence to all citizens, because it does not attribute any independent merit to citizen involvement in political decisions. However, as Thompson concludes, the neatness of his logical solution "still depends on the assumption that participation and competence can eventually be reconciled."[15]

Thompson's interpretation of Mill emphasizes the democratic and participatory nature of Mill's theory, and ultimately gives priority to the principle of participation over the principle of competence. It is also possible to provide another interpretation which highlights the paternalistic aspects of Mill's thought and brings into question how democratic and participatory his theory really is. Thus Mill writes:

> It is not useful, but hurtful, that the constitution of the country should declare ignorance to be entitled to as much political power as knowledge. The national institutions should place all things that they are concerned with, before the mind of the citizen in the light in which it is for his good that he should regard them: and as it is for his good that he should think every one is entitled to some influence, but the better and wiser to more than others, it is important that this conviction should be professed by the state, and embodied in the national institutions.[16]

There are clearly paternalist overtones to this statement, in terms of the envisaged structure of political power and the role of government in the political indoctrination

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[15] Ibid., p. 200.

[16] Mill, <u>Representative Government</u>, p. 478.

of its citizens concerning the superiority of the wise. Richard Arneson contends that a main source of Mill's paternalism is his idea that the foremost criterion of a good government is the promotion of the education and moral improvement of its citizens.[17] Mill reasons that representative government is the only form of government which is compatible with this criterion, but there is a prima facie case, Arneson suggests, that the educative function could be performed by another form of government such as enlightened despotism. Arneson also criticizes the idea that Mill was a strong supporter of participatory democracy. Confusion over the extent to which Mill advocated strong, or maximal, participation arises because Mill's text equivocates between popular participation or *involvement* in government, and popular *sovereignty*, or the ultimate accountability of the government to its citizens. The latter, Arneson argues, is closer to Mill's true position, and it explicitly entails a more "occasional" form of participation, which Arneson calls a "peace and quiet" model of democracy. The contrast between this model and the maximal participation model "turns on the degree to which one regards a highly politicized society to be permanently desirable. In the peace-and-quiet model of democracy popular sovereignty reigns, so that citizens are capable of intervening in politics to correct any discrepancy between their will and the policy of the governor; but they need not actually intervene much and if government is running smoothly, they will not."[18] According to Arneson, it is "positively good" that individuals' private, self-

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[17] Richard J. Arneson, "Democracy and Liberty in Mill's Theory of Government," Journal of the History of Philosophy 20 (January 1982): 43-64, p.

[18] Ibid., p. 53.

regarding actions—the province of individual liberty—not be excessively diminished by an increase in the scope and volume of public-regarding actions as a result of high levels of participation in government.

Arneson is correct in pointing to the ambiguity between popular sovereignty and involvement in Mill's concept of participation. However, Arneson's argument that the source of Mill's paternalistic tendencies is his reliance upon the educative criterion of good government—in addition to the protective criterion—deserves closer scrutiny. Contrary to Arneson's claim, Mill gives a good reason why the educative function could not be successfully carried out by an enlightened despot. According to Mill, education, properly provided, increases the individual's desire for autonomous action which would undermine the despot's power. "But any education which aims at making human beings other than machines, in the long run makes them claim to have the control of their own actions . . . Whatever invigorates the faculties, in however small a measure, creates an increased desire for their more unimpeded exercise; and a popular education is a failure, if it educates the people for any state but that which it will certainly induce them to desire, and most probably to demand."[19] Thus on this argument, education is a means, not a barrier, to liberty, and this shows that Mill's views on education are not simply paternalist.

Yet there is undoubtedly a strong paternalist tendency in Mill, and it is important to identify the sources of this so that the virtues of Mill's views on education and participation may also be appreciated. There are, in my view, three

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[19] Mill, Representative Government, p. 403.

sources of Mill's paternalism. One is that Mill did not consider in sufficient depth the way in which superior and inferior mental qualifications for citizenship could be identified. More specifically, although he appreciated that there must be "some approximate means of ascertaining" mental superiority, Mill's suggested solution did not address the fundamental issue. Mill proposed that occupation and educational qualifications be used to establish a rough hierarchy of competence (e.g. labourer, foreman, tradesman, employer, banker, university graduate).[20] However, the key assumption here, which Mill does not explicitly discuss, is that these qualifications bear some relation to the "wisdom" which Mill considers necessary for the conduct of public affairs.

Secondly, Mill's perspective on the knowledge elite was too benign. Mill recognized that without sufficient accountability any elite, even a wise one, would rule in its own interests, he does not appear to have foreseen other possibilities. One is that a knowledge elite could take on the subservient role of providing justificatory discourses for another elite on whose resources it depended for survival. In addition (and not necessarily inconsistent with the first), Mill did not explore the possibility of irresolvable disagreements within the knowledge elite. In each of these cases, the prospect of deferring to the "instructed classes" is not as straightforward as Mill might suggest. Mill underestimated the extent to which the relationship between knowledge and power can be articulated in different ways, and he overestimated the potency of expertise in social and political life. Indeed, expertise is often invoked to manage situations of uncertainty and ignorance, with

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[20] Ibid., p. 475.

the result that there will always be questions of selection and interpretation of evidence. Informed deferral to the more instructed may thus be more difficult to learn (and, by implication, accept) than Mill anticipated.

The third source of paternalism in Mill's educative theory of government is the result of his failure to distinguish clearly enough between the educative function performed *by* the knowledge elite, and the educative effects of citizens' participation *in* government. In the former, the flow of knowledge is strictly one-way from the knowledgeable to the ignorant; we have already commented on the paternalist implications of this view which accepts the authoritative status of expertise as unproblematic. But there is also in Mill an appreciation of the virtues of active participation and·discussion—a more interactive view of political education. Only if citizens are occasionally given responsible tasks within government—such as voting, jury duty, serving on the local council—will they care to engage in political discussion with their fellows and by this means improve their knowledge and understanding.[21] It is here too that they will encounter the "superior intellects" of those who are more knowledgeable, but it is not this encounter itself which is the sole virtue of participation. Most importantly, Mill was all too aware of the dangers of government founded on the pursuit of narrow self-interest, although he recognized that it would always remain an important motivation in political life.[22] However, participation in government affairs ameliorated the excesses of self-interested politics by giving the ordinary citizen an opportunity "to weigh interests

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[21] See Representative Government, Chapter III, and also pp. 469, 535.

[22] See ibid., p. 445.

not his own; to be guided, in case of conflicting claims, by another rule than his private partialities; to apply, at every turn, principles and maxims which have for their reason of existence the common good . . ."[23] Similarly, through discussion within the context of participation, the "manual labourer . . . is taught that remote causes, and events which take place far off, have a most sensible effect even on his personal interests; and it is from political discussion, and collective political action, that one whose daily occupations concentrate his interests in a small circle around himself, learns to feel for and with his fellow-citizens, and becomes consciously a member of a great community."[24]

Mill's enduring legacy is his recognition of the educative value of the responsibility associated with participation itself. However, Mill's contention that citizens should possess enough competence so that they may defer to the wise should be modified to take into account the complex articulations of expertise and power in today's world: citizens also must know enough to be able to determine when they should *not* defer to the experts, or at least not to every expert. With his faith in the superior intellect, buttressed by the enthusiasm for the new sciences of the Enlightenment, Mill did not countenance how ambiguous the power of the new sciences would become.

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[23] Ibid., p. 412.

[24] Ibid., p. 469.

Anthony Downs and Rational Ignorance

During the twentieth century a number of theoretical and practical developments have resulted in Mill's theory of developmental democracy being largely discarded in many quarters of political and social theory. One of the reasons for this was the increasing scepticism that human actions were predominantly guided by reason. The theoreticians of mass society pointed to the breakdown of community relationships and their decomposition into a mass of fragmented individuals who were generally apathetic, ill-informed, prone to an "authoritarian personality," capable of sporadic outbursts of mob violence, and susceptible to becoming mobilized by irrational appeals conveyed by elites through powerful new mass media.[25] Darwinian and Freudian influences emphasized the importance of the unconscious and instinctual bases of human behaviour. Graham Wallas, writing just after the turn of the century, clearly articulated the implications of these developments for democratic politics in the 20th century when he wrote that: "The empirical art of politics consists largely in the creation of opinion by the deliberate exploitation of subconscious non-rational inference."[26]

There were other reasons too for this unfavourable view of the prospects for competent mass participation in politics. Competent participation was regarded as not only undesirable but also unfeasible because of the nature of large bureaucratic

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[25] Salvador Giner, Mass Society (London: Martin Robertson, 1976), Chapter 7.

[26] Graham Wallas, Human Nature in Politics, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), p. 18.

organizations, the complexity of political issues, and the lack of time for citizens to deliberate on them adequately. The introduction of welfare state planning and the growing state interest in science and technology after World War I were additional factors which conditioned the development of a revisionist theory of democracy which drew heavily upon technocratic themes.

One of the first systematic expressions of this revision came with Walter Lippmann's debunking of the myth of the "omnicompetent citizen" which was said to be the assumption of "classical" democratic theory. Not only did this myth assume "the intolerable and unworkable fiction that each of us must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs," it also assumed that the citizen is "consistently public-spirited and endowed with unflagging interest."[27] Lippmann's proposed solution to the problem of democratic politics in a complex, large scale society was to displace the functions of information gathering and the proffering of informed advice onto an administrative elite of intelligence gatherers who would serve political representatives.

These themes were consolidated in the so-called elitist theory of democracy, which Joseph Schumpeter expressed in an influential version.[28] The elitist or equilibrium model of democracy held that democracy was merely a means for the selection of leaders and governments, utilizing competitive political parties and periodic elections. As C.B. Macpherson summarizes the equilibrium model: "The

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[27] Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: MacMillan, 1922), pp. 19, 173.

[28] Joseph A. Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy, 5th ed. (London: Unwin University Books, 1954 [1943]), pp. 235-302.

voters' role is not to decide political issues and then choose representatives who will carry out those decisions: it is rather to choose the men who will do the deciding."[29] In view of the fact that universal male suffrage had not brought about working class tyranny which had been feared when it was introduced in the late 19th century, elite theory was not overly concerned about the problem of citizen ignorance. The results of survey research which indicated widespread apathy, low levels of political knowledge, and inconsistent and wildly fluctuating citizen opinions, provided the evidence with which "empirical" political theory further challenged the "classical" image of democracy.[30] Indeed, in equilibrium theory, apathy and ignorance were considered functional for elite democracy; too much participation could prove destabilizing in a complex industrial society. Elite theory thus provided reassurance in the face of mass society theories of uncontrollable, irrational outbursts by the atomized urban masses. This was the age of the "private citizen" who devoted only sporadic and minimal attention to politics.

In his book, An Economic Theory of Democracy, Anthony Downs formulates a theory of the modern private citizen who is only minimally involved in politics.[31]

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[29] Macpherson, The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy, p. 78.

[30] See, for example, Bernard Berelson, "Democratic Theory and Public Opinion," Public Opinion Quarterly 16 (Fall 1952): 313-330, reprinted in Reader in Public Opinion and Communication, 2nd ed., edited by Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz (New York: The Free Press, 1966). For an early critique of the empirical theorists as apologists for existing political order, see, Graeme Duncan and Stephen Lukes, "The New Democracy," in Apolitical Politics: A Critique of Behavioralism, edited by Charles A. McCoy and John Playford (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967).

[31] Anthony Downs, An Economic Theory of Democracy (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

Downs' work is important partly because it contains one of the few explicit discussions of the possibility of informed citizenship in the modern world, and because his work is still implicitly or explicitly invoked by (American) social and political scientists to explain low levels of citizen knowledge and interest in liberal-democratic states.[32] Downs applies the methods and assumptions of marginalist economic theory to behaviour in the political market place. The structure of Downs' argument is axiomatic and deductive, and demonstrates what consequences follow once certain assumptions are made. In Downs' model of democracy all actors, citizens and parties alike, are assumed to be motivated by self-interest.[33] Following Schumpeter, Downs argues that the political functions of government to enact legislation and implement policies are the by-products of the desire of individual party members for the "power, income and prestige that go with office."[34] Elections are the means for selecting a government from parties competing in the political marketplace.

For our purposes the most interesting feature of Downs' argument concerns the relationship between information and citizen rationality. Downs accepts that citizens live in an environment of uncertainty and imperfect information. If we grant, says Downs, that a certain level of information is required to come to a

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[32] See, for example, Donald R. Kinder and David O. Sears, "Public Opinion and Political Action," in Handbook of Social Psychology, 3rd ed., vol II: Special Fields and Applications, edited by Gardner Lindzey and Eliot Aronson (New York: Random House, 1985): 659-741, pp. 660-661.

[33] Downs, Economic Theory of Democracy, p. 27.

[34] Ibid., p. 111.

decision at all, then citizens need rules to help them decide how much information they require. The basic decision-rule, according to Downs, is that the citizen continue "to invest resources in procuring data until the marginal return from information equals its marginal cost. At that point, assuming decreasing marginal returns or increasing marginal costs or both, he has enough information and makes his decision." According to Downs, these rules are implicit in any rational decision-making which requires information.[35] Proceeding from this principle, Downs describes how all citizens are faced with an "information floor" of free or subsidized information which is provided by political parties, government, the mass media, interest groups, friends and associates, entertainment media, and other incidental sources. If citizens want further information beyond what is freely available, they must pay transaction costs in order to obtain it. However, even the free information must induce some nontransferable costs for citizens if they are to process it: these costs include the availability of time to absorb the information, and the capital costs involved in gaining access to free information channels. In addition, the amount of free information which reaches individuals will depend on their social class position: a corporate executive who deals regularly with government will receive more free incidental information than a dishwasher in a restaurant.[36]

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[35] Economic Theory of Democracy, pp. 216, 217. Downs model excludes those who process information for its intrinsic gratifications.

[36] Ibid., p. 224.

Following the logic of Downs' model, it is rational for citizen to reduce the costs of information as much as possible: this they can do in a number of ways. They could, for example, choose to vote for or otherwise support political parties on the basis of party ideology rather than detailed analysis of policies.[37] Or, citizens can make use of additional free information from personal and media sources, although to depend on the latter involves sacrificing control of the principles of selection of information to media operatives.[38] Citizens may also "delegate" the functions of analysis and evaluation of information to professional experts or trusted individuals or interest groups.

Downs further argues that for the bulk of citizens it is not rational to seek great amounts of political information. There are two reasons for this. First, the incentives to obtain and process information about political issues is affected by citizens' level of commitment to a particular party. Paradoxically, however, neither strongly committed nor apathetic citizens have much incentive for obtaining more information. For the citizen with strong preferences for a party, it would take a large amount of costly information to change his or her mind, which implies an irrational expenditure. For the apathetic citizen, they do not care about the election outcome, and thus they do not care to invest in information.

There is also a second, pivotal reason why, according to Downs, many citizens make a rational decision not to invest in political information. In deciding how much information they need in order to make political decisions, citizens

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[37] Ibid., p. 98.

[38] Ibid., p. 230.

include in their calculus of utilities the expected benefits of making an informed decision. In the case of an election, these benefits accrue from the "utility income" distributed to citizens by the elected government. The citizen thus calculates the balance between the cost of coming to an informed decision versus the expected utility income. However, in the case of voting, an individual vote has virtually no chance of influencing the outcome. Nevertheless, the citizen will still receive the same utility income because the benefits provided by social organization are assumed to be indivisible. Because of this indivisibility, "the individual is motivated to shirk his share of the costs: he refuses to get enough information to discover his true views. Since all men [sic] do this, the election does not reflect the true consent of the governed."[39] Thus there is a conflict between ethical models of democracy and Downs' "positive" model:

> It arises from the simultaneous truth of two seemingly contradictory propositions: (1) rational citizens want democracy to work well so as to gain its benefits, and it works best when the citizenry is well-informed; and (2) it is individually irrational to be well-informed. Here individual rationality apparently conflicts with social rationality; i.e. the goals men seek as individuals contradict those they seek in coalition as members of society.[40]

This is, Downs concludes, an enduring inefficiency of democratic election systems, because of the difficulties, not to mention undesirability, of coercing people into becoming informed.

Thus, according to Downs' model, "it is irrational to be politically well-informed because the low returns from data simply do not justify their cost in time

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[39] Ibid., p. 246.

[40] Ibid., p. 246.

and other scarce resources."[41]   This is Downs' central thesis about the citizen's incentives to become well-informed, although there are a number of qualifications and additions to the model to cover such matters as participation in interest groups.

As with any model, the most important question which it raises is the validity of its assumptions. Perhaps the single most important assumption is that all citizens and parties act out of narrow self-interest, within the framework of law. This theme, as we have seen, is a venerable one in the liberal tradition. In Downs' model, the assumption that citizens act according to rational self-interest is pared down to its minimal components, and the consequences ground out with rigorous consistency. However, even the liberal tradition acknowledges that there can be conflicts between private and public interests. Self-interested behaviour is assumed to predominate, but self-interest also coexists with motivations and interests concerned with the common good, and much of liberal thought is concerned with adequately reconciling this tension. These concerns about the common good are, in Downs' view, "ethical" assumptions which he claims to avoid by constructing a "positive" model. However, if the intent of Downs' model is to show that democracy *can* work even if all actors exclusively pursue self-interest—in other words to show that Adam Smith's "invisible hand" reaches into the political world—then there is only a short distance to the "ethical" conclusion that democracy *should* (or can only) be organized in this way. This certainly seems to be the implied conclusion of Downs' work. If it can be shown that political actors display a more varied range of motivations than Downs allows, then the

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[41] Ibid., p. 259.

applicability of his model even to existing reality is questionable.[42] This leads us to an explanatory weakness of the theory: it cannot explain the activities of a significant proportion of citizens who do participate and inform themselves about politics, some of whom are concerned about issues beyond their own immediate or even long term interests. A more fruitful approach may be found in Albert Hirschmann's suggestion that what Downs would call the 'costs' of becoming informed and participating in political affairs, should, at least in some circumstances, be redefined as a 'benefits' or rewards such as a heightened sense of individual accomplishment and feelings of solidarity with other participants. For some citizens at least, it may well be that "the benefit of collective action for an individual is not the difference between the hoped-for result and the effort furnished by him or her, but the *sum* of these two magnitudes."[43]

John Plamenatz offers another perspective on why Downs' model of the political actor is not an adequate justification of democracy, nor an adequate description of the motivations of the people that practice it. An individual's personal aims are, Plamenatz says,

> affected by his beliefs about justice and freedom, and about what is
> honourable or respectable or generally useful. The principles and
> standards he accepts, the social and political order to which he is
> attached, do not stand to his aims as means to ends. His aims,
> personal or impersonal, have no meaning outside a social context, real
> or imaginary. They are the aims of a social and moral being, who

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[42] This discussion draws from Martin Diamond's review of Downs in Journal of Political Economy 67 (February 1959): 208-211.

[43] Albert O. Hirschman, Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 86.

could not have aims or orders of preference among them, unless he were such a being."[44]

In other words, citizens act not only to satisfy desires, but also according to principles which are acquired in a socio-historical context. "The citizen," Plamenatz continues, "whether he is a mere voter or is politically more active, is often concerned that the government should uphold certain principles, or should look after the interests of groups whose interests (in his opinion) have been neglected. Even when he wants the government to look after the interests of a group he belongs to, his conception of these interests is only to some extent determined by what he wants for himself or for others personally known to him."[45] The importance of the self-interest axiom is further modified, Plamenatz contends, by the fact that individuals may act in a *private* or an *official* capacity. Individuals act to further their private wants and desires, but they also act on behalf of organizations, in which case their aims are to a greater or lesser extent defined by the organization. Downs collapses this distinction, with the result that all organizational activities are viewed as the result of individuals pursuing their private interests. In this respect, then, a whole layer of social structure, consisting of institutionally defined roles, is eliminated from theoretical consideration. Plamenatz also introduces other action distinctions, between personal and social aims, and self- regarding and other-

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[44] John Plamenatz, <u>Democracy and Illusion</u> (London: Longman, 1973), p. 164.

[45] Ibid., p. 173.

regarding aims, in order to demonstrate that to bring all political action under the rubric of self-interest is likely to lead to over-simplification.[46]

In view of this broader conception of citizen rationality, Plamenatz concludes, it is mistaken to try to explain the citizen's information seeking behaviour on the assumption that the citizen evaluates past, present and future government activity according to whether it maximizes the utilities flowing to him or her personally. If such were the case, each citizen would require perfect information to perform the relevant cost-benefit calculus. Downs' error is to conclude that because perfect information is not possible, it is generally rational for a citizen to remain uninformed. In contrast, Plamenatz suggests that different political roles will call for different types and levels of information. The division of labour in social and political life necessarily leads to inequalities of information, but this does not prohibit ordinary citizens from obtaining sufficient information in order to judge whether their trust in political leaders and experts is justified. "The voter, when he casts his vote, does not take incompetently a kind of decision that the expert or the political leader takes more competently; he takes a decision of a different kind. We cannot apply to him the same criteria of understanding and rationality as we do to the expert or to the leader."[47] Plamenatz' position is, ultimately, close to Mill's position of informed and rational deference to representatives and experts.

A second important assumption is that citizens "political tastes" are fixed. "To simplify the analysis," Downs says, "we assume that every citizen has a fixed

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[46] Ibid., pp. 155-158.

[47] Ibid., p. 195; see also p. 176.

conception of the good society and has already related it to his knowledge of party policies in a consistent manner. Therefore only new information can persuade him to change his mind."[48] Downs claims this is a reasonable assumption to make in the short run, "barring wars or other social upheavals." Perhaps what is most surprising about this assumption is ·that these self-interested individuals would have a conception of the good *society* at all. Why should they be concerned about a good society, if they are, in every facet of their political behaviour, acting to maximize the satisfaction of their own desires? The standard liberal response would be to say that the vision operating here is a purely formal one of the state enforcing the rules of the game. But in that case, if the good society is merely a framework of law to regulate the pursuit of self interest, it seems insufficient as a basis for the individual citizen to evaluate party policies. Rather, the citizen would need to evaluate policies according to his or her own preference structure, which is not a vision of the good society, but a vision of what is good for him or her. In fact the use of the term good society does not seem to hold much credence here. However, this still leaves the question of whether political tastes can be assumed to fixed. In one respect, we can of course concede this in the very short run. But it is overly restrictive to assume that political tastes cannot be subject to rational inquiry and conscious transformation. Indeed, it is hard to envisage that an individual's political tastes can even be consciously articulated without opening the possibility that during such articulation they may be transformed due to self-reflection or discussion with others. And, finally, given that the human world has

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[48] Downs, Economic Theory of Democracy, p. 47.

never really been too far from wars and social upheavals of all kinds, the stability of tastes is perhaps not a safe long-term assumption to make. Downs' deferential citizen is modeled as an ahistorical ego whose apathy is functional for an equally ahistorical political and economic equilibrium. The equilibrium model of democracy eternalizes the bouyant American capitalism of the 1950s. Apathy is most certainly still functional for maintaining elite dominance, but it is by no means as assured. More specifically, the assumption that citizens will choose to remain apathetic in the face of deteriorating public services, fiscal crisis, world-wide ecological, health, and security threats, is uncertain. Whether such developments will lead to a reorientation of preference structures is unclear. But what is clear is that Downs' ahistorical model of information-seeking cannot accommodate these disruptions to equilibrium which we must accept as the norm.

The view that liberal democracy functions as a political market, which Downs advances, is open to criticism on the same grounds as any other market. Some consumers have greater competence and resources than others, and thus can more effectively make their demands; and of course the market itself has an oligopolistic structure of a few large suppliers of political goods. Theorists of developmental and participatory democracy argue that apathy and ignorance is not an "independent datum" (Macpherson), but is in large part a function of social inequality which is an historical product of capitalist societies.[49] Macpherson, in an

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[49] See Macpherson, The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy; Carole Pateman, Participation and Democratic Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Carole Pateman, "The Civic Culture: A Philosophic Critique," in The Civic Culture Revisited, edited by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (Boston: Litttle Brown, 1980); Christian Bay, "Access to Political Knowledge as a Human Right," in Government Secrecy in Democracies, ed. by Itzhak Galnoor (New York: Harper

argument with some parallels to that of Downs, contends that apathy can in fact be a rational response under conditions of inequality of competence, time, and reward: "Those whose education and occupation make it more difficult for them than for the others to acquire and marshal and weigh the information needed for effective participation are clearly at a disadvantage: an hour of their time devoted to political participation will not have as much effect as an hour of one of the others. They know this, hence they are apathetic. Social inequality thus creates political apathy."[50] Unlike Downs, however, participation theorists do not assume that the structures of inequality are indelibly fixed.

Social inequality in capitalist societies is only one of two main impediments to greater political participation, according to Macpherson. The other is the "model of man" as an acquisitive consumer attempting to maximize the satisfaction of boundless appetites, which is itself associated with the rise of capitalism since the 17th century; this model converges with aspects of what is here called privatism. The pursuit of satisfactions promised by consumption activity divert the citizenry from the development of competences and pleasures which Macpherson, like Mill, thinks political participation can provide. Politics is reduced to consumption; social inequality and consumer culture together limit political participation, and thus perpetuate the low-involvement politics which elite theory adequately describes. The citizen is, in Macpherson's phrase, a "political consumer" who choses between a narrow range of political goods offered by competing oligopolistic political parties at

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Colophon Books, 1977).

[50] The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy, p. 88.

election time, but otherwise was left to private pursuits within the high-intensity market setting of consumer society.

The difference between the Downs' model and that of the participation theorists can be characterized as the difference between the model of the market and the model of the forum. This distinction has been well formulated by Jon Elster: the forum is a social choice mechanism which *transforms* "the raw, quite possibly selfish or irrational, preferences that operate in the market . . . [into] informed and other-regarding preferences," rather than *aggregating* existing preferences as in the model of the market.[51] The model of the forum defines politics as a public activity involving interaction, discussion and deliberation oriented to common concerns, rather than as a private act, such as the secret ballot which is taken as the paradigmatic political act in market theories of politics. Participatory theories of democracy adopt the model of the forum over that of the market, and seek to extend the principle of the forum into areas traditionally excluded from the liberal theory of politics, such as the workplace and the family.

The Limits of Expertise

The growth and specialization of knowledge within the social division of labour has long been recognized as a major obstacle to informed citizenship. The classical conception of citizenship as an active sharing and rotation of roles between

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[51] Jon Elster, "The Market and the Forum," in <u>Foundations of Social Choice Theory: Studies in Rationality and Social Change</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 112.

ruling and being ruled cannot be sustained when expertise required for some social roles may take the better part of a life-time to acquire: the omnicompetent citizen is indeed an impossibility. Downs has shown convincingly that even assuming an equal distribution of social wealth and income, there would still be inequality in the distribution of information in a complex society, by virtue of citizens occupying different positions within the social division of labour. Mill's approach to this difficulty was to commend that ordinary citizens cultivate informed deference to the more educated and knowledgeable. Most importantly, this informed deference was to be *cultivated*, through occasional participation of citizens in local government, jury duty, and debates in the press. The shifting roles of the classical citizen is in Mill substantially qualified but not totally sacrificed, as in Downs. For Downs, the distinction between active and passive citizenship, ruling and being ruled, is turned into a rigid social division. The citizen's cost-benefit calculus renders apathy and ignorance rational: ill-informed deference is substituted for Mill's informed deference. The strength of Downs' analysis is that, to the extent that contemporary political life *is* conducted according to the pursuit of self-interest, his model offers some insights in explaining why many citizens are ill-informed about political issues. Feelings of individual ineffectiveness and lack of reward in electoral processes makes it rational to opt for ignorance and non-participation. Downs is the quintessential theorist of democratic cynicism. However, the logic of Downs' model demonstrates the absurdity of a model of democracy which is constructed solely on the premise of self-interest; the ground of the democratic ethos cannot be constructed on such a narrow conception of human nature.

One approach to the problem of expertise in a representative democracy is to say that citizens are not *expected* to possess all the knowledge needed to make specific political decisions; rather they need to know just enough to select able representatives, who then take on the responsibility for specific decisions. Such is the position of Plamenatz and Mill. Against this, it might be said that, aside from assessing a candidate's character, surely the citizen must also be in a position to assess the candidate's (and his party's) positions on key issues and policies. This requires a level of information and competence beyond being able to assess character. But even here it may be argued that citizens already have sufficient knowledge for this purpose through their direct experience of the effects of policies in·their everyday lives. As the maxim says: 'The wearer knows best where the shoe pinches.'[52] However, as Parry has observed, "in order to have something done about it does [the wearer] need to know how and why it pinches? Or does he merely need to know where the shoe repairer is to be found?"[53] And, furthermore, does this mean that if the citizen experiences no discomfort there is therefore no cause for him or her to be concerned? These questions suggest that the citizen's everyday or tacit knowledge is a very important starting point for strengthening the citizen's position vis a vis the expert, even if it does not offer the last word. Herman van Gunsteren encapsulates this position well:

> Self-government of citizens can only work if their tacit knowledge of their own life situations can enter into their political discussions. . .
> Why should we demand that citizens acquire skills they do not have, instead of finding out what they can accomplish with the skills that

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[52] Cf. Aristotle, <u>Politics</u>, 1282a.

[53] Parry, "Citizenship and Knowledge," p. 50

> they do have. A citizen can begin to function properly when he has an awareness of his [sic] life-situation and is prepared to discuss its relations to what other people do.[54]

The problem of citizen knowledge, van Gunsteren argues, is too readily framed in terms of the citizen's reputedly poor understanding of what are assumed to be the superior languages of expertise, bureaucracy and professionalism, ignoring the citizen's own stock of knowledge resting on experience, locale, and tradition. A revised theory of informed citizenship should, he says, attempt to establish an "absolute equality" between the languages of expertise and everyday life. By absolute equality, I understand van Gunsteren to mean that the citizen and the expert must be equally willing to listen to one another, and appreciate the strengths and weaknesses in both their own and the other's framework of knowledge and perception. Expertise and everyday knowledge can complement and correct each other; however, in the present epoch expertise enjoys a higher status which demeans everyday knowledge. One task for expertise is to learn to appreciate the virtues of everyday knowledge.

However, in order to attain a level of equality between everyday and expert knowledge, the citizen who aims to be informed cannot be content with his or her existing stock of knowledge. Local, everyday knowledge is certainly the starting point for the citizen wishing to be informed, but it cannot end there if the citizen is to become more aware of the structures and interdependencies (for example, ecological and economic) which are constituted through higher levels of abstraction,

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[54] van Gunsteren, "Notes on a Theory of Citizenship," pp. 30, 31. Paragraph separation removed.

and which are accessible to understanding only through more specialized languages and provinces of knowledge. In a sense the task of the informed citizen is more difficult than that of the expert. The expert operates in a precisely defined region of knowledge where the range of relevant problems is narrowly defined. From this base of knowledge, the expert may offer advice to others who define the pregiven ends to which the expert applies his or her knowledge. In contrast, the citizen who aims to be well-informed finds him or herself "placed in a domain which belongs to an infinite number of possible frames of reference. There are no pregiven ready-made ends, no fixed border lines within which he [or she] can look for shelter."[55] The well-informed citizen prepares for all contingencies; what may not be relevant one day may be relevant the next.

In this context one goal of informed citizenship is for the citizen to strive to improve his or her understanding of the basic mode of argumentation of expert discourses, in order to identify whether an expert is competent, and to arrive at a considered judgment after listening to various expert opinions.[56] The informed citizen aims to penetrate the aura of authority which surrounds expert discourses, in order to at least be able to compare them and locate them within the articulations of power and knowledge. The informed citizen today must be able to understand the reasons for disagreements between experts contributing to debate on public policy matters. In addition, the citizen should be able to search for and identify the group

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[55] Alfred Schutz, "The Well-Informed Citizen," in Collected Papers, vol. 2: Studies in Social Theory (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p. 130.

[56] Ibid., p. 123.

interests which may support and lie behind the advancement of competing knowledge claims. This is not so much deferral to expertise as it is developing a critical stance toward it. Such is the ideal of informed citizenship appropriate to modern conditions; however, it is also true that the existing social structures of inequality and the predominance of privatism make it very difficult for the majority of citizens to attain this ideal, or even actively strive toward it. There is a sense in which ignorance is, following Anthony Downs, a rational strategy for citizens in these circumstances, even if the rationality of the world order which sustains these conditions is suspect.

Chapter Four

THE WORLD CITIZEN

The growth and specialization of expert knowledge is one of the central ways in which science and technology are implicated in the problematic of informed citizenship, as was discussed in the preceding chapter. This chapter will introduce two further ways in which the speed and power of modern technology contributes to a new global setting for citizenship. The first is the unprecedented power of scientifically based technology to transform the biospheric conditions which sustain human life on earth. The second aspect is the growth of a planetary electronic network of instantaneous communication and availability of information. Together these two aspects help create what Marshall McLuhan called the global village.

More specifically, these two aspects pose the question of citizen engagement with *distant* and *diffuse* events and effects. The global information network makes us aware of distant events happening in other locations on the earth: thus we are aware, say, of a civil war in the Sudan, an earthquake in Armenia, the destruction of forests in Brazil, and so on. These events may be relatively concrete and localized in their impacts, although even this is no longer certain. In addition, a new kind of global event is also being conveyed through the information media. This is the biospheric event, such as global climatic change, thinning of the ozone

layer, the dispersal of radioactive pollution, or the possibility of nuclear winter. These events are distinguished by the fact that their effects are not neatly contained within one locale or region—although it is possible that their effects can be unevenly distributed. Furthermore, they are often not manifested in ways accessible to the unaided senses: they must be measured using scientific instruments and mathematical models. It should also be noted that the difference between these global biospheric events and local events is not absolute; rather, they are best thought of as existing on a continuum in which local events can in varying degrees partake in the dynamics of the global context.

The extension of the power and speed of technology to encompass the world as a whole, in both a productive and a destructive sense, suggests that the citizen is now located within a global context. The idea of the world citizen thus seems particularly appropriate as a term to describe the new horizons of responsibility which the citizen faces. Yet the difficulties of world citizenship, in particular the existence of myriad local and national cultures and states, each primarily oriented to their own projects and interests, suggests that it is perhaps nothing more than the aspiration of a simplistic universalism. This theme is explored in the first section of this chapter. There is, moreover, the question of whether an informed and timely response to the new intensity of global problems is possible if matters are left to the democratic collective actions of citizens. The second part of this chapter will address this question in a discussion of three perspectives on the implications for democracy of the world-destructive power of technology. Finally, as the discussion of democracy will make clear, the prospects for world citizenship depend

significantly upon the extent to which the particular peoples and states of the world are able to recognize themselves as part of a greater community. This leads to a critical assessment of the idea of the global village viewed as a consequence of the implosive effects of electronic information media.

Imagining the World Citizen

The idea of world citizenship can be traced to the ancient Greeks who, despite their reputation for contempt of barbarians, also initiated the cosmopolitan outlook through their desire for knowledge of universal and impartial truth and their openness to learning from many cultures.[1] The Stoic philosophers of Greece and Rome were the first to systematize a cosmopolitan doctrine which emphasized cultural pluralism, the recognition of the habitable world as a single unit, the artificial nature of the state, rejection of patriotism, and the primacy and dignity of the individual. The world citizen sought to cultivate *humanitas*, in which the virtuous man recognized his oneness with the human race.[2] These concerns were revived during the Renaissance and further consolidated during the Enlightenment, whose cosmopolitan philosophers focused on the new international community of

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[1] Hugh Harris, "The Greek Origins of the Idea of Cosmpolitanism," International Journal of Ethics 38 (October 1927): 1-10. Cf. Albert Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 126.

[2] Thomas J. Schlereth, The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), Prologue, esp. pp. xix-xxi; Moses Hadas, "From Nationalism to Cosmopolitanism in the Greco-Roman World," Journal of the History of Ideas 4 (1943): 105-111.

science, religious toleration, and the civilizing effects of international trade and

commerce idealized in the role of the cosmopolitan merchant. The state, although

conceded by Enlightenment thinkers to be a necessary institution, was not a primary

focus of concern:

> Enlightenment political thought in general began with men as equal
> individuals, not as members of particular or dynastic states. To most
> cosmopolites, the basic political norm was the welfare and interest of
> the individual; as Kant suggested, the individual and not the nation
> was the principal and primary unit of political and social
> organization. . . The neo-Stoic philosophes, like their classical
> forebears, held that the individual at one extreme and human kind at
> the other were the two basic social realities; they did not find the
> origins of nation-states in the ties of the hoary past or in prehistoric
> biological factors, but rather in the rational, expedient will of
> autonomous individuals expressing their enlightened self-interest.[3]

This dominant theme of political universalism was tempered to some extent by a

recognition of the necessary plurality of cultures and regions; the Enlightenment

cosmopolites did not call for the abolition of nations and states but rather accepted

the nation-state as an "intermediary polity": "a necessary, intermediate, although

artificial, agent of union between the individual and humanity," which would act as

the guarantor of universal human liberties on the local and regional level. The

cosmopolitans thus supported a "humanitarian nationalism" in which it was hoped

that the goals of national policy would be congruent with the overall welfare of

humanity.[4]

Many of these themes—although notably not the contractarian assumptions

about the individual—were carried forward by Karl Marx, whose radical

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[3] Schlereth, The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought, pp. 104-105.

[4] Ibid., pp. 105, 106, 109.

cosmopolitanism accepted that the creation of a capitalist world market was a vital precondition for the coming of communism. The world market brought nations and individuals into tightly knit relations of interdependence and interaction: within this situation of "universal intercourse" the full humanizing potential of the new forces of production could be realized only when the universal class, the proletariat, overthrew the "illusory community" represented by class-dominated states.[5] Only with the advent of a world communist revolution, Marx hoped, would "separate individuals be liberated from the various national and local barriers, be brought into practical connection with the material and intellectual production of the whole world and be put in a position to acquire the capacity to enjoy this all-sided production of the whole earth (the creations of man)."[6]

The theory and practice of nationalism over the past two centuries has put a very large dent in these professions of political and ethical universality. In response to the cosmopolitans, German historicist thinkers celebrated the cultural variation of the human species as an essential human characteristic: human character, destiny and development was necessarily tied to the particularities of locale and tradition.[7] In practice, the outcomes of the pursuit of nationalism have ranged from genocide and imperialism to the heroic struggles of national and ethnic resistance waged against the universalizing pressures of the capitalist world market. Above all, nationalism

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[5] Karl Marx, The German Ideology, in The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd ed., edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), pp. 191, 197.

[6] Ibid., pp. 163-164.

[7] John Dunn, Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 58.

has thrived in a context of ethical relativism which easily tapers into nihilism: "Nationalism, then, is simply one level in a conceptual continuum which reaches from the single morally irresponsible individual to the morally irresponsible species man the whole globe over—man, an intelligent being no longer conscious of a dependence on any being higher than himself and left to decide what ends to act for, all on his own—man become, as John Locke put it, 'a god to himself'."[8] Nationalism thus legitimates state actions in the name of the people's will, but cannot offer any transcendent principle for mediating inter-state relations other than national self-preservation and survival of the fittest. This is an immensely practical problem in an age of global economic interdependence, ecological crisis, and the destructive power available for modern warfare.

To broach the question of world citizenship is therefore to enter into a debate between the claims of universalism and the particularities of traditions and states. Unlike the cosmopolites, we cannot assume that the nation-state is merely a convenient kind of voluntary association independent of the affective ties of tradition. And unlike the defenders of the Folk, we cannot accept that there are no over-riding norms of international cooperation. There is merit, in my view, in Herman van Gunsteren's position that the citizen should first and foremost be defined in terms of locale and tradition, with globalism subsequently acting as a corrective to the isolated perspective of a single state. "Thus a conception of citizenship is inherently related to a specific historical community, including its institutionally embodied aspirations and possibilities for criticizing the community

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[8] Ibid., p. 61.

and its institutions. Striving for the realization of citizenship, then, is striving for the best that is possible in the given circumstances."[9] Citizenship is thus always located within a homeland, a specific national community.

But van Gunsteren neglects to mention that it is the modern *state* which grants citizenship rights, and the boundaries and agenda of the state may diverge considerably from the traditions which it encompasses and not infrequently represses; this point is exemplified in multiple intra-state conflicts around the world. Just as clearly, the location of citizenship within a particular tradition does nothing by itself to remedy the problem of international cooperation, mentioned earlier. "Affirming the folkways is all very well within the Folk," John Dunn comments, "but it offers little ground for optimism as a method of mediating between different folks."[10] Nevertheless, the recognition that the world does consist of an agglomeration of cultures, traditions, and states which will remain, to a great extent, diverse and somewhat intransigent, is a more worthwhile starting point than that of a facile internationalism.

There is more than a little truth in Dunn's suggestion that the implosive effect of the world market has produced confusion as much as cosmopolitan enlightenment: "The history of capitalism has forced upon the human race the understanding that, as a single species, it shares a single world for its habitat and that the destinies of all its members for the rest of human history are therefore relentlessly intertwined. From what had often been a high degree of cultural and

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[9] van Gunsteren, "Admission to Citizenship," p. 735.

[10] Ibid., p. 60.

historical privacy, the myriads of discrete human communities and language groupings have been forced into baffled and uneasy fellowship with each other."[11] Dunn argues persuasively that socialist internationalism has failed to provide a pragmatically or conceptually viable alternative vision to the mythology of a world governed by uncoerced market exchange. It has turned out to be far more difficult to formulate a vision of a transition to a world of international trust and fair exchange free from domination by private capital, than socialist thought ever contemplated. The barriers to formulating such a vision, and enacting it, include the gross inequalities of the world market, the multiplicity and inertia of state organizations, the existence of deeply ingrained national sentiments, and ignorance and fear of other cultures.[12]

But if the prospects for world citizenship appear bleak, it might nevertheless be said that modern technology makes world citizenship in some sense both possible and necessary. The contemporary citizen is not grounded solely within a single community. If we understand citizenship as the mode of constitution of the public self within an historical community, then we should also understand the ways in which technology extends the horizons of knowledge and responsibilities for citizens within that community. If the Enlightenment assumption of an abstract, autonomous, universal self must be modified in the direction of cultural, geographical, and historical particularity, then it must also be modified by a

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[11] John Dunn, "Unimagined Community," in Rethinking Modern Political Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 107.

[12] Ibid., pp. 114-117.

recognition of the universalizing effects of technology for the constitution of that same self. In other words, technology, in particular in its previously mentioned aspects of the global information network and the global destructive power, enters into the very constitutive fabric of the citizen's historical community. Technology operates to link the local community to a global context. These two aspects of the technological constitution of the citizen which we have selected will now be further explored.

World-Preservation and Democracy

The capacity for modern technologies to radically change, and possibly destroy, the biospheric conditions which sustain human life, increases the stakes of debates about citizenship and knowledge, if not radically reorienting them. The character of these developments can be appreciated by comparing the tasks of ancient political theory with the additional and unique tasks of political theory in our time. In the ancient tradition of political thought, the political constitution of human society was intended to create stable conditions, not just for the maintenance of human life, but for citizens to be able to pursue a good life: a life of virtue and the pursuit of excellence. The polis was to be preserved for the sake of enabling humans to pursue the good; without this goal, *any* form of human life, no matter how miserable or demeaning, would be equally acceptable. Traditional political theory has addressed the ways in which a good political order may be created, sustained, or destroyed; however, it has not, until recently, had to consider seriously

the possibility that the very conditions that sustain life on planet earth may be jeopardized by human actions.

It is precisely this possibility which now confronts the human species in general, and political and ethical theory in particular. In response to the dilemmas of modern technological power, political and ethical theory is articulating a new concern for the fragility and contingency of our common world. Not surprisingly, there are already disagreements and differing perspectives. Hans Jonas, for example, proposes a new "emergency ethics" which focuses primarily on preserving the conditions for the maintenance of life, and puts the quest for the good life on hold until this task is assured of success.[13] Now that the stakes of unabated technological development include the possibility of the destruction of human civilization as a whole, then, Jonas argues, an ethics of caution is in order which seeks to prevent the infinite loss which the loss of the world would represent. The prospect of such infinite loss must be weighed against the promise of the finite and marginal material gains held out by continued economic growth. For Jonas, the prevention of infinite loss is the over-riding priority. In Jonas' view a "heuristics of fear," arising out of the threat to human existence as such, is needed to instill a sense of responsibility to preserve the world for future human generations. This focus upon "an ethics of preservation and prevention, not of progress and perfection," is a direct rebuff to visions of an historical evolution towards a post-scarcity utopia based on continued

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[13] Hans Jonas, The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age, trans. by Hans Jonas with the collaboration of David Herr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

perfection of technological power. Such aspirations, Jonas warns, can only fuel the life-threatening technological dynamo.[14]

Jonas brings to light a hidden assumption in Western metaphysics: it was assumed that the world as the set of conditions for human life would continue to exist forever, irrespective of the historical ebb and flow of civilizations. Technological power, along with other factors such as population pressures, now renders this assumption problematic. Are contemporary citizens capable of assuming the new responsibilities for the preservation, not just of themselves, but of the world, which Jonas considers necessary? Or are the new responsibilities best left to informed and wise leaders? Jonas comes down on the side of a "well-informed tyranny" because democracy can too easily become subordinated to citizens' perceptions of their short-term interests rather than their responsibilities to the future of humans and of life as a whole.[15] Jonas' perspective thus raises the question of the extent to which democracy is compatible with world-responsibility.

There are, however, reasons to be sceptical of constructing an ethics based primarily on a fear of potential world-annihilation. Albert Borgmann articulates one argument to this effect. Borgmann argues that the ecological threats posed by technology can probably be contained through technological means and without major changes in the world political order. In Borgmann's view, conventional representative democracy will respond to avert any major crisis in order to maintain

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[14] Ibid., pp. 26, 37, 139.

[15] Jonas, The Imperative of Responsibility, pp. 147, 150-151.

the conditions for consumption of technological commodities.[16] Borgmann does not advance this viewpoint in defence of the status quo—which he acknowledges to contain gross social inequalities and human misery—but as part of a radical critique of the kind of satisfaction obtained through a lifestyle of consuming commodities in an advanced technological society.

Underlying Borgmann's position is a particular conception of the social pattern of modern technology: this social pattern enacts a radical separation between the machinery of technology, the means, and the end uses and functions which people obtain from technology in their everyday lives. Thus people avail themselves of air conditioning, heating, transport, fast food, with very little knowledge or appreciation of the background machinery and labour which go to providing these commodities. The character of the modern commodity, Borgmann contends, is that it procures any and all goods and services in a manner which is instantaneous, ubiquitous, safe, and easy.[17] Because of the radical separation of machine and function in modern technology, it does not matter *how* a commodity is procured (e.g., whether heating is gas or electric), providing *that* it is supplied commodiously.

Borgmann's position on the threat of world destruction is, therefore, a corollary of his conception of the commodity as convenient availability. The commodity is defined, in part, as that which can be procured *safely*; if this is not being achieved, then it would follow from the logic of modern technology that

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[16] Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, pp. 147-148.

[17] Ibid., p. 77.

consumers will take steps to ensure that the technological system corrects these safety problems. In this way the internal imperatives of the social pattern of modern technology guarantee its environmental and social stability.

Focusing on the world-destructive effects of technology will not, in Borgmann's perspective, bring about a fundamental questioning of the relation of technology to our quality of life, but will rather encourage demands for ameliorative technologies. New layers of protective technology will be introduced to ensure human survival in the face of technological dangers. In this respect, democracy has become thoroughly concerned with the maintenance of the technological apparatus. Citizenship has thus become technological: the consumption of technological commodities is a de facto vision of the good life, despite the denials of liberalism to endorse any particular pattern of social life.

In contrast to Jonas' call for an emergency suspension of the quest for the good life, Borgmann advocates that it be re-opened by a way of a searching examination of the de facto good life promised by modern technology. According to Borgmann, technology has brought about an impoverishment of social and spiritual life because the free-floating commodity disengages consumers from the intricacy and depth of attachment of things to their particular context. The instantaneous availability of heat from a heating system, for example, replaces the multidimensional process of the preparing the traditional wood fire: the routine of gathering fuel, lighting, stoking, and sharing its warmth. The good life of technology has disburdened us of having to perform these sometimes arduous kinds of tasks, but ironically it has also made us less engaged and caring about the world

around us. The fundamental nature of modern technology is that it engenders a pattern of expectations that anything in the world can be procured instantly and conveniently for human purposes; everything is seen as subordinate to the human will and its ingenious technical capabilities. Borgmann argues that we must begin to cultivate a new daily praxis which is not centred around a technological attitude to the world; a praxis which, in other words, recognizes that there are things in the world, such as wilderness areas, which cannot be procured for human use without destroying their unique and contextual qualities. In this way, a new and deeper focus for caring about the world may emerge. A focus on the character of the good life in technological civilization can therefore, in contrast to Jonas, cultivate a sense of caring and responsibility for the world.

Borgmann's point is well taken that focusing on the preservation of the world against technological threats will not necessarily call forth a very deep understanding of the character of technology and its effects upon the human psyche and culture. Indeed, the temptation of the technological fix is ever-present, but not always appropriate. However, I believe Borgmann is mistaken to assume that the stability of technological society can be assured within a technological framework of action. This simply seems too large an assumption to make in an increasingly complex and unpredictable world. To do so must implicitly concede the self-perfection of the modern scientific paradigm of knowledge, and its ability to fully comprehend and control the real world. However, Borgmann is well aware of the fallacies of this technocratic conception of knowledge. It seems more likely that he is assuming the stability of technology in order to distinguish more clearly between

his position and other critiques of technology which rest predominantly on the threat of world-destruction. In other words, even if technology were not potentially world-destructive, there are grounds for questioning the goodness of the modern technological project. There is much to be learned from taking this approach, which is in my view justifiable. Nevertheless, I would also contend that both world preservation, and the goodness of a pattern of life, are at stake in evaluating the status and aspirations of the contemporary citizen. World-responsibility is indeed vital, but it does not preclude, and in fact may require, a questioning of the effects of technology upon our everyday experience. The cultivation of our caring for the world must, in these circumstances, develop in tandem with technological interventions oriented towards world-preservation. The procurement of fuel-efficient homes and automobiles, or the introduction of recycling facilities, for example, are not inconsistent with wanting to care for the world and to tread lightly upon it. Other kinds of technological fix, such as opting for nuclear fission power in order to meet the intensive energy requirements of the affluent states and also avoid the consequences of burning massive amounts of fossil fuels, are in my view not consistent with such a caring orientation. In other words, there are some very important judgments to be made 'within' the technological frame of action, and the resources for making such judgments centrally involve an orientation to world-preservation and caring for particular things in the world in all their uniqueness and diversity. The cultivation of a caring orientation cannot occur in isolation from the ongoing threats to world-preservation, and the latter will require considered judgments about the type and level of technological intervention necessary to

diminish them. The significance of this point is lost if the technological system of modern society is viewed as adapting almost automatically to disturbances in its provision of commodities. There are, in fact, cases where it *does* (and should) matter to citizens as to which technological machinery (e.g. nuclear power or energy conservation) is chosen to procure commodities, and are thus matters on which the citizen ought to be well-informed about the consequences of deploying different types of technological machinery.

It is in the light of threats to world-preservation, and of their connection to the underlying pattern of technological civilization, that informed citizenship takes on a heightened significance. We have seen that the viability of a democratic response to these threats is in question. Jonas rejects democracy as an unreliable path to world-preservation; Borgmann believes democracy will correct the most overtly destructive aspects of technology, while ignoring deeper deficiencies. Christian Bay has articulated another approach to this problem in an essay on the status of the citizen's right of access to political knowledge.

Bay's starting point is close to that of Jonas: "No moral life can persist," Bay writes, "unless the ecological basis for preserving mankind's physical existence can be protected. . . We assume . . . that some of the most urgent issues of our time are issues to which there are right and wrong answers and that, in some cases, wrong answers would be deadly and must be avoided at any cost."[18] The capacity of existing liberal-democracies to avoid wrong answers is low, according to Bay.

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[18] Christian Bay, "Access to Political Knowledge as a Human Right," The Human Context 7 (1975): 388-398, p. 392.

Political leaders are more interested in retaining public support rather than dishing out unpalatable policies based on the best available knowledge. Moreover, liberal-democratic politics revolves around bargaining and adjudication between competing sectional interest groups which severely limits the ability to develop a consensus around a knowledgeable conception of the public interest. Furthermore, the much-vaunted marketplace of ideas in liberal-democracies has taken an oligopolistic turn, which permits the agenda of public discussion to be largely controlled by the most powerful state agencies and private interest groups. Finally, the structure of social inequality belies the assurances that all citizens are equal in the voting booth. Citizens in the lower social strata are socialized to obey passively rather than initiate action; they lack the requisite knowledge and self-assurance to assert their political demands and act collectively.

Bay's estimation of the potential for social and political transformation towards genuine democracy rests upon the expansion of democracy within the domains of everyday life such as the family, the school and the workplace. This direct experience with democratic practices will, Bay argues, give people more confidence in political action and allow them to gain new knowledge which is related to their concrete existence. This kind of knowledge is what Bay calls dialectical knowledge (following Paulo Freire) in distinction from positivistic knowledge. Positivistic knowledge is analogous to a reservoir of value-neutral facts and factual relationships, while dialectical knowledge is less systematic, more geared to local conditions and needs, and developed directly by people interacting with each other and engaging with their own problems. The development of this kind of

dialogical knowledge can only come with the restructuring of institutions, and only with such institutional change is it meaningful to speak of a general right to political knowledge. Thus, for Bay, the citizen's right of access to political knowledge cannot be granted abstractly, but can only really be achieved once democratic institutions are in place.

Christian Bay's criticisms of liberal-democracy are quite compelling and his advocacy of dialogical knowledge attractive. However, the question remains whether a democracy operating as Bay describes could address in a timely and coordinated manner the ecological (and other) issues which Bay is rightly concerned about. Bay wants "responsible leadership to represent our common interest in survival"; he also wants to avoid "psychological imprisonment within the liberal assumptions about democratic procedural legitimacy taking precedence over substantive issues involving human lives or human rights."[19] The question is whether the kind of democracy to which Bay aspires could provide decisive leadership or avoid the time-consuming procedures of democratic discussion. Bay does not, in the end, make any arguments to show that a more authentic democracy would achieve the kind of responsible leadership which he believes is urgently necessary.

One possible line of argument, which is only implicit in Bay's essay, is that the facts about the threats to the biosphere are uncontested and thus will be accepted almost unanimously. According to Bay, "some of the most urgent issues of our time are issues to which there are right and wrong answers"; thus by

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[19] Ibid, pp. 393, 394.

implication, it may appear that democratic discussion about these issues will be straightforward and decisive.[20] If this is what Bay has in mind, he is ironically the victim of the positivistic model of knowledge which he criticizes. What Bay ignores is that facts must necessarily be constructed and interpreted; along the way there is ample scope for points of disagreement, especially in matters of interpretation. More specifically in the political context, even if there is substantial agreement on the facts, there may be, and usually is, disagreement on what to do in response to them. Thus, the interpretation of the facts about climatic change, and the action-implications flowing from them, are likely to differ between the Brazilian cattle rancher and the Canadian city-dweller.

The important point here is a familiar one in policy studies: as proposals for action become more specific and geared towards implementation, their differential impacts on different sectors of society become more apparent and, in a democratic setting, more of an object of discussion, resistance, and negotiation. As the plan of implementation becomes more concrete, the potential for disagreement becomes greater. Despite general agreement on the need for world-preservation, the differential absorption of costs and benefits needed to implement this goal will mean that interest groups and locales will use democratic processes to minimize their net losses. The very great differentials in wealth and technology both within and between states make distributional conflicts over existing shares of wealth more

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[20] Ibid, p. 392. Bay also writes, with reference to the reality of the threats to the biosphere: "These facts, and they **are** facts, have profound implications for our thinking about liberal-democracy and about the people's need for and right of access to knowledge." (p. 392)

acute. Different stakeholders in the existing order of things will have different reasons for refusing to accept world-responsibility: the 'haves' may not be prepared to sacrifice a portion of their existing affluence; the 'have-nots' may not be prepared to forego the promise of future affluence which they see a small proportion of the world's population has already attained, unfettered by strictures about world-responsibility. The have-nots may be especially reluctant to forego the promise of affluence whilever they are being saturated with favourable images of Western-style consumption habits.

Agreement on the facts, although itself an important and by no means guaranteed accomplishment, is not likely to diminish lengthy democratic processes of negotiation and conflict on what actions to take. Another reason that facts with "deadly" consequences are not likely to bring anything like universal agreement is that the threat of world-destruction does not depend on their being one single catastrophic event, such as a massive nuclear war. Changes in the biosphere may occur slowly, imperceptibly, and with differential geographical effects. Or, war using weapons of mass destruction (e.g. chemical weapons, high-tech terrorism) may be waged on regional scales and hence not threaten total extinction. In these ways technology quantitatively magnifies age-old human capacities for barbarism and exploitation, but does not necessarily suggest a need to recognize a qualitative change in the world situation. Self-preservation, rather than world-preservation, can serve as an "adequate" response to such events so long as they are perceived as isolated from the global context.

Bay has not, therefore, offered a plausible demonstration that a more authentic democracy would enhance the prospects of world-preservation. This is not to deny that such a demonstration may be possible. Nor is it to concede that some form of technocracy or rule by a knowledgeable elite is a more acceptable path to world-preservation. Rather, what Bay's discussion highlights is the importance of understanding the ambiguous range of consequences which flow from accepting democratic norms. Democracy can serve to protect individual and national self-interest just as easily, if not more so, as it can promote and enact world-responsibility. A related difficulty is that in the world as it exists today there is a great variation and unevenness in the quality and types of democracy in different states, and of course in many states it barely exists at all. There is, therefore, no guarantee that democracy can bring about a conscious orientation to world-responsibility, as Bay hopes, or even, as Borgmann suggests, a *de facto* one which arises as a side-effect of our addiction to technological commodities.

However, democracy is still the path of choice, in my view, because the enlightened tyranny which Jonas endorses depends entirely upon the character and understanding of the select few who are to rule. Despite the best intentions of their devisers, such schemes seem to demand a perfection of leadership qualities which is almost contrary to human nature. Democracy, at least, allows the people to correct the most gross errors or malice of their leaders. Democracy also permits all interests to be taken into account, rather than being ignored and perhaps trampled by tyrants, even well-informed ones. The ineradicable dilemma remains that group interests may also prove to be intransigent, self-serving, and short-sighted.

Moreover, democracy is slow and cumbersome, and the people can make mistakes too, which in turn take time to be corrected. Jonas, only too well aware of this, is not willing to risk the possibility that in the high-stakes matter of world-preservation, the people *will* make a mistake and fail to comprehend their own true interests and those of future generations.

If, on the other hand, we opt for democracy then it behooves us to look at the ways in which the level of enlightened understanding of citizens can be improved to encompass an orientation to world-responsibility. An important way in which this might be achieved is if electronic information and communication technology were to contribute to a sense of global community which would transcend narrow individual and national self-interest: such is the vision of the global village.

The Global Village Revisited

Marshall McLuhan's vision of the global village can be viewed as continuing the cosmopolitan tradition, and incorporating into that vision an explicit conception of the self and technology. McLuhan was by no means the first to associate electric media with a cosmopolitan and utopian transformation. Since the inception of the telegraph in the 1840s, electric information and communication technology has often been proclaimed as the harbinger of a new moral and social order. Early descriptions of the telegraph "stressed religious imagery and the sense of miracle," and "celebrated the promise of universal communication" in terms remarkably

prescient of McLuhan's global village.[21] Nearly one hundred years later, Lewis

Mumford eulogized the potential for electrically-powered production and

communication to supplant the squalor and pollution of steam-powered industrialism

with a clean, decentralized, and humane civilization. Since the 1960s another wave

of enthusiasm has welcomed the conjoining of communications and computer

technologies.[22]

McLuhan's theory of technology is somewhat Manichean, in that he saw a

radical disjuncture between the psychic and social effects of the printing press and

subsequent electric media. McLuhan saw the printing press as the key to

understanding modern nationalism and individualism. The printed word helped

construct communities around vernacular texts, giving rise to nation-states, which at

the same time began to guarantee the rights of individuals to participate in these

communities, in particular through reading and writing.[23] However, the printing

press, says McLuhan, encouraged uniformity, isolation and the fixed point of view

at the levels of both the individual citizen and the nation as a whole.

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[21] Daniel Czitrom, Media and the American Mind (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 11.

[22] Lewis Mumford, Technics and Civilization, with a new introduction (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963 [1934]). For an historical survey of the role of science and technology, and electricity in particular, in futuristic thinking, see James Carey and John J. Quirk, "The History of the Future," in Communication Technology and Social Policy: Understanding the New 'Cultural Revolution', edited by George Gerbner, Larry P. Gross and William Melody (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), also reprinted in James Carey, Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

[23] Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), pp. 218, 236.

Electric media, in contrast, ushered in an era of simultaneity and a mosaic of viewpoints. McLuhan believed that electric media, especially television, were bringing about a retribalizing, communalizing trend, in contrast to the linearity and isolated perspective engendered by the printed word. McLuhan envisaged that electric information and communication technology would not only compress distances but also overcome specializations of work and knowledge, and put the whole world in touch through a mythic, participatory global consciousness.

> Now that we have extended not just our physical organs but the nervous system, itself, in electric technology, the principle of specialism and division as a factor of speed no longer applies. When information moves at the speed of signals in the central nervous system, man is confronted with the obsolescence of all earlier forms of acceleration, such as road and rail. What emerges is a total field of inclusive awareness.
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> . . .
>
> Above all, however, it is the speed of electric involvement that creates the integral whole of both private and public awareness. We live today in an Age of Information and Communication because electric media instantly and constantly create a total field of interacting events in which all men participate. . . . The simultaneity of electric communication, also characteristic of our nervous system, makes each of us present and accessible to every other person in the world.[24]

McLuhan's conception of the global village is an ambiguous combination of both an electric return to "an integral and primitive awareness," and a celebration of difference and multiple perspectives: "In this age of space-time we seek multiplicity, rather than repeatability, of rhythms." Mosaic and pattern recognition induced by

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[24] Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media (New York: New American Library, 1964), pp. 103, 219.

electric simultaneity replace uniform perspectives and the fragmented point-of-view, since "there can be no point of view in a mosaic of simultaneous items."[25]

McLuhan conceived of all technologies as being in some way extensions of various parts and functions of the human body. There is, therefore, a strong component of organicism in McLuhan's thought, which is strongly evident in his interpretation of the communalizing effects of electric media which he viewed as extensions of the central nervous system: "electricity is organic in character and confirms the organic social bond by its technological use in telegraph and telephone, radio, and other forms."[26] The organic analogy is indeed a suggestive metaphor in a world consisting increasingly of artificial environments wired together with devices for sensing, scanning, and processing information. However, McLuhan's use of the organic analogy tends to allow for no mediating factors, such as socio-cultural context, in attending to the relations between people and devices. The idea of technology as extensions of organs and nerves fosters, if it is not carefully qualified, a view that sees technology as producing uniform effects, and obscures the social power structure within which technology is embedded.

McLuhan's most ingenious use of the organic analogy is his suggestion that electric media reinstate the sense of touch: "Perhaps *touch* is not just skin contact with *things*, but the very life of things in the mind?" "Electricity offers a means of getting in touch with every facet of being at once, like the brain itself. Electricity is only incidentally visual and auditory: it is primarily tactile." For McLuhan

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[25] Ibid., pp. 141, 138, 219.

[26] Ibid., p. 219.

tactility is a metaphor for multi-sensory awareness—what he also calls synaesthesia—gained through our extended electrical nervous system; it is a virtual state of everyone "being there" together in the communality of the global village. McLuhan hoped that the electric extensions of man would wrap themselves around the earth, creating a global body electric, with the "spiritual form of information" pulsating through its circuits.[27] What this metaphor ignores is that synaesthesia, in the sense of truly multi-sensory, integral awareness of a distant context, is impossible through media. Electric information media necessarily *abstract* from the socio-cultural context; they convey only a selected fragment of any given context. The organic metaphor of tactility effectively suppresses attention to the institutional mechanisms whereby particular fragments are selected, transmitted, and replicated. In a brilliant but flawed inversion, McLuhan elevates that which is impossible to attain (specifically the sense of touch) into a metaphor of unity.

Recently another approach has been offered to support McLuhan's hope that electronic media, and television in particular, are fostering the development of global community. Ross Buck argues, drawing upon research in psychology and ethology, that television enhances the prospects for global community because of the emotional content of the messages it conveys. All humans are, Buck says, biologically equipped to spontaneously produce "innate expressive displays" of emotion under the appropriate conditions, and are preattuned to receive such displays from others.[28] This emotional content, particularly evident in images which

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[27] Understanding Media, p. 67.

[28] Ross Buck, "Emotional Education and Mass Media: A New View of the Global Village," in Advancing Communication Science: Merging Mass and

depict the expression of human emotions, is, Buck continues, a neglected component
of media message analysis, which usually focuses on cognitive or ideational content.
Buck adduces some evidence to suggest that witnessing the expressive displays of
those in distress triggers an empathic response of sympathy in the observer. The
intrinsically empathic and altruistic features of emotional communication could,
Buck contends, provide a more sound basis for McLuhan's hope for global
community through television. When we see televisual images of suffering and
distress, it triggers a caring response which now encompasses even the most distant
events.

Buck's argument is intriguing, but it is also deficient in at least two respects.
First, if television is able to convey emotional expressivity, then it is probable that
this includes the full range of emotions, including hatred and anger. The televisual
is thus not biased solely in the direction of compassion and understanding; it may
also serve to foment international rivalries and resentments. Buck's attempt to
salvage the optimistic community of the global village is interesting and well-
intentioned, but one-sided. Second, Buck also ignores an ambiguous consequence of
externalizing the sensory apparatus of which McLuhan himself was well aware:

> Throughout previous evolution, as it were, we have protected the
> central nervous system by outering this or that physical organ in tools,
> housing, clothing, cities. But each outering of individual organs was
> also an acceleration and intensification of the general environment
> until the central nervous system did a flip. We turned turtle. The
> shell went inside, the organs outside. Turtles with soft shells become
> vicious. That's our present state. But when an organ goes out
> (ablation), it goes numb. The central nervous system has gone numb,

Interpersonal Processes, Sage Annual Reviews of Communication Research, vol. 16,
ed. by Robert P. Hawkins, John M. Wiemann and Suzanne Pingree (Newbury Park,
CA: Sage Publications, 1988), p. 48.

for survival, i.e., we enter the age of the unconscious with electronics, and consciousness shifts to the physical organs, even in the body politic. There is a great stepping up of physical awareness and a big drop in mental awareness when the central nervous system goes outward.[29]

This passage highlights a deep ambiguity in McLuhan's thought: between his hopes for unity and synaesthesia in the global village, and the numbing of sensation and awareness which, according to McLuhan's theory of technology, is a natural consequence of "outering" bodily organs or even the central nervous system itself.

McLuhan's concern about the numbing effects of electronic media went so far that he welcomed the prospect of computers becoming "conscious" and taking over the rational administration of tasks from humans; computers, after all, "cannot be numbed nor distracted by the Narcissus illusions of the entertainment world that beset mankind when he encounters himself extended in his own gimmickry."[30] Whether computerization can really act as the saviour is doubtful, given that computers and television join in a creative symbiosis to produce even more fantastic "Narcissus illusions." Nevertheless there is a fruitful tension here between tendencies toward universal social integration and toward psychic numbing in the face of the implosive effects of media systems. This suggests that McLuhan's idea of the global village—which he sometimes called, more appropriately, the global theatre—is more serviceable than might first appear.

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[29] Marshall McLuhan, Counterblast (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1969), p. 42. Cf. Buck, pp. 45, 70.

[30] Understanding Media, p. 67.

Even within McLuhan's own framework there is, therefore, room for considerable ambiguity about the communalizing effects of the global village, although on balance it is safe to say that McLuhan was an inheritor of the Enlightenment view of the world citizen which welcomed the universalizing effects of technology, and tended to underestimate the degree to which technology must be accommodated to existing structures of interests and traditions in frequent conflict. This assessment is further supported by McLuhan's embrace of the computer as the final solution to the problem of the rational administration of human affairs.

However, the continuing extension of the global electronic matrix does not *necessarily* bring about greater unity or rationality in human affairs. Electronic information networks have been superimposed, as it were, upon more localized regions of culture and conflict, resulting in the use of media as an instrument for mobilizing national populations during conflict, as well as transmitting information about it around the world to appear as a part of a global drama. Even more significantly, the global network is itself part of an international structure of political and economic domination which serves the interests of the multinational corporations. McLuhan's vision of the global village completely ignored the global structures of power and inequality. The global network serves as one instrument of domination in the continuing impoverishment of the majority of the population in many third world nations, brought about by their dependence upon the most powerful actors in the world market, the multinationals. Along with this impoverishment come repressive and heavily militarized regimes whose elites attempt to win favour with the multinationals. The structures of international

equality in which the global network is embedded generate the conditions for brute poverty, repression, fanaticism, war, and international terrorism which takes advantage of the new sensitivity of the world order to strategic local actions.

The citizens of the various societies of the earth now face changed parameters of action and knowledge which pose new problems for informed judgment and rational action. The printing press and now broadcasting has favoured a general trend to bringing more national and international problems and issues to the attention of citizens in the affluent liberal-democratic states and elsewhere. Clearly this information is of little relevance to the mass of people in the world struggling to maintain their daily existence under extremes of poverty. But even to those who are not preoccupied with such struggles, many of these events and issues are going to appear as abstract compared to the everyday activities of local individuals. But sometimes they are remarkably concrete, portraying vividly the experiences of individuals undergoing crises such as war or famine in distant locations. The role of television is critical here. The mass media—and television in particular—in reporting on the conflicts in regions such as the middle east and South Africa suggests that the mass media of the world are contributing to the formation of an as yet vague and amorphous "world public opinion" which extends beyond the boundaries of single states, within which public opinion is usually thought to reside. What is perplexing about these uses of information media is that they produce an experience which is strangely concrete and abstract—both intensely emotional and affective, yet also detached from the rest of the everyday activities of the individual recipient. The experience of the reported event lies somewhere

within what Don Idhe calls the "irreal near-distance" of electronic communication systems.[31]

Hence there are new parameters of action and knowledge: local populations are recipients of information and of the effects of actions over great distances, yet the bulk of the population remain passive observers of a drama enacted by representatives of powerful institutions. The citizen in the affluent states is exposed to a panorama of virtually instant information about global conflicts and trauma, but does not experience a concomitant increase in his or her capacity to respond to these situations, giving rise to a combination of detachment and momentary emotional involvement. The citizen faces a lack of reciprocity of action and information: what is so easily received cannot be as easily reversed or responded to.

The promise of information technologies to deliver a rational world order is belied by bitter regional conflicts, abstract and invisible dangers, labyrinthine specialization, and the ultimate inability of experts to provide answers. There are thus good reasons, aside from the internal institutional imperatives of media industries, for the nightly television news to appear as an incoherent catalogue of crisis. The information society unleashes tremendous productive and destructive forces, beyond the capacities of its own experts to fully understand or control, whose effects are selectively magnified by the global electronic network and focused on the home viewing screen. But the effects of this process upon citizens are not

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[31] Don Ihde, <u>Existential Technics</u> (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 56-57.

self-evident: today's private citizens are seasoned viewers of the spectacle of global chaos. Does video footage of civil disturbances, war, the trauma of poverty and hunger—occasion passionate concern, vicarious thrills, or cool detachment and desensitization? It is impossible to answer this question with any precision here, but the preceding discussion suggests that all of these reactions are likely at various times.

The surface of our planet is indeed becoming ever-more intertwined with electronic communication links, sensing devices, and computers, which monitor and control our interchange with the surrounding world. But this global system is fragmented, dislocated, unstable, and controlled or programmed according to conflicting objectives. Tendencies towards communal sympathy with distant suffering coexists with the strategic use of information to further corporate, state, and individual self-interest. And as the flow of information through the global electronic matrix increases, the processes whereby this information is generated become more and more opaque to everyday human understanding. A variety of names have been suggested for the new global situation of interconnected information systems: global village, world brain, hyperintelligence, eco-computer.[32] But whatever the computerized global matrix may be named, it is just as much a cause for perplexity, confusion and anxiety as for communal celebration.

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[32] See George Bugliarello, "Toward Hyperintelligence," Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization 10 (September 1988): 67-89; Geoff Simons, Eco-Computer: The Impact of Global Intelligence (Chichester and New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1987), p. 148. On H.G. Wells' idea of the world brain, see Kevin Robins and Frank Webster, Information Technology: A Luddite Analysis (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986), p. 343.

The prospects of electric information media creating a unified global community are therefore not entirely encouraging. Like the earlier discussion of the role of democracy in world-preservation, the global village is an ambiguous phenomenon. There is indeed a sense in which the peoples of the world have been brought closer together; the lineaments of structures of international cooperation and of a world public opinion are visible. But along with greater awareness of distant events and cultures, the citizen is now more entangled in the complex and sometimes overwhelming dynamics of global affairs. The citizen is less and less able to define the boundaries of what is and is not likely to impinge upon and be relevant to his or her daily life. Alfred Schutz provides a particularly lucid description of this new situation:

> Extending reciprocal anonymity of partners is . . . characteristic of our modern civilization. We are less and less determined in our social situation by relationships with individual partners within our immediate or mediate reach, and more and more by highly anonymous types which have no fixed place in the social cosmos. We are less and less able to chose our partners in the social world and to share our social life with them. We are, so to speak, potentially subject to everybody's remote control. No spot of this globe is more distant from the place where we live than sixty airplane hours; electric waves carry messages in a fraction of a second from one end of the earth to the other; and very soon every place in this world will be the potential target of destructive weapons released at any other place. Our own social surrounding is within the reach of everyone, everywhere; an anonymous Other, whose goals are unknown to us because of his anonymity, may bring us together with our system of interests and relevances within his control. We are less and less masters in our own right to define what is, and what is not, relevant to us.[33]

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[33] Alfred Schutz, "The Well-Informed Citizen," in <u>Collected Papers</u>, vol. 2: <u>Studies in Social Theory</u>, ed. and introduced by Arvid Brodersen (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p. 129. This essay was first published in 1946.

This implosive effect of modern technology not only induces anxiety and helplessness but also generates a reaction of detachment and desensitization. In this context, the rationality of privatism, understood as the high-intensity pursuit of commodity consumption, can be appreciated as a response to this new situation. With privatism, citizens can insulate themselves from the unstable and anonymous constellation of global forces imploding around and upon them. Ironically, however, in opting for privatism the citizen is also partaking in the universality of modern technology and its commodities, as is attested by the proliferation of manufactured soft drinks and fast food franchises to all corners of the world, and the importation of consumer goods from distant lands. In seeking to escape the anxiety-inducing effects of implosive media systems, the citizen partakes of the global technological system all the more. Individuals are thus becoming world consumers and producers; however, the horizon of world citizenship remains distant and the terrain exacting.

THE INFORMED CITIZEN AND THE MASS MEDIA

The mass media are significant for informed citizenship not only in the way citizens are implicated in the global electronic matrix, but also because of the overall role of media usage in the routine of their everyday lives. Entertainment fare and sports coverage, as well as news and current affairs, absorb the time and attention of media audiences. The character of this pattern of attention to the media is important: if media users attend primarily to entertainment fare, then the "opportunity cost" of such activity will be that they are likely to be poorly informed.[1] Moreover, the ideal of the informed citizen includes the requirement that citizens have sufficient leisure to contemplate and deliberate upon political matters. Since media usage is an important part of modern day 'leisure' activity, patterns of usage will affect how much political information is attended to through the media, and also the amount of time which is left over for other activities such as discussion and interaction.

McLuhan, as we have seen, noted the numbing effect of the narcissus illusions of the entertainment industry, although the idea of mass media as frivolous and distracting is by no means new. The role of entertainment programming in

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[1] While this probably stands as a general hypothesis, the importance of fictional drama and novels set in contemporary international political contexts for citizen learning should not be underestimated.

limiting the success of the media in promoting informed citizenship has been duly noted by political communication researchers. Doris Graber articulates a particularly clear liberal interpretation of the underlying problem:

> As long as average Americans do not perceive themselves as suffering excessively at the hands of an unresponsive, incapable government, they are likely to prefer the entertainment provided by mass media over political fare. Increased emphasis on political news and commentary may thus help the elite stratum, but it is not apt to attract attention from the middle and bottom levels. *The news consumer, rather than the news supply transmitted by the mass media and other sources, is primarily to blame for deficiencies in political knowledge.*[2]

In Graber's view, the problem is not lack of available information, but the lack of strongly felt grievances towards their government by the bulk of the population. In this socio-political context, most citizens prefer to use media for entertainment. Of particular interest here is that Graber views the "news consumer" as being "primarily to blame" for their own ignorance: citizens remain ignorant by choice. Yet this is a curiously asocial explanation. In an essay on the historical uses of "apathy" as a term to characterize the condition of the masses in industrial society, Stephen Yeo offers the pertinent remark that: "Individuals or collectivities can have qualities attributed to them, often in quite viciously moral language, which are in fact attributes not in them so much as in the structures of power and ownership in

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[2] Doris Graber, review of W. Russell Neuman, <u>The Paradox of Mass Politics: Knowledge and Opinion in the American Electorate</u> (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), in <u>Public Opinion Quarterly</u> 51 (1987): 282-284, p. 284. Emphasis added. Cf. Neuman, <u>The Paradox of Mass Politics</u>, p. 157: "Until and unless the media are able to tap the motivational core of political attention, the fundamental orientation known as political empathy, the effects of the political media will be deeply constrained by the character of its audience."

which they live."[3]   A similar point can be made with respect to the purported

ignorance of the masses. Ignorance and apathy are more than a matter of choice,

they are the result of structural or systemic conditions which inhibit people's

capacity or motivation to become informed citizens.

This chapter will explore several dimensions of this insight. First of all, the

work of A.P. Simonds on informed citizenship will be introduced. Simonds makes

a significant contribution to the problematic of informed citizenship; indeed he is

largely responsible for initiating recent theoretical attention to this question.

Simonds sees informed citizenship as a way of redefining the problem of ideological

domination which, in Marxist studies, is purportedly the reason why the class

structure of advanced capitalist societies has not been overturned in a socialist

transformation. Simonds follows the same path as other recent work criticizing the

"dominant ideology thesis." The basic criticism of the dominant ideology thesis is

that historically, ideology, in the sense of a coherent system of normative beliefs,

has functioned largely to integrate those in the ruling circles, while the lower strata

have been subordinated less through accepting the legitimacy of their status than

through the coercive and stultifying task of maintaining their everyday existence.[4]

Congruent with this critique, Simonds argues for a shift of focus away from the

ideological content which is supposedly transmitted from the mass media to the

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[3] Stephen Yeo, "The Uses of Apathy," Archives of European Sociology, 15 (1974): 279-311, p. 287.

[4] Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner, The Dominant Ideology Thesis (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980). For important modifications to the claims of Abercrombie et al., see Conrad Lodziak, The Power of Television (London: Frances Pinter, 1986), Chapter 3.

minds of individual receivers, and towards the communicative context in which citizens conduct their daily lives. It is this decisive shift of focus to the communicative context, or what I call the social relations of information, which highlights the problematic of informed citizenship. However, in shifting attention to this problematic, Simonds also takes what I believe to be a wrong turn. He seeks to set up an ideal-typical contrast between the printed word and televisual media, in order to argue that television in particular is inhibiting the advancement of informed citizenship. My objection to this is that it sacrifices what has just been gained, namely the shift of focus to the social relations of information. Instead, Simonds pursues a much narrower focus upon the effects of the supposedly intrinsic characteristics of particular types of media.

Following this critical discussion of Simonds, I will go on to discuss the work of the Frankfurt school theorists on what they call the culture industry, which locates the mass media within the structure of industrial capitalism. In my view, their analysis provides some insights for a perspective on the social relations of information. In particular, the Frankfurt school analysis offers a cogent discussion of the distracting function of mass media, raised earlier in this introduction. It also offers a context for interpreting a number of issues such as the quantification of public opinion and the strategic management of public images, and the effects of this upon feelings of political cynicism among citizens.

A.P. Simonds on Being Informed

The context of Simonds' discussion of information media is his attempt to recast the grounds for the critique of ideology, by shifting attention away from the content of beliefs and the manipulation of consciousness towards an analysis of the communicative context in which the citizen operates:

> . . . some of the most debilitating effects of ideology concern not *false* belief but the *absence* of belief. The power of ideological domination lies chiefly in its incapacitating effect, and this often implies not so much erroneous or even distorted ideas as mental quiescence. Passivity, resignation, bewilderment and confusion, disorientation, and marginalization have all been more consequential elements of effective systems of social domination than false consciousness in the strict sense of the word, and the conditions that produce and reproduce such incapacity are largely publicly identifiable features of the social environment, not some mysterious process of class brainwashing or collective hypnosis.[5]

In Simonds' view the critique of ideology is more properly a question of resources than a question of belief: what is at stake is the resources available to various strata of the population for "conceiving, transmitting, decoding, interpreting, and applying" the content of beliefs. This suggests a new focus for the critique of ideology: "The proper task of *Ideologiekritik* is not to announce truth and expose error, but to identify and endeavour to eliminate such constraints on communicative activity as impede inquiry, comprehension, and consequently efficacious action on the part of historical subjects who are dominated."[6] This leads Simonds to redefine the critique

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[5] A.P. Simonds, "On Being Informed," <u>Theory and Society</u> 11 (1982): 587-616, pp. 593-594.

[6] Ibid., pp. 593, 594.

of ideology as the critique of the resources available to enable individuals to become informed.

Simonds' discussion of the informed citizen is thus an attempt to identify the social structure of inhibitions to communicative activity; being informed is characterized as a problem of "the development and distribution of resources for political judgment." Being informed is conceived broadly as: "the capacity to grasp, interpret, appraise, and draw appropriate inferences from factual information, the ability to follow and evaluate an argument, the ability to comprehend and employ abstract concepts (as opposed to using, perhaps blindly, an abstract term), the ability to make connections between events, or ideas, or attitudes—the ability, in short, to 'make sense' of the political world."[7]

Simonds goes on to outline three sorts of judgment which the politically competent citizen should be able to make: judgments about what is, judgments about what is good or desirable, and judgments about what is possible. Judgments about what is require information about the basic material characteristics of society (demography, geography, distribution of wealth etc.) as well as of social institutions and practices such as the market, the family, law, and custom. Much of this information will concern matters which the citizen does not experience directly and which is expressed through "extremely abstract, synthetic, conceptually complex ideas (such as representative democracy, the labor contract and labor organization, inflation)." Secondly, judgments about what is good or desirable require an ability to apply normative standards to evaluate what is. This calls for information about

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[7] Ibid., p. 596.

one's own interests and those of other citizens, and of the justifications which purportedly underlie social practices and institutions. Normative judgment involves a dialogic process which allows for the transformation of preferences and the generation of shared norms in a context of mutual autonomy and respect. Finally, judgments about what is possible refer to the potential for the achievement of historical change in accordance with normative judgments about what is desirable. These kinds of judgment require citizens to be informed with an historical awareness, an ability to discern historical tendencies and causal links (which, Simonds notes, can not meet standards of scientific verification) which suggest potentials, limits, and opportunities for political action.[8]

Each of these sorts of competence, Simonds further argues, are sequentially dependent on the one preceding it: normative judgments cannot occur without knowledge of what is, while historical/practical judgments require being informed on both the factual and normative levels. Simonds then extends this idea into a more speculative thesis: that the history of ideological domination has evolved through a similar sequence. Thus in precapitalist societies the lower, rural classes were in a state of sheer factual ignorance about any matters beyond their local situation; this was enough to inhibit their political competence. With the development of capitalism, the greater levels of communication, mobility, coordination and urbanization helped to overcome ignorance at the basic factual level. Instead, ideological domination worked at the second level through inhibiting the development of moral autonomy by means of elaborate rules of behaviour,

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[8] Ibid., pp. 597-598.

deportment and deference which were promulgated by scientific, bureaucratic, religious, and patriarchal authorities. Finally, in the present era Simonds suggests another shift may be occurring because the old disciplinary modes are no longer adequate for the kinds of self-directed work roles in the technical, intellectual and professional realm. This shift is to the inhibition of the third level of judgment, that of a sense of political efficacy: "The predictable consequences of such blockages is not ignorance or moral subordination but cynicism, resignation, political withdrawal, and the eclipse of civic virtue."[9]

To demonstrate the validity of Simonds' evolutionary schema would require much more evidence than he provides, and Simonds concedes that each later sequence may not simply replace an earlier one. Perhaps the one point which is not controversial is that in the liberal-democratic welfare states, the factual knowledge of contemporary citizens of the great society around them has increased considerably, even though much of it may remain as unarticulated background assumptions. However, it is not our intent here to debate the validity of the evolutionary schema as such, but to examine more closely an associated claim of Simonds that television is inhibiting citizen competence and in particular the sense of political efficacy. This argument is framed as a contrast between the consequences of print media and television.

Simonds argues that the advent of printing and the growth of literacy levels have had beneficial effects on the distribution of resources for political judgment. Printed communication has features which are "favorable to democratizing trends:

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[9] Ibid., p. 599.

the printed text is egalitarian in the double sense that it is the same for one and all and, even more important, it implies agency, the development and exercise of competence, on the part of *both* sender and recipient of its message." However, Simonds cautions against "vulgar technological determinism" which sees a necessary link between printing and democracy: "Print culture is a *resource*; even if its structural characteristics ultimately have emancipatory implications, it can be employed very effectively in the service of domination as long as other conditions are maintained such as restricting access, regulating content, and obstructing or distorting transmission."[10]

Simonds argues that the generally democratizing influence of printed communication is being eroded by new electronic media, notably television: "The cause for concern . . . is not that the television screen has made the printed text obsolescent but that new modes of information dissemination may have slowed, ended, or even reversed the process of gradual expansion and development of text-using skills—a process that, I have been arguing, had fundamentally democratic implications." Simonds then goes on to compare "some of the general features of messages that are conveyed by means of different channels of communication."[11] These features are organized on a bipolar continuum, in which television appears at one end of the continuum and print at the other.

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[10] Ibid., p. 604.

[11] Ibid., pp. 606-607.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INFORMATION RESOURCES
Source: A.P. Simonds, "On Being Informed"

television	radio/newspapers/news weeklies	periodicals/books

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concentrated	dispersed
ephemeral	durable
sender paced	recipient paced
up-to-the-minute	retrospective
short units	long units
simple	complex
concreete	abstract
affective	intellectual
passive response	active response
pattern image	process/structure

These opposing features are grouped into four sets of contrasts: scale of organization, temporal form, content, and effects. Rather than dealing in detail with each point of contrast, I want to focus first of all on the overall kind of argument that Simonds is making, and then to comment on some of his specific points of contrast.

The basic structure of Simonds argument depends on identifying communication "channels" with features which affect the perceptual and interpretive experiences of the audience. This attributes intrinsic characteristics to television

which are seen to cause corresponding changes in the recipients. This means that the historically conditioned organizational forms of information technology are not given sufficient credit for evident contrasts between media. The argument that "television" threatens the further progress of literacy and, so it is claimed, political competence carries the risk of attributing the cause of a complex set of socio-political relations to the inner nature or essence of television. Television does not have a stable universal essence, but only an indefinite set of fragmentary features which may be more or less emphasized within particular socio-historical settings. It is true, of course, that there are certain minimal requirements of television for it to be recognized as such: television is a transmission of video images from a centralized source, although the scale of centralization is not fixed. In addition, as McLuhan emphasized, the true innovation of broadcasting is the simultaneity of reception, although even this is now subject to qualification with time-shifting made possible with VCRs. Simonds, however, goes further than this in an unsuccessful attempt to define immutable characteristics.

There are two related difficulties which can arise when the fixed characteristics of television are sought as an explanatory principle. The first occurs when a "self-evident" feature of television, such as its visual nature, is selected to explain particular social or political consequences. Simonds, for example, argues that television tends to be sensuously immediate, concrete and specific because it is image-based, with a resulting bias towards affect over intellect. Rational political judgment, in this view, is supposed to suffer because of this. The problem with such claims is their sheer generality: does this mean that we are to see no

difference between a contemporary political TV ad, and a political or historical documentary? Visual appeal—"good television," as the producers say—can be found in an extraordinary diverse range of subject matter which can in turn be represented within many different formats and genres. It may be true that television is not ultimately able to represent highly complex and abstract arguments in the same way as print, but the flexibility of television is greater than Simonds gives it credit. For example, lectures, interviews and discussions can, given appropriate subject matter and participants, be quite engrossing. The real problem is that Simonds' argument is premised on the belief that print is the ideal form of mediated communication which has an optimum balance between affect and intellect. As a consequence, television necessarily falls short.[12] But it can be argued, quite convincingly I believe, that print has its own "bias" which means it is not the paradigm of balanced rationality which Simonds claims. In fact, the printed word abstracts from the sensuous, concrete immediacy and rational give and take of the oral tradition—a consequence which has been analyzed at length by Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, among others. The printed word cannot directly convey the expressivity of the human face, tone of voice, or gesture, which radio and television and their derivatives are able to do as forms of what Ong calls "secondary orality."[13]

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[12] See ibid., p. 609.

[13] Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (London and New York: Methuen, 1982); Harold Innis, The Bias of Communication, with an introduction by Marshall McLuhan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951); Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

In a similar vein, Simonds is disappointed when the medium does *not* deliver particular social results. Thus, "[l]ittle or no effort is required to receive the [televisual] message, few skills are developed in the course of receiving it, no opportunity is provided nor incentive given to work actively on it—to interpret, to compare, to generalize, and to criticize."[14] But why should we expect the development of critical faculties to be an automatic consequence of the medium itself? Surely, this is not the 'responsibility' of the medium, understood by Simonds to be a nature-like "channel of communication," but rather would be a result of the conscious development of appropriate social settings and institutions for this purpose. Given the right topic, even the dominant television system can generate considerable discussion and controversy, and this is not to mention the use of video in small-group educational settings. Even with respect to the dominant televisual system, there is growing evidence for an active audience which interprets televisual content in different ways.

The second difficulty arises when Simonds identifies features of television which, upon consideration, are clearly the characteristics of particular *historical forms* of television. In fact, when Simonds talks about television, he is actually referring to television *news*, and, moreover, television news as it is produced in the USA in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Simonds points to the brevity of the network news, but Cable News Network or even PBS can be given as a counter-examples. Similarly, Simonds attributes a lack of overall coherence to the fragments of images and stories which are portrayed on television news, which

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[14] Simonds, "On Being Informed," p. 610.

contributes to the mystification of the citizen about reality. However, even within the television systems of the Western democracies, there is considerable variance of the thematic coherence of television news.[15] Perhaps more significant is that such a lack of coherence would likely not be found in countries where television news is controlled by oppressive state regimes. Once again, the fallacy of attaching fixed characteristics to a technological object is apparent.

What is at issue here is not the validity of comparative analysis of televisual and printed messages in all their aspects, nor the voluminously documented inadequacies of television news, but rather the idea of basing social critique on the typification of information technologies as having in-built, fixed characteristics which determine social responses. In order to construct his set of contrasting features, Simonds abstracts from their historical origins, and the problems which that creates for assigning causal primacy.

An important cornerstone of Simonds' argument rests on survey evidence which show television is the most popular and most trusted information medium.[16] However, recent research suggests that assessments of news believability rest less on the characteristics of the medium as such than upon the kind of news being reported and the perception of the journalistic and organizational sources.[17] Other research

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[15] See Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, "Speaking of the President: Political Structure and Representational Form in U.S. and Italian Television News," Theory and Society 13 (1984): 829-850.

[16] Simonds, "On Being Informed," pp. 610-611.

[17] Michael J. Robinson and Andrew Kohut, "Believability and the Press," Public Opinion Quarterly 52 (Summer 1988): 174-189.

has shown that in America television is a very poor source for the learning of political information, which offers support for the thesis that television does not contribute greatly to informed citizenship. This same research, however, suggests that television news viewing can enhance political learning for the less educated, while for the more educated there is a *negative* correlation between television news viewing and information gain. Television may, therefore, contribute to a leveling of political information between different strata of the population. Moreover, comparative evidence between America and Britain suggests that television news viewing in Britain has stronger associations with information gain, which means that the poor informative effects of American network news may be culture-specific.[18] These results call for much more detailed interpretation than I can offer here, but they reinforce the main point of my argument: 'television' does not possess an ahistorical and unchanging essence which determines its social and political effects. Furthermore, Simonds' attempt to create a dichotomy of features of television and print not only obscures their institutional character, but also limits understanding of the relations *between* different media institutions. Television is undoubtedly restructuring the political scene—particularly through its potential for dramaturgy and the projection of charisma—but newspapers remain the primary source for the small proportion of the population who have a close interest in politics.[19]

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[18] John P. Robinson and Mark R. Levy, The Main Source: Learning from Television News (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1986), pp. 83-85, 103-105.

[19] See, for example, Doris Graber, Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide (New York: Longman, 1984), p. 85.

The crux of Simonds' argument is that literacy, "text-using skills," has inherently democratic implications, and that television is undermining these skills. To show convincingly that television is actually doing this would require more than the construction of ideal-typical polarities, however. For example, if a putative decline in literacy is attributed to television, then the potential counterbalancing effect of the widespread use of computers to increase text-handling skills should also be acknowledged. Surprisingly, too, Simonds does not mention the potential for television to convey political information to those who cannot read. More fundamentally, although the spread of literacy is a laudable goal, Simonds underestimates the propensity for print to be used in notably undemocratic ways. One need only point to the authoritarian structure of some religions based on "the word," or to the importance of literacy for processes of indoctrination, discipline and occupational training within the school system, or for the growth of systems of bureaucratic domination. Before the advent of broadcasting, the printed word was more than adequate as a vehicle for state and church propaganda. The printed word is, it is true, sufficiently portable to make it relatively easy to produce oppositional discourses (but not to distribute them to large scale audiences and publics, which is the real issue in assessing the economics and accessibility of media). With cheap and portable video equipment now available, the same can be said for video, if not for "television" as we know it. Simonds discusses only the 'good' features of print, while emphasizing the 'bad' features of television.

Print literacy is a skill with many applications and degrees of competence. There is no necessary unilineal causal link between literacy and political interest and

competence. Other factors must be introduced to explain how both image- and text-processing skills come to be used (or not used) in political settings. The fact is that in our contemporary society these skills are used predominantly for employment, recreational, and market activities. According to one rough estimate, the proportion of total newspaper content devoted to international and national news is equivalent to the proportion of news in television programming: an astounding four per cent![20] This suggests that text- and audio-visual processing skills are applied mainly in non-political domains.

Television, in all its forms and offshoots (such as pay television and VCRs), is the flagship of contemporary culture, occupying many hours of attention by children and adults every week, and thus it is not surprising that critiques of culture often end up attributing cultural and political malaise to television itself. As the circulation of images has become increasingly important in the constitution of technological civilization, television has become a scapegoat for all kinds of political and cultural discontent. This is a kind of inverse McLuhanism: television is not the harbinger of global community but the purveyor of shallowness, obfuscation and isolation. However, in my view, this approach is not particularly fruitful, for reasons which have been outlined. The significance of the unique characteristics of television—to the extent that such intrinsic features can indeed be identified—do not outweigh the effects of the location of television within particular social relations of information. In order to illuminate some of the broad characteristics of the social relations of information, I will now turn to analysis of the culture industry offered

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[20] Ben Bagdikian, cited in The Paradox of Mass Politics, p. 136.

by the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, represented in the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse.

Media and Enlightenment

Like Simonds, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno were also sceptical of the idea that the media were conveying an ideology of normative beliefs. Like Simonds, too, they focused on the characteristics of what were at the time new media (i.e. the sound film), in order to partially explain changes in the character of ideological domination. Indeed to some degree Horkheimer and Adorno fall prey to some of the same difficulties as I have identified with Simonds. However, I believe their overall perspective on the culture industry provides some insights into how distraction and political cynicism are constituted through the social relations of information, insights which are not pursued in Simonds' comparison of print and television.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the liberal oligopolistic media have had disastrous consequences for the development of individual autonomy and the exercise of reason in human affairs. Rather than acting as bearers of enlightenment within a marketplace of ideas, the culture industry, as Horkheimer and Adorno called it, was obstructing the development of a critical public. Horkheimer and Adorno believed that the problem with the new filmic medium was that its remarkable fidelity of representation was perfectly adapted to reproducing existing

reality without subjecting it to critical reflection. This was in turn bringing about a

change in the underlying form of ideology:

> The new ideology has as its objects the world as such. It makes use
> of the worship of facts by no more than elevating a disagreeable
> existence into the world of facts in representing it meticulously. This
> transference makes existence itself a substitute for meaning and right.
> . . .
>
> Even the abstract ideals of the harmony and beneficence of society
> are too concrete in this age of universal publicity. We have even
> learned how to identify abstract concepts as sales propaganda.
> Language based entirely on truth simply arouses impatience to get on
> with the business deal it is probably advancing. . . Value judgments
> are taken either as advertising or as empty talk. Accordingly ideology
> has been made vague and noncommittal, and thus neither clearer nor
> weaker. Its very vagueness, its almost scientific aversion from
> committing itself to anything which cannot be verified, acts as an
> instrument of domination. . . Ideology is split into the photograph of
> stubborn life and the naked lie about its meaning—which is not
> expressed but suggested and yet drummed in.[21]

The new form of ideology is vague, cynical, and based less on

rational, discursive appeals to moral precepts (which now merely signals the

disguised self-interest which everyone sees through) than on the technically flawless

representation which the new technologies allow.[22] In its fidelity of realistic

reproduction, its constant repetition of media images and sounds, "the giant

loudspeaker of industrial culture . . . endlessly reduplicate the surface of reality."[23]

Critical reflection is inhibited by "the objective nature of the products themselves,

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[21] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum, 1972 [1944]), pp. 148, 147.

[22] By implying that the masses may have previously adhered to a more conceptually coherent dominant ideology based on "meaning and right", Horkheimer and Adorno are susceptible to the critique offered of the dominant ideology thesis by Abercrombie et al.

[23] Max Horkheimer, Eclipse of Reason (New York: Continuum, 1947), p. 142.

especially to the most characteristic of them, the sound film. They are so designed that quickness, powers of observation, and experience are undeniably needed to apprehend them at all; yet sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts."[24]

The culture industry was, in Horkheimer and Adorno's view, inaugurating a new relationship between high art and popular culture. More precisely it was destroying the distance between them, resulting in the loss of critical elements contained in both. The standardized basis of mass culture destroys the possibility of making a judgment about reality which the autonomous work of art had encouraged; the standardized formulae of the culture industry happily coincide with the work-weary individual's putative need for reassuringly predictable tunes and narratives. The culture industry radically dilutes the intensity of the critical and utopian aspirations embodied in autonomous or high art, while at the same time appropriating ideas from this art for incorporation in its own stereotypical portrayals. It thus blocks the 'higher' modes of contemplation. But neither does the culture industry abandon itself to the self-surrender of sheer amusement found in traditional popular culture—because of the excessive release of energy required for the latter, and moralistic censorship in the mass media. "The consequence is that the nonsensical at the bottom disappears as utterly as the sense in the works of art at the top."[25]

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[24] Ibid., pp. 126-127.

[25] Ibid., p. 143.

The culture industry is normally defended on the ground that it at least supplies pleasurable gratification for its users. The quality of this pleasure is disputed, however: "What happens at work, in the factory, or in the office can only be escaped by an approximation of it in one's leisure time. All amusement suffers from this incurable malady. Pleasure hardens into boredom because, if it is to remain pleasure, it must not demand any effort and therefore move rigorously in the worn grooves of association." The rationale which justifies the culture industry as merely being a source of pleasure, or whatever quality, is therefore not acceptable. By its very nature the culture industry cannot supply pleasure free from moralizing overtones. The construction of a whole industry around the principle of technically calculated pleasure, but in the name of culture, means a retreat from thought. "Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance."[26]

The culture industry thus liquidates the autonomous individual—the ideal of liberal thought—and with it the thought of resistance to the very forces which undermine autonomy. Individuals adopt the categories of the culture industry as their own. "What is individual is no more than the generality's power to stamp the accidental detail so firmly that it is accepted as such. The defiant reserve or elegant appearance of the individual on show is mass produced like Yale locks, whose difference can be measured in millimetres."[27] While the autonomous

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[26] Ibid., pp. 137, 144.

[27] Ibid., p. 154.

bourgeois individual was always a myth, the crushing of individuality and its replacement with pseudo-individuality by the culture industry is regressive, since these mass produced simulations of autonomy in fact signify isolation, not self-determination. The change in the status of the individual is indicated by the way the dramatic form of tragedy has become a vehicle for fatalism. "Tragedy is reduced to the threat to destroy anyone who does not cooperate, whereas its significance once lay in a hopeless resistance to a mythic destiny. Tragic fate becomes just punishment . . ."[28] The ideology of fatalism is combined with a faith in chance occurrences, both of which make futile any thought of individual resistance or initiative.

The Frankfurt school thinkers initiated an important critical perspective on the relationship between politics and culture, by showing how closely intertwined they were becoming in their integration into the forms of the mass media. The mass media were not so much purveyors of ideology conceived as a set of conscious beliefs, but rather held out a broken promise of pleasure and release which was nevertheless sufficient to keep the attention of a weary populace. The marvellous fidelity of the new media in their capacity of realistic representation was just as important as the "content." The political implications of this situation were, first of all, that media became a significant means of spending time in which self-reflective or critical thought could scarcely take hold. Equally important were the ways in which culture and politics were adopting similar administrative procedures and forms derived from marketing and propaganda techniques. "The ruthless unity

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[28] Ibid., p. 152.

in the culture industry is evidence of what will happen in politics. Marked

differentiation such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines in

different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying,

organizing, and labelling consumers."[29]   Furthermore, propaganda and marketing

techniques were transforming language into calculated slogans and cliches which

removed words from the "layer of experience which created the words for their

speakers," instantly diffusing new catch-words through the media. Language

becomes less a possession of its speakers, and more designed to issue an instant

demand which seems impenetrable to further reflection.[30]   Behind each of these

tendencies was the pressure for conformism and adaptation demanded by the

extension of instrumental reason, the linking of scientific theory with technical

power, into all aspects of social and psychic life. All that was left was for the

individual to recognize that his or her interests coincided with the commodities and

the cultural and political programmes which had already been calculated for him or

her in advance.

Herbert Marcuse took the totalitarianism thesis one step further in his

discussion of how the freedom of speech and toleration assumed to be the operative

principle of liberal Western media was in actuality a mechanism for the

neutralization of dissent. Marcuse pointed to several features of political language

in the mass media—the false reconciliation of opposites, the construction of opaque

images through acronyms and long nominal phrases—which together worked to

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[29] Ibid., p. 123.

[30] Ibid., pp. 123, 165.

cancel out recognition of the potential for historical transformation.[31] The putative objectivity of the media meant that lies and trivia were elevated to the same plane as true and important, indeed world-historical, facts.[32] This kind of objectivity supported what Marcuse called pure or abstract tolerance, which, in refraining to take sides, "actually protects the already established machinery of discrimination."[33]

The problem with such abstract tolerance, Marcuse contended, was that it assumed that citizens were capable of separating truth from lies and illusion, the significant from the nonsensical: "the democratic argument [for tolerance] implies a necessary condition, namely, that the people must be capable of deliberating and choosing on the basis of knowledge, that they must have access to authentic information, and that, on this basis, their evaluation must be the result of autonomous thought."[34] Yet the actual conditions did not meet this requirement: the mass media apparatus undermined the capacity for autonomous thought through its positivistic reproduction of reality, its technically perfect barrage of images, its manipulative techniques and its debasement of political language. Not only this, but technological civilization was itself in a crisis brought on by aggressive and destructive forces such as those exhibited in the apparatus of nuclear war. There

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[31] Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), Chapter 4.

[32] Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in A Critique of Pure Tolerance, p. 98.

[33] Ibid., p. 85. Cf. Horkheimer, Eclipse of Reason, pp. 13, 19.

[34] Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," p. 95.

was therefore a grave discontinuity between this crisis and its recognition by the population at large. In response to this situation Marcuse proposed that pure tolerance should be replaced by "discriminating" or "liberating" tolerance which would not tolerate such world-destroying forces; the media would have to redress the balance by refusing to tolerate the discourse of militarism.

Marcuse's essay on tolerance generated considerable controversy, particularly in its vague suggestion that violence might be necessary to enforce discriminatory tolerance. The inevitable question was, who would decide what and whom is tolerable, and why? Marcuse came close to advocating that this task be performed by a knowledgeable elite which possessed privileged access to the truth; more specifically he assumed that "there is an objective truth which can be discovered, ascertained only in learning and comprehending that which is and that which can be and ought to be done for the sake of improving the lot of mankind."[35]

Marcuse's conception of tolerance was wedded to a particular view of its relation to truth. "The telos of tolerance," according to Marcuse, "is truth."[36] On one interpretation this means that tolerance allows truth to emerge through contestation, the testing of arguments, and the exposure of error. However, it can also mean—and this appears to be how Marcuse understood it—that in the present historical conjuncture, the parameters of tolerance should be guided and limited by a truth known only by those whose capacities for judgment had not been rendered ineffectual by the forces of heteronomy. The implication is clearly elitist, although

[35] Ibid., p. 89.

[36] Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," p. 90.

Marcuse attempts to sidestep this conclusion.[37] The ambiguity which Marcuse's definition of tolerance generates suggests that the telos of tolerance should not be "objective" truth as such, but something like respect for plurality out of which truth of varying quality may emerge.

The source of the difficulties with Marcuse's concept of toleration can be traced to his view of the role of truth in politics. Marcuse understood politics to be properly conducted under the guidance of objective or theoretical truth. Whether there can be such a truth in the realm of politics is doubtful, and whether it can, if it exists, be known to a self-selected elite, equally so. Politics is not philosophy; politics is about making collective decisions about public matters under conditions of scarcity of information, time, and other resources. Strategies of rhetoric and persuasion will, it seems, always remain a part of democratic politics. Science and philosophy do have a significant role in political life, either directly or indirectly, but there is no scientific method for arriving at the validation of political truth for subsequent imposition upon the less enlightened.[38]

Clearly Marcuse's central thesis raises significant conceptual and practical difficulties, but these should not detract from the importance of the problem which Marcuse raised but could not satisfactorily resolve. Marcuse formulated his critique

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[37] For further discussion of Marcuse's position, see Alex Callinicos, "Repressive Toleration Revisited: Mill, Marcuse, MacIntyre," in Aspects of Toleration ed. by John Horton and Susan Mendus (London: Methuen, 1985).

[38] For an essay which counterposes the philosophical criterion of political truth in Marcuse with the rhetorical tradition of civic republicanism, see Gerard P. Heather and Matthew Stolz, "Hannah Arendt and the Problem of Critical Theory," Journal of Politics 41 (1979): 2-22.

of totalitarian tendencies in response to a historical situation in which there seemed to be a systematic paralysis of critical thought and effective action. This problem can be posed starkly as the contrast between the immense forces of destruction assembled in contemporary technological civilization and the impoverished level of awareness of these problems among the general populace, which results in a citizenry who do not meet the prerequisites of the liberal-democratic model of free and informed discussion and decision making.[39] Marcuse's proposal that discriminatory tolerance could be a legitimate means of unblocking the impasse is clearly problematic. What Marcuse did point to, however, was that information must be evaluated in the light of an overall historical judgment about the trajectory of technological civilization. This refers us back again to the problem of truth: Marcuse may indeed have been in error to suggest that for the sake of liberating tolerance an elite should regulate public discussion over the heads of the masses, as it were, but he articulates the intent of Critical Theory well when he says that political truth arises "only in learning and comprehending that which is and that which can be and ought to be done for the sake of improving mankind." The contingent and agonistic character of political life precludes acting upon an indubitable objective truth as revealed in science or philosophy, but politics nevertheless must be concerned with the preservation and betterment of the conditions of human life, and with cultivating the resources for making judgments

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[39] To say awareness is impoverished does not imply, however, that most people are unaware of problems such as the threat of nuclear war or degradation of the environment; rather it is to say that these issues are perceived only as an amorphous background to everyday life.

about historical dangers and possibilities. Marcuse's hope that this could be done was matched by his alarm at the historical stalemate which systematically obstructed it.

Critical theory traced the roots of this historical paralysis to the ascendancy of instrumental reason as the overarching ideal of knowledge and its subsequent harnessing to the production process within modern industrial societies. According to critical theory the mass media, even in a liberal-democratic political context, have not served to improve the critical faculties of citizens in order to resist and transform the social dynamics which lay behind instrumental reason; rather the information media are a barrier to critical thought. Rather than acting as tools of enlightenment, the new media implement the tyranny of the realistic representation; the fetish of the ever-more exact reproduction replaces concern with critical analysis of the content or of the context from which it was abstracted. In one of Marcuse's formulations, the media thoroughly conceal the factors behind the facts. Not only this, the flow of information in mass media is one-way: they allow no response, and the attention of recipients is directed to the medium rather than to interaction among themselves.[40] The media accomplish social integration by separating and isolating atomic individuals. The stultifying effect of the media thus operates in a pincer movement: the media present an impenetrable image of the given for consumption by the speechless mass.

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[40] Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 222; Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in The Essential Frankfurt School Reader, p. 271.

Before proceeding to discuss some recent work which extends and complements some of these themes, some interim comments on the validity of the overall perspective of the Frankfurt school on the mass media are in order. Two issues are particularly germane to an overall assessment. The first comes out of the fact that behind the hostility to the products of the culture industry, especially evident in Horkheimer and Adorno's work, was a blanket judgment as to their content and effects. The possibility that their content may not be as uniform or as affirmative of the existing order as supposed, or that individual receivers may each interpret the content differently, was not explored, and indeed it was excluded *a priori*. Subsequent studies of media and the active interpreting role of receivers suggests, first of all, that mass media culture does to some extent draw out and portray anomalies and injustices within the existing order, and secondly, that individuals can have widely varying interpretations of media products. Whether these discoveries are more than marginal qualifications to the underlying thesis of the functional importance of the culture industry for social domination, is an important question but one which we cannot answer adequately here. However, its importance indicates that we must go beyond making blanket judgments about mass culture.

The second issue arises out of the deep suspicion in Horkheimer and Adorno's work towards the sound film and, by extension, television.[41] The mimetic capacity of film predisposed it to representing only the surfaces of reality and to obscuring tensions between surface appearances and the essential structure of

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[41] Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 124.

capitalist production relations.[42] Filmic realism destroys the distance between art

and real life, removing the possibility of a critical judgment of the present. Further,

the onrush of images in viewing a film is a distraction which disrupts thought and

prevents quiet contemplation. Adorno and Horkheimer did not extend their

discussion to include the impact of the documentary and the newsreel; however, one

can see how the critique of the surface nature of the filmic or televisual mode of

representation could be applied: a viewing of the nightly television news will reveal

how visual images of the news of the day are often peculiarly unenlightening, if not

sensational. The activities of world leaders are depicted in terms of their departing

or arriving in limousines and airplanes; stories on the drug problem seem to be

invariably accompanied by close-ups of addicts injecting themselves, or police

making a drug raid (and rarely a depiction and explanation of the roots of the drug

problem in urban poverty and alienation). Television news thus testifies to the

dangers of preoccupation with images of surface realities. However, there is some

distance between this insight and the condemnation of film or television as a whole,

which is what Adorno and Horkheimer tend to do in the work discussed here. As

has been argued earlier, I reject the labelling of a general technique of

representation, such as television, as having intrinsic features which predispose it to

solely having an affirmative or pacifying role. Adorno and Horkheimer are on safer

ground, however, when they locate the media within a particular industrial structure

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[42] This importance of this point for Horkheimer and Adorno is shown particularly clearly in Martin Jay, "Mass Culture and Aesthetic Redemption: The Debate Between Max Horkheimer and Siegfried Kracauer," in Fin-de-Siecle Socialism (New York and London: Routledge, 1988).

which plans its output to cater to individuals who seek escape from their everyday routines, but who unwittingly succumb to the routine of the culture industry itself. This is an insight which does not depend upon privileging one mode of cognition (i.e. the printed word versus the visual image) over another.

Image-Making and the Public Sphere

An essay by Tim Luke, entitled "Televisual Democracy and the Politics of Charisma," extends some of the themes of Critical Theory to contemporary American democracy.[43] Luke argues that network television is bringing about a major transformation of American politics which short-circuits the traditional organizational structure of the political parties. Television is no longer a window on an external political scene: television *is* politics. Televisual politics enlists polling and image-making techniques which identify voter characteristics and target voter segments with appropriate images, in order to mobilize sectors of support and of funds. Of key importance is the way in which charisma becomes the central political variable which transcends traditional party affiliations. Television adds a vital new dimension to charisma because it can be constructed through image-making techniques on a national scale.

> Rather than individuals proving their personal charisma to future party
> nominating committees in great political or military crises, televisual
> sites of production can generate auras of charismatic authority directly
> among viewers for potential nominees to public office. What Weber
> saw as an episodic aspect has become a predominant fixture.

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[43] Tim Lukes, "Televisual Democracy and the Politics of Charisma," Telos No. 70 (Winter 1986-1987): 59-79.

> *Charisma*, under these conditions, is an objectification of the public's aspirations returning to them as image.[44]

The manufacture of charisma enables candidates to by-pass traditional avenues of

garnering support and to appeal directly to the television audience. The audience,

for their part, are witness to spectacular politics in which the intricately

choreographed democratic rituals are played out on the screen as seemingly lived,

substituting "preprocessed political choice" for "traditional democratic activity."[45]

> The public sphere . . . is no longer the city square, an urban
> commons, city hall or town meetings. It is fused in the focal field of
> a remote mini-cam broadcasting live to the viewers'/voters' television
> screens. Signs and signing displace political discourse. Posting a
> partisan bumper sticker or being a dependable contributor on a direct
> mail list or wearing a political tee shirt replace engaging in political
> debate in city squares. Citizenship is now like being a fan, who
> votes favorably for media products by purchasing them, extolling their
> virtues, or wearing their iconic packaging on one's bill cap or tee
> shirt. . . In this form of informational democracy, voting is
> consuming, and consistent voting is product/brand loyalty.[46]

Media commentators have become the "surrogate voice of the voters" who articulate

public concerns as indicated through polls and other public feedback, and circulate

the key catch phrases issued by the party image-makers, providing a basic repertoire

of words and phrases without which the voters could not voice a political opinion at

all.[47]

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[44] Ibid., p. 65. Paragraph separation removed.

[45] Ibid., p. 62.

[46] Ibid., p. 71-72.

[47] Ibid., p. 71.

"Televisual electioneering," Luke concedes, "is not a closed loop with guaranteed results."[48] Face-to-face interaction and traditional loyalties still have a role, image strategies may not work, and voters become cynical of image appeals. Nevertheless the main tendency according to Luke is towards greater perfection of the techniques of electoral engineering in which television is the central locus. Televisual politics matches almost perfectly the model of competitive-elite politics—the extent of citizen participation in politics is limited to choosing the candidate who is able to construct a better image and successfully combat the slings and arrows of media pundits and other televisual candidates.

Luke's description of the transformation of electoral politics captures at least some of the key changes which television has brought to politics in America, and to greater or lesser degrees in other advanced televisual democracies. Luke's perhaps overplays the exactitude with which all the factors can be measured and manipulated by political consultants, and perhaps also romanticizes the public spheres of earlier times. Before television or even radio, elements of charisma, such as loyalty to the party boss, operated on local and regional levels. The space-binding character of television facilitates the integration of these activities onto a single national level. One might say that television has 'cut out the middle man' (and woman) from these activities and hence reduced the potential for broad-based processes of active participation, replacing it with surrogate participation in televisual events.

This shift in the make-up of electoral politics should be viewed within the broader context of the range of information management techniques which are now

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[48] Ibid., p. 66.

employed by private, non-profit, and state agencies. Robins, Webster and Pickering make the important point that propaganda and information management are an integral part of modern democratic societies.[49] The management of propaganda and information—to the extent that they can be distinguished—are constitutive of the modern public, rather than aberrations, precisely because the state depends for its existence upon the coordination of information flows in its various organizations and regions. "Only through the extensive flow of communication can administrative unity and integrity be assured. In this sense we can argue that the nation state is essentially and intrinsically an information society."[50] In the public sphere this has brought about a shift in theory and practice from the idea of a rational public consisting of informed and reasoning individuals, to a rationalized public whose members were considered uninformed, irrational and inarticulate and whose consent can be manufactured using the whole gamut of manipulative techniques of "democratic propaganda."

The critical study of information strategies within the modern state is, Robins, Webster and Pickering contend, more necessary now than ever, when, as Luke's discussion of televisual electioneering suggest, information techniques are becoming more sophisticated and pervasive. Indeed, Robins et al. conclude by offering the provocative thesis that *"in the nation-state of late capitalism information*

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[49]Kevin Robins, Frank Webster and Michael Pickering, "Propaganda, Information and Social Control," in Propaganda, Persuasion and Polemic, ed. by Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1987), p. 8.

[50]Ibid., p. 5.

management is inherently totalitarian. . . Our argument is that the totalitarian aspect of this process is to be found in its increasingly systematic (totalizing), integrated and 'scientific' ambitions and tendencies."[51]

With this boldly stated thesis we have, it seems, moved in an historical spiral to return to the nightmare of a totalitarian democracy envisaged by Horkheimer and Adorno—only now the nightmare is even more of a reality. Indeed, Robins, Webster and Pickering specifically refer to the dialectic of enlightenment when describing the transition from a reasoning public to a rationalized one. The question for them is whether "it is possible to rescue a sphere of rational debate from the logic of rationalization?"[52] This question can be understood as also posing the question of the possibility of informed citizenship. However, the question as posed by Robins et al. is misleading, because it mistakenly accepts that the public sphere has been totally depoliticized because it has been invaded by manipulative techniques. Against this, I would say that the rationalizing, manipulative aspect of Enlightenment does not simply destroy all other processes of political reasoning and rhetoric; rather, multiple discourses continue to coexist in an unstable and changing relations of alliance and opposition. Thus one response to Robins' et al.'s question is to simply say that rational debate does not need to be rescued, since it is already being conducted quite vigorously: in the meetings of interest groups, trade unions, social movements, political parties, and in

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[51]"Propaganda, Information and Social Control," p. 16. Emphasis in original.

[52]Ibid., p. 17.

various types of media—from newsletters to at least some of the mass media. The point of this response is to highlight the dangers of isolating rational debate as a *separate sphere* of public activity, and to claim that it has eclipsed, is in decline, and hence needs to be rescued.

One further point should be made concerning the totalitarian character which Robins et al. ascribe to contemporary public sphere: just what does it mean to use the term totalitarian to describe the Western media? A common sense understanding would say that a totalitarian media system is one which is under totally centralized and unified control. Yet in the West what appears to be occurring is an acceleration of the use of information strategies by a number of groups capable of mobilizing sufficient resources (money, of course, but also organizational talent, attention-getting strategies, and sometimes volunteer efforts). The interaction of all of these often-competing strategies in the public sphere is more likely to produce cacophony and confusion than it is a unified message in support of domination by a particular class. In other words, the conflict of information strategies may under some conditions engender cynicism about any and all claims represented through the media system, rather than normative acceptance of existing social relations. This could contribute to depoliticization, and in this sense the loss of political efficacy could be equated with a totalitarian function. However, it is important to distinguish this sense of totalitarianism from the Orwellian vision of total centralized control of information, and the terroristic control of anyone who speaks out of turn.

The idea that the clash of image-making strategies may provoke cynicism rather than enlightenment suggests another perspective on Marcuse's thesis of repressive tolerance: the citizen comes to cynically identify every media discourse to be just one more version of the same old hype. Repressive tolerance actually means that all media speech is reduced to the appearance of equivalent sales pitches which are judged not according to their truth-claims (they barely pretend to have any), but by their entertainment value, appeal to core political values, and the perfection of their technique. In this sense the audience actually sees through the oligopolistic media's profession to embody the free speech ideal; however, this insight is obtained at the cost of the impoverishment of the receiver's language and thought.

This connection between mass media and political cynicism is a tendency (and only a tendency) which must be comprehended alongside the importance of the conventional mass media for democratic politics. If this is not done, we will quickly arrive at the self-defeating (and empirically false) conclusion of total manipulation. The remarks by Alvin Gouldner on the historical relation of mass media to the public sphere are highly pertinent to this point. Gouldner describes how the modern public sphere emerged out of an alliance between the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia to overcome absolutist censorship; once this was accomplished this alliance was dissolved (or more precisely it was re-established on the basis of commodity exchange relations). The old forms of state censorship gave way to a censorship exercised by private commodity producers, clearly evidenced in today's oligopolistic media.

However, Gouldner points to two enduring—but still contingent—results. First of all, the media institutions established themselves as having a degree of autonomy from the state; not independence, but nevertheless not merely an appendage. This has introduced a new element into Western politics which has still not been reversed: "A new historical situation has now been created for societal managers; their dealing with the public and with one another is now greatly affected by reports carried by the media. The problem of dealing with the media now becomes a central and special problem for all social institutions."[53] Although this mediating function does not necessarily result in a critical orientation to the subject-matter being reported upon, the strong element of progressivism and liberalism in the ideology of media personnel is significant (although probably not determining), a point not lost on the media critics of the new right. Secondly, the oligopolistic private media produce their output according to what sells or what will attract a value-creating (i.e. profitable) audience. So long as it contributes to value-creation, a considerable range of information may be conveyed, including items which conflict with the interests of particular segments of the ruling elites or even, occasionally, with the interests of capitalist reproduction as a whole. Undoubtedly many pressures are brought to bear to keep the news media in line, and the studies of news selection and compilation show the procedures by which media organizations censor themselves. Nevertheless the underlying contradiction between the media's need for value-creating news and the interests of the capitalist class or

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[53]Alvin Gouldner, The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology (London: MacMillan, 1976), p. 124.

of particular corporate institutions remains whilever the media are not merely an organ of the state.

The media, according to Gouldner, "are a complex system of property interests, technologies, professionalising skills, strivings for domination and for autonomy, all swarming with the most profound inner contradictions."[54] Above all, the media are caught between attempting to live up to their self-image as tough interrogators, enforcers of public accountability and representatives of the powerless, on one side, and their actual dependence upon the good will of official sources, their need to deliver audiences of specified types to advertisers, and their subservience to the clever stratagems of information managers who construct newsworthy 'angles' and events, on the other. An orientation to democratic politics requires that these contradictions be highlighted, that attempts to reinstitutionalize state censorship be resisted, that new modalities of censorship be exposed, and that gaps between official accounts of reality and those of the media and other sources be identified and supported.[55] The modern public sphere is indeed grounded in private property and patriarchy, but nevertheless the achievement of the bourgeois public sphere (and its precarious contingency) should be appreciated:

> The bourgeois public was never democracy-in-being. It was and is a small and precarious social space, with significant institutional support, from which to expand freedom and to win rights; but it is not

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[54]Ibid., p. 160.

[55]Ibid., p. 158.

freedom secured. Its vast and continuing importance cannot be overestimated even if it provides 'only' an opportunity . . .[56]

Acknowledging the heritage and existence of a contradiction-prone public sphere does not, of course, automatically lead to an overcoming of the historical impasse mentioned earlier. Yet there *is* a living tradition of public contestation and justification which provides the threads out of which some semblance of a just and enduring civilization may be constructed. These threads can be lost—or better, cannot be grasped—if the totalizing *intent* of image-making strategies is not theoretically comprehended *in conjunction with* a living, obstinate public whose constituents take delight in unmasking the deceptions and injustices committed by their masters. The problem of information and citizenship must be located in a context of struggle between strategies for production of consent—or at least of passivity—and the critical and empowering functions which information can have.

The Frankfurt school thinkers depicted citizens who were paralysed and helpless in the face of giant corporate structures, whose capacity for independent judgment and action in accord with conscience had been decimated, who out of sheer exhaustion from the daily work routine (and, one might add, routine of consumption) identified with the needs already calculated and represented to them by the planning apparatus, and whose subjectivity was reduced to adaptation and

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[56] Ibid., p. 162. Gouldner also offers the strategically important insight that: "The doctrine of the breakdown of the public may be used to sanction any and every form of violence and terror whose provocation aims to reveal the fascist essence presumably hidden by the parliamentary appearance." (Ibid.) In other words, the idea that the public sphere has been totally eclipsed, which gains justification in Critical Theory, can be used to defend terrorist strategies, the response to which supposedly reveals the true repressive character of the state.

imitation of the omnipresent stereotype. Alongside this scenario of total manipulation there was counterposed the traces, however faint, of individual resistance to the relentless stream of images and facts. The domination achieved through the culture industry is thus a dynamic process which threatens to collapse under the weight of its own hype: "Nevertheless, it has become increasingly difficult to keep people in this condition [of subservience]. The rate at which they are reduced to stupidity must not fall behind the rate at which their intelligence is increasing." "The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them."[57] This is an insight which should be extended further than Horkheimer and Adorno were willing to take it. Total manipulation is not as easy to accomplish as would first appear; it is in reality an ongoing struggle with a resistant, intelligent, and playful audience.

Despite the shortcomings of the thesis of total manipulation, Critical Theory does offer insight into the way in which ideology has become linked to the fetishism of technologies of representation: the apparently great clarity and meticulousness of media representation of the surface of reality conceals the deeper currents of social structure and process. Fetishism attributes magical potency to inanimate artifacts which masks their origins in human productive activity and social relations. The magic of media, particularly film, video and television, is to create high-fidelity illusions of reality which are in fact only surface appearances. The fetish of ever-higher fidelity is evident in the enthusiastic promotion of compact

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[57] Dialectic of Enlightenment, pp. 145, 167.

discs and high-definition television currently taking place, and in the production of spectacular cinematic special effects. The individual in the contemporary information society is confronted by information filtered through the grid of technical perfection: information technology is the glowing veil of the entire technological apparatus.

Ironically, as the technical capacity for representation has grown, so too it has become harder to portray or express the radicality of evil and suffering inflicted during our century. Horkheimer wrote in his later work: "As their telescopes and microscopes, their tapes and radios become more sensitive, individuals become blinder, more hard of hearing, less responsive, and society more opaque, hopeless, its misdeeds (those just committed and those that threaten) larger, more superhuman than ever before."[58] The virtually unlimited powers to objectify information in our age contribute to a loss of collective memory of past horrors, and failure to anticipate those of the future.[59] This penetrating insight should also be qualified by a clear appreciation of just what are the specific factors which prohibit modern media from serving as an effective collective memory and warning system. It is not so much that the magnitude of suffering and evil cannot, *in principle*, be portrayed through media such as film or television: the horror of the Nazi death camps is powerfully conveyed by the documentary film of their results, and equally

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[58] Horkheimer, Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969, trans. by Michael Shaw (New York: Continuum, 1978), p. 162.

[59] Cf. Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 230: "The loss of memory is a transcendental condition for science. All objectification is a forgetting."

so by the approach taken in the epic documentary "Shoah," which consists of ten

hours of talking head interviews interspersed with slow-paced shots of the material

remnants of the camps. Examples such as these could be multiplied,[60] but the main

point is that the difficulties are predominantly institutional: in part outright

censorship, as in the suppression for decades of the film footage of the effects of

the atomic bombing of Hiroshima,[61] and in part problems of obtaining production

resources and of gaining access to the distribution system controlled by the culture

industry. Even if these obstacles are overcome, the greatest obstacle of all remains:

the work becomes absorbed into the accelerating flow of information which

inundates the individual, who develops strategies to block it out. In this context of

information saturation and the individual's desire for relief from the working day,

the chances of him or her attending to 'serious' drama or documentary are not high,

and in any case such choices are grossly outnumbered by usual fare of talk shows,

wrestling, sitcoms, soaps and action-adventure shows. The culture industry's

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[60] For example, the work of filmmaker Peter Watkins and of photographer Robert Del Tredici in documenting the facilities, attitudes, structures, and struggles related to nuclear weapons systems and the effects of nuclear war. Watkins' work uses a slow cutting pace and contains some excellent "deconstruction" of conventional television news reporting and editing techniques. The difficulty, however, is that the film is 15 hours long! Del Tredici documents photographically the complex chain of facilities and individuals which make up the American nuclear weapons system, demonstrating how photography can reveal the hidden underside of everyday life in a way which is far from positivistically affirming it, and adding credence to Arendt's dictum about the banality of evil. Peter Watkins, The Journey: A Film about Nuclear War (1987); Robert Del Tredici, At Work in the Fields of the Bomb, with an introduction by Jonathan Schell (Vancouver, B.C.: Douglas and McIntyre, 1987).

[61] Eric Barnouw, The Sponsor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 162.

integration with the rhythms of the production system predispose many individuals to prefer distraction, although it is an open question whether this would remain the case (or intensify) if the background anxiety about the world situation increases.

To recapitulate: A.P. Simonds' perspective on being informed as a question of the distribution of the resources for political communication and judgment is a valuable contribution to the problematic of informed citizenship. Simonds' discussion of the differences between image and text based media raises some interesting questions, despite some of the difficulties discussed above. However, the cognitive and affective characteristics of different media should be comprehended within the broader framework of an oligopolistic industrial structure which is predominantly and increasingly organized for the sake of profit-making, and dedicated to the promotion of commodity consumption. As information and communication technologies continue to gradually converge into integrated systems, the distinctive characteristics of image, sound, and text systems must be viewed in the context of the larger strategies of private capital and the state, and of the oppositional forces, such as public-interest media groups, which attempt to intervene in these strategies and initiate alternatives. These arenas of contestation and strategy, the unstable balance of forces which comprise them, their role in constituting, pacifying, confusing, or agitating audiences, network users, and publics, are in my view more fruitful starting points for research than pronouncing totalitarian closure of the public sphere or attempting to idealize a single medium as the paradigm of rationality.

The commodity basis of information industries helps shape the character of all the information they produce, whether image, sound, or text, and whether news, entertainment, or promotion (or a mixture of each). It is one of Horkheimer and Adorno's more enduring insights that the capitalist industrial structure molds the form and content of cultural products (and by extension of commodified information in general) *and* the conditions of their reception. This is, I believe, an important and indeed central aspect of the social relations of information in the affluent liberal-democratic states.

The focus upon the social relations of information implies, of course, that information itself is a social relation: that, in other words, the character of the information encountered by the citizen in daily life is shaped by a social pattern of institutions and technologies. The concluding chapter of this dissertation will explore this idea through an analysis of the concept of information.

Chapter Six

THE CONCEPT OF INFORMATION

Modern science and technology have implications for informed citizenship in several respects: dependence on specialized expertise, global technological dangers, the implosive effects of the global information matrix, and the promise and distractions of the mass media. In this chapter I shall propose that one entry point to a perspective on these implications is through the concept of information. In the political theory of the informed citizen surveyed earlier in this dissertation, the concept of information was not itself brought into question. For example, A.P. Simonds' essay, "On Being Informed," one of the most systematic reflections on informed citizenship, does not discuss the meaning of the concept of information.[1] Therefore I shall undertake a discussion of the concept of information as it bears on some of the themes pursued so far, in an attempt to bring the concept of information into adequate relation with the present historical conjuncture.

Some preliminary insights into the concept of information can be found in the distinction between knowledge and information. One approach, taken by Daniel Bell, is to introduce a criterion of truth or theoretical justification to distinguish knowledge from information: knowledge is "an organized set of statements of fact

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[1] A.P. Simonds, "On Being Informed," Theory and Society 11 (1982): 587-616.

or ideas, presenting a reasoned judgment or an experimental result, which is transmitted to others through some communication medium in some systematic form." Information, in contrast, includes all kinds of "data" such as that contained in bureaucratic and financial records, scheduling and inventory systems, and data bases.[2] In contrast, Fritz Machlup adopts a broader view of knowledge which includes various kinds of everyday knowledge and subjective as well as objective knowledge; the truth-value of some of these kinds of knowledge does not admit of the rigorous evaluation which Bell would like. Instead Machlup does not believe a stable demarcation between knowledge and information is possible, although he does distinguish between information as "the *activity or process* of informing and getting informed," and knowledge as "the *state* of knowing." Incoming flows of information are neither necessary for knowledge, which can arise through creative thought, nor are they sufficient, since information may be misunderstood, ignored, or forgotten.[3] Finally, Anthony Downs, in his discussion of information and citizenship, distinguishes information from contextual knowledge: the latter is derived from experience and education in a particular field, such as mathematics or history, whereas information concerns the current status of a phenomenon within a particular field of contextual knowledge. Thus a person may know the history and

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[2] Daniel Bell, "The Social Framework of the Information Society," in The Microelectronics Revolution, ed. by Tom Forester (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 504-505.

[3] Fritz Machlup, "Semantic Quirks of Information," in The Study of Information: Interdisciplinary Messages, ed. by Fritz Machlup and Una Mansfield (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1983), p. 644; Fritz Machlup, Knowledge: Its Creation, Distribution, and Economic Significance, vol. 1 Knowledge and Knowledge Production (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 56-57.

structure of the monetary system in a given country, but not be informed as to the current level of interest rates. In Downs' view informed citizenship implies the possession of both contextual knowledge and current information relevant to the decision with which the citizen is involved. The citizen can be knowledgeable without being informed, or vice versa, but the citizen cannot interpret information without contextual knowledge.[4]

This brief discussion suggests that information can be distinguished in terms of its truth-claims (or rather, its lack thereof), its possession of flow characteristics, and its time-value. With these general aspects in mind, I now want to turn to a classification of information in which the above characteristics can be seen as sometimes more and sometimes less relevant (and in some cases not at all). The following is not a rigorous taxonomy of information; rather, it attempts to highlight some themes or aspects of the concept of information which have a bearing on the relationship between information and citizenship. To this end I distinguish between information as fact, as form, as commodity, and as self-formation.

Information as Fact

In its everyday sense, information is derived from the verb "to inform," which unlike the verb "to know," suggests a transitive process of imparting, conveying, or telling. The information which is conveyed consists of propositions

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[4] Anthony Downs, <u>An Economic Theory of Democracy</u> (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 79.

describing events, facts, or situations. This core sense of informing as a kind of telling locates the concept of information within the realm of human, social communication. This common sense understanding of information has been carefully analyzed by Christopher Fox, utilizing the techniques and approach of linguistic philosophy.[5] Some of the relevant conclusions of his investigation are that, first of all, as we have just said, informing is a kind of telling involving propositions. More than telling, however, information is a specific kind of telling by an informant who is "in a position to know" the truth of the information. However—and this is a crucial point—just because the informant is in a position to know does not necessarily require that the informant will always reliably tell the truth. Conscious deception or error may result in untruthful information, but it is still information, provided that at the time, the recipient believes the informant is in a position to know, and has no reason to doubt the validity of the informant's claim.

Thus it is not a requirement for information that it be true. This is not to deny that information makes a truth *claim*, which is why we associate information with knowledge; however, in our everyday encounters with information, the standing

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[5] Christopher John Fox, Information and Misinformation: An Investigation of the Notions of Information, Misinformation, Informing, and Misinforming, Contributions in Librarianship and Information Science, Number 45 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983).

of this claim is dependent upon the authority or credibility of the informant.[6] This finding has direct implications for the concept of misinforming:

> "[I]nform" and "misinform", often taken as exact opposites, are not strict antonyms after all. If P is false, and X tells Y that P, then it is correct to say both that X informs Y that P *and* that X misinforms Y that P. On the other hand, if P is true, then X informs Y that P but X does not misinform Y that P. Thus misinforming is a kind of informing rather than a fundamentally different sort of activity.[7]

Truth is not a requirement for informing or information, but falsity is a necessary condition for misinformation. The association which we intuitively make between information and truth is more strictly speaking an assumption that untrue information will be labelled as misinformation wherever it is identified as such, rather than a positive requirement that information be true.

The elegant simplicity of Fox's analysis is a helpful guide to the common sense semantics of the concept of information. In particular, the requirement of the informant being in a position to know helps to explain the connection of information with the factual and the objective, which is reflected in the common sense distinctions between information and propaganda, information and persuasion, and information and entertainment. More precisely, it explains how information can

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[6] Fred Dretske argues for a much closer link between information and truth: "Information is what is capable of yielding knowledge, and since knowledge requires truth, information requires it also." However, Dretske fails to appreciate the distinction between an informant **knowing** that P, and being perceived to be **in a position to know** that P. It is this latter insight of Fox into the meaning of information in ordinary language which is particularly valuable for the problematic of informed citizenship. Dretske's approach to information is geared to his own project of developing an information-theoretic epistemology which rests on information as the foundation for knowledge. See, Fred I. Dretske, Knowledge and the Flow of Information (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 44-45.

[7] Fox, Information and Misinformation, p. 159.

take on the appearance of fact, objectivity, even truth, while in reality it does not

necessarily have to be true. All that is needed is for the informant to be perceived

to be in a position to know—in other words, to be credible. Finally, we can add

one more term within the family of information concepts: the concept of

disinformation (which Fox does not discuss). Disinformation can be defined as a

conscious or intentional process of misinforming. Thus while misinforming is a

kind of informing which happens to be false, disinforming is intentional

misinforming.

Let us now review the results so far of this survey of the general concept of

information as fact. First of all, becoming informed means becoming aware of

facts, events, and arguments which are conveyed to us by those who are in a

position to know. The process of informing is thus an asymmetrical communicative

relation between actors with more and less authority and credibility. This social

character of information captures the reliance upon experts of various sorts

(including journalists) which confronts the modern citizen. And as we have seen,

information does not entail truth; one of the problems of becoming informed, which

modern information technology exacerbates, is that the recipients of information are

rarely in a position to independently verify it. Becoming informed in the modern

world usually requires that truth claims be perpetually deferred to claims of

authority; the only way around this difficulty is to cross-check with other

authorities.

In a discussion of television news, Peter Dahlgren invokes a conception of information which is convergent with that of Fox. Dahlgren contrasts the narration of television news with the narration of news by a friend:

> If a friend tells us about an event, she, like the news narrator, mediates us to that event. We know of the event only *through* the friend's narration. Her *telling*, moreover, constitutes an event for us which is separate from the one described in her narration. In talking with a friend, however, we can stop, ask for clarification and even inquire about the process by which she came to know of the event. This is made possible by the two-way communication situation and the subjective (and evolving) understanding we have with her.

With television news, in contrast:

> News narration is like an account by an eternal stranger because while we can dwell within the narrator's subjectivity of the event, we never get to know the narrator's subjective experience of coming-to-knowledge of the event. The viewer is only *familiar* with the narrator. That is, the narrator is *recognizable* as *somebody who knows*. However, the narrator does not mobilize viewer involvement to *reflect* on his subjectivity. The news narration only refers to events (or at best to previous news narration): it does not refer to the *history* of its own learning. The news demonstrates knowledge, but not *how* learning takes place. Therefore, it never shows the viewer how s/he can learn from the subjectivity of news, The news never teaches the viewer the possibility of being a self-reflecting Subject within the relationship. The viewer's relation to news becomes one of static dependence.[8]

Thus, Dahlgren's analysis shows how the modern media of information, and particularly television, create asymmetrical and one-way relations of authority between informants and users, in such a way as to discourage the interrogation of

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[8] Peter Dahlgren, "TV News as a Social Relation," <u>Media, Culture and Society</u> 3 (1981): 291-302, p. 295. Emphasis in original.

the authority of the informant, and hence inhibiting the user's ability to critically assess information.[9]

In terms of the role of information as fact within political life, one of the basic premises of the ideal of informed citizenship is that opinions be based on factual truth. Hannah Arendt has expressed this idea well:

> Facts and opinions, though they must be kept apart, are not antagonistic to each other; they belong to the same realm. Facts inform opinions, and opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth. Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute.[10]

Arendt argues that one of the great achievements of Western culture is the cultivation, since Homer and Herodotus, of impartiality and objectivity. Respect for the facts must mean, in Arendt's view, respect for unpalatable facts as well as pleasing ones. This gives facts, in their peculiar stubbornness, an unpolitical character:

> Facts are beyond agreement and consent, and all talk about them—all exchanges of opinion based on correct information—will contribute nothing to their establishment. Unwelcome opinion can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon, but unwelcome facts possess an infuriating stubbornness that nothing can move except plain lies. The trouble is that factual truth, like all other truth, peremptorily claims to

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[9] We should also note here the situation of citizens under regimes where the relation between information and truth is particularly weak, as for example when all media outlets are controlled by the state. In this situation the 'authorities' may well be in a position to know, but citizens may be highly cynical of whether they are really telling what they know.

[10] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in <u>Between Past and Future</u> (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 238.

be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of political life.[11]

There are, however, grounds for questioning the view that in politics facts must be objective and beyond debate. The idea of objectivity in journalism, social science, even in the natural sciences, is no longer accepted uncritically. The reason for this is that objectivity can operate as an ideology to obscure the processes by which human actors selectively construct the facts according to undisclosed assumptions and constraints.[12] The value of information in political deliberation trades on its claim to objectivity; however, precisely because this objectivity is mobilized strategically, it is diminished. Information becomes a contested concept: what is someone's information is someone else's ideology or propaganda, unless some provisional agreement on the facts can be reached.

In defense of Arendt it must be said that she has a specific agenda in mind when making a case for the objectivity and ineradicability of facts: this is the very real danger of totalitarian attempts to reconstruct the factual texture of reality—to rewrite history. When Arendt speaks of facts, she is referring specifically to world-historical facts such as the historical existence of a man named Trotsky during the Russian revolution, or the historical existence of the Nazi extermination camps. Arendt's deep concern that facts are fragile and subject to political manipulation

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[11] Ibid., p. 241.

[12] For journalism, see Robert A. Hackett, "Decline of a Paradigm? Bias and Objectivity in News Media Studies," Critical Studies in Mass Communication 1 (1984): 229-259; Denis McQuail, "From Bias to Objectivity and Back: Competing Paradigms for News Analysis and a Pluralistic Alternative," Studies in Communication vol. 3 (1986): 1-36.

through organized lying leads her to propose that facts should be provided by an agency independent of the political realm, which Arendt believes to be hostile to truth of all kinds. But can sanctuary for facts ever be found? Arendt herself stresses the precarious and contingent nature of facts; they are recorded by witnesses and documents, both of which are potentially unreliable and untrustworthy.[13] Arendt argues that factual truth tellers such as the media must be impartial and independent from the political realm; however, the ideology of objectivity does not necessarily inhibit, and may indeed mask, the influence of partial interests. To reject the myth of objective factual information does not mean to deny the importance of facts as part of our world, or to suggest that the news media should abandon procedures for the checking and verification of news. Rather, to relinquish the idea that the news and information media can stand outside of the political world means that media institutions themselves cannot escape the provisional and constructed character of facts which the "strategic ritual" of objectivity conceals.[14]

Another aspect of Arendt's perspective on factual truth in politics deserves further consideration. Arendt distinguishes between factual truth and rational truth. Rational truth belongs most properly in mathematics, science and philosophy, while it is factual truth which is most relevant to the politics, "since facts and events—the invariable outcome of men living and acting together—constitute the very texture of

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[13] Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 243.

[14] Gaye Tuchman, "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity," <u>American Journal of Sociology</u> 77 (January 1972): 660-679.

the political realm."[15] However, in my view, the effect of this separation between rational (i.e. theoretical) and factual truth is to exclude theoretically constructed facts, i.e. scientific facts, as irrelevant to the political realm. Obviously this is not adequate in an age when so many political decisions depend upon scientifically derived facts, such as those referring to the deterioration of the ozone layer or the possibility of nuclear winter. In recognizing the significance of scientific facts for the political realm, it is important to avoid the objectivistic understanding of science which conceals the dependence of science upon the ground of experience, institutions and values which exist in the everyday world. It is also important, in my view, to avoid assuming that human social problems will progressively be solved as scientific knowledge accumulates. In contrast, acknowledgement should be made of the growing underside of ignorance about social and ecological problems which accompanies the progression of scientific facts and theories.

Jerome Ravetz articulates such a revised view of the role of scientific facts in public policy, which focuses on how policy problems such as the effects of pollution in the biosphere are challenging the usefulness of the traditional model of the role of scientific knowledge in policy. In this model, the basic assumption was that natural science should and could "provide 'the facts' unequivocally. So long as it seemed that those facts would always be forthcoming on demand, this assumption was harmless. But now we must cope with the imperfections of science, with radical uncertainty, and even with ignorance, in forming policy decision for the

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[15] Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 231.

biosphere."[16] Ravetz argues that historically the belief in the ultimate success of science in discovering true facts managed to obscure the fact that there have always been insoluble scientific problems. "Through all the centuries when progress became an increasingly strong theme of educated common sense, science could be seen as steadily advancing the boundaries of knowledge. There seemed no limit in principle to the extent of this conquest, and so the areas of ignorance remaining at any time were not held against science—they too would fall under the sway of human knowledge at the appropriate time."[17] Ravetz believes, however, that our ignorance of the effects of scientifically induced technologies is increasing even faster than the growth of scientific knowledge. Ravetz offers the example of radioactivity: we have conquered previous ignorance of the nature of radioactivity, only to now face ignorance about the disposal of long-lived radioactive wastes.

According to Ravetz a new model of the role of science in policy is needed if we are to get beyond the "illusion that the scientist is a sort of privileged being who can dispense nuggets of truth to a needy populace."[18] In contrast, Ravetz proposes a new kind of policy-related science "in which facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high, decisions urgent, and where no single one of these dimensions can be managed in isolation from the rest."[19] Ravetz envisions roles for

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[16] Jerome R. Ravetz, "Usable Knowledge, Usable Ignorance: Incomplete Science with Policy Implications," Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization 9 (September 1987): 87-116, p. 90.

[17] Ibid., p. 100.

[18] Ibid., p. 107.

[19] Ibid., p. 99.

both knowledge and ignorance in policy formation which would involve, on the side of knowledge, an understanding of the social and political context in which policy research problems arise, and an understanding of the diverse criteria of quality which are used to assess scientific research in the policy arena. On the side of ignorance, Ravetz insists ignorance be made "usable" by more careful monitoring of environmental effects, explicit specification of areas of ignorance in environmental impact assessment in order to pinpoint where questions of values and prudence are most important, and generally reorienting scientists and institutions to explicitly acknowledging ignorance as a first step to coping with it.

Ravetz's critique of the lack of recognition of scientific ignorance helps to demystify the authority which is popularly attributed to science, and perhaps will contribute to more realistic expectations of the role of science within a democratic political process. If scientific specialists are seen as less able to supply hard and fast facts or decision rules, then more space may be opened for dialogue and study of priorities and values. But equally it should be recognized that ignorance, like knowledge, can be mobilized as an instrument of power, just as when politically unpalatable decisions are delayed in order to carry out "further study." Moreover, Ravetz is obviously not advocating that we give up on scientific study of biospheric problems. Rather, he is formulating a new set of expectations for knowledge which does not assume that power over the natural world has been achieved or is even possible in principle, and which sees the immediate task as attempting to rationally control the rate at which myriad scientific techniques are being unleashed into the biosphere.

Information as Form

During the 1940s and 1950s information became significant in the vocabulary of a variety of scientific fields such as electrical engineering, computing, neurophysiology, psychology and biology.[20] In this context, information was conceived variously as a quantitative index of the orderliness of an electromagnetic communication channel; as the 'stuff' which enables processes of communication, feedback, and control through the comparison of information about current states with programmed goals; or as sets of coded instructions which regulate the interaction of living cells. This new usage of the concept of information raised a number of issues and implications. First of all, it was premised upon a separation between information and the meaning or content of a message. The mathematical theory of communication, for example, was concerned with the technical parameters which govern the accuracy with which a message is transmitted and received; the content of the message was assumed to be irrelevant. Secondly, information was now viewed as something which could potentially be subjected to mathematical description and modelling. And finally, if information could be brought under the universal language of formal logic and mathematics, then this suggested that a new unifying substrate of the human, animal, and machine worlds had been discovered.

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[20] For a useful survey, see William Aspray, "The Scientific Conceptualization of Information," Annals of the History of Computing 7 (April 1985): 117-140.

Visions were put forth of a unified theory of information processors which bridged the gap between human and machine.

The idea of information as a mathematical measure of form or pattern within a communication system does not sit well a humanistic understanding of information. Fritz Machlup, for example, saw these formal scientific usages of information as purely metaphorical: "The difference [is] between information in a metaphoric sense where no minds and no cognitive processes are involved, and information in the original and traditional sense where meaningful perceptions and thoughts reach a mind that receives and interprets them."[21] Machlup's humanistic view of the social sciences made him somewhat irritated at the uses of the information in the non-human sciences, because they appear to deviate from the primary sense of information as the result of meaningful human interaction. In other quarters the promise of unifying the natural, social, and mind sciences around the concept of information is welcomed.[22]

It is not possible within the present study to pursue this debate or to adjudicate on the success or otherwise of attempts to create a unified information paradigm. We shall restrict ourselves to two comments on matters which have some bearing on technology, media, and informed citizenship. The first is that information technology is so named because it can break down aspects of the world into meaningless patterns of information which can later be reconstituted into

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[21] Machlup, "Semantic Quirks of Information," p. 655.

[22] See, for example, James R. Beniger, The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 35, 38.

meaningful images, content or messages. Whereas the older, semantic or humanistic sense of information classified information according to its *content*, i.e. whether it was news, fact, or in some way admitted of truth, the newer sense of information in relation to information technology includes any pattern of matter-energy which is captured, created, or transmitted by technical means. Referring to the various kinds of information media, Paul Young summarizes their underlying principle of operation according to this broader scientific conception of information:

> Regardless of the energy medium, the information generated at each stage of these processes is found entirely in the vibratory patterns of electrons, electromagnetic waves, or other participating systems, and in the structure and arrangement of chemical molecules in a receptive surface. The only difference between one signal or type of information and another in a given medium is in the form characteristics of the wave disturbances and in the structure and arrangement of the receptive substances involved. All information is coded, transmitted, and received using the same basic mass-energy mechanisms; only the patterns change.[23]

This passage illustrates how radically different the scientific concept of information is from the everyday sense of information as news or fact. Some commentators such as Machlup and Roszak have condemned the intrusion into ordinary language of a notion of information which is extremely broad and divorced from specifically human processes of communication and understanding.[24]

Rather than simply condemning this development, however, it is desirable (and this brings us to our second comment) to assess the significance of this change in language brought about through the influence of the scientific conception of

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[23] Paul Young, The Nature of Information (New York: Praeger, 1987), p. 17.

[24] See Theodore Roszak, The Cult of Information (New York: Pantheon, 1986), pp. 11-16.

information. I want to suggest that the scientific conception of information as form or patterning of matter-energy, both in its usage by specialists and its incorporation into an expanded common sense understanding of information, represents a distinct new phase in the deep assumptions contained in contemporary advanced industrial culture about the structure of the natural and social world. To put it directly, information has become an index of the way the world is available for use according to human purposes. Information is understood as the currency of observation, measurement and, to an extent, the *operation* of the natural and social worlds, which we draw upon to make the world conform to our desires. Nature again becomes a text, which we can now rewrite and erase as we please. This insight is partly the familiar Baconian one that knowledge would unlock the means to control nature, but now in addition nature (and society) is viewed as an information system in its very mode of operation. Conventional scientific discourse still privileges matter and energy as the basic building blocks of nature, but information too is increasingly viewed as having an ontological aspect.

This sense of information as "availability of the world" can be extended still further if we consider how information technology is a way of selectively coding and re-presenting multiple worlds—whether they be the worlds of nature, human events and affairs, or fantasy. Increasingly, these worlds can be reduced to formal matrices and equations, and can be probed by advanced information technology. The video camera can probe an undersea shipwreck, or the inner secrets of the body, or it can film a TV mini-series or document daily political affairs. Computers enable access to the parts of the social stock of knowledge which are

stored in databases, or they may be used for simulating arousing or relaxing experiences. Information technologies bring us worlds beyond our immediate reach: worlds of nature, of human affairs, or of the recesses of our unconscious.[25] The idea of multiple worlds is introduced here to indicate how advanced information technology increases the availability of worlds. This is a preparatory step to understanding the character of information as a commodity.

Information as Commodity

The political economy of communication and information has already made substantial contributions to understanding information as a commodity.[26] In what follows I intend to supplement these political-economic perspectives with a view of information as commodity in one of the root senses of that term: commodity as convenience. Albert Borgmann's work on the commodity and technology is a *more soc.* *than technical aspect.* fundamental contribution to such an approach. In this section I shall explicate Borgmann's conception of the commodity in order to show how it can be extended to include information as a commodity.

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[25] These ideas owe a debt to the work of Alfred Schutz, particularly "On Multiple Realities," in Collected Papers, vol. 1 The Problem of Social Reality, ed. by Maurice Nathanson (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967).

[26] For several perspectives, see: William H. Melody, "Information: An Emerging Dimension of Institutional Analysis," Journal of Economic Issues 21 (September 1987): 1313-1339; Kent Hall, "The Economic Nature of Information," The Information Society 1 (1981): 143-166; Dallas Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory 1 (Fall 1977): 1-28; Sut Jhally, The Codes of Advertising.

Unlike Marxist political economy, Borgmann's conception of the commodity is not concerned primarily with its exchange value, and the transformation brought about once society is organized around the sale of human labour-power as a commodity.[27] Borgmann instead focuses on our experience of commodities as items for final consumption. In Borgmann's perspective, the consumer experiences the technological commodity as something which performs a function, but the machinery which lies behind this functioning is concealed. The commodity is experienced as the opaque surface of some deeper and uncomprehended apparatus. This perspective leads to another difference with Marxism: whereas in Marxism the opacity and fetish-like character of the commodity is something which it is supposed can be overcome with a change of production relations and the control of production by associated producers, in Borgmann the opacity of the commodity is an ontological condition of modern technology.

For Borgmann, the key to understanding the modern commodity is in its relationship to modern technology. Borgmann characterizes modern technology as a particular approach to reality which has become deeply ingrained in our civilization over the past three hundred years. This social pattern of taking up with world is termed the device paradigm. Under the reign of the device paradigm, reality is viewed as unreservedly open to alteration and manipulation for human purposes, through the use of scientifically-based techniques which are continually refined and improved. The ultimate purpose of modern technology, in this view, is to provide

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[27] See, Albert Borgmann, <u>Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life</u> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 259, footnote 5.

for the relief of human hardship and to increase the opportunity for cultural enrichment.

The device paradigm is premised upon the idea of maximizing the *availability* of commodities, and the term availability here takes on a special sense: "Goods that are available to us enrich our lives and, if they are technologically available, they do so without imposing burdens on us. Something is available in this sense if it has been rendered instantaneous, ubiquitous, safe, and easy."[28] There is a cultural price to be paid for availability of the modern commodity, however; this is what Borgmann refers to as the irony of technology. The Baconian promise of technology was to disburden us from the afflictions, hardships and vicissitudes of daily life, and to provide in their place the means and leisure for enrichment of our selves. The irony of technology is that the disburdening and enriching aspects of technology are more and more giving way to disengaging and distracting aspects.[29] Each of these aspects will now be addressed in turn.

Disengagement obtains because the device paradigm, in its splitting of machine and function, enables us to withdraw from the experience of the process of producing the commodities which we now take for granted. Heating of the home becomes a matter of turning a switch, rather than skilled and bodily interaction with reality to gather firewood, set the fire, and keep watch on the fireplace. The enjoyment of music can be procured instantaneously from media without drawing

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[28] Ibid., p. 41.

[29] Ibid., p. 76.

upon and developing our own musical skills. In short, "our contact with reality has been attenuated to the pushing of buttons and the turning of handles."[30]

There is, says Borgmann, both a split and a necessary connection between machinery and commodity in the device paradigm: "a split in the way in which we as consumers are familiar and in touch with the commodity on the one side, and ignorant and incompetent with regard to the particulars of the machinery on the other side; a necessary connection because it is possible only on the basis of discrete and prohibitively complex machineries to enjoy totally unencumbered and supremely refined commodities."[31] The key point about the device paradigm is that, from the consumer's point of view, it matters little by what means the commodity is procured, so long as it is delivered on demand. For example, a long-distance telephone conversation can be conveyed by satellite or microwave towers; this is unimportant to the consumer provided that telephone service is in fact procurable. What is important is that the machinery be as unobtrusive as possible:

> The concealment of the machinery and the disburdening character of
> the device go hand in hand. If the machinery were forcefully present,
> it would eo ipso make claims on our faculties. If claims are felt to
> be onerous and are therefore removed, then so is the machinery. A
> commodity is truly available when it can be enjoyed as a mere end,
> unencumbered by means.[32]

This point has deep ramifications for the implications of information technology for the device paradigm. Advanced information technology permits commodities to be

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[30] Ibid., p. 140.

[31] Ibid., p. 151.

[32] Ibid., p. 44.

delivered more efficiently, in more variety, more instantaneously, and more 'intelligently.' In this respect it can be thought of as merely providing incremental improvements to the promise of technology to disburden us from arduous daily toil. But there is more to it than this. As goods and services come to be provided more commodiously, the machinery which procures these commodities tends to become more concealed and to shrink. Electronic information technology, from television to computers, exemplifies this tendency towards ever-greater efficiency and power to procure commodities combined with increasing miniaturization achieved through radical technical innovation.[33] The commodities procured may remain the same, but the machinery is radically transformed to become less comprehensible to the non-expert. The digital watch, for example, indicates the time just as does a mechanical watch, but while we can take apart the mechanical watch to reveal its inner workings of spring and gears, the workings of the digital watch, should we attempt to inspect them, are too miniaturized to shed any light on their principles of operation: they are in effect indecipherable. The microcomputer, to take a more general example, is similarly impermeable to everyday understanding: it operates on theoretical and programming principles which only a small percentage of people understand with any degree of proficiency, and their workings are too small and intricate to permit intrusions to make repair even if the operating principles are understood.[34] The development of 'user friendly' computer software does not

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[33] Ibid., pp. 42-43.

[34] This is put forth as a general principle, to which of course there may well be exceptions of particularly ingenious individuals.

change this situation: it only serves to deliver processed information more commodiously, not shed light on the machinery of the device. And even if we do have considerable knowledge of the principles of computer operation, this would be "entirely cerebral" because the machinery itself is resistant to our interventions.[35]

The outcome of these developments, according to Borgmann, is that modern technology induces an atrophy of our skilled and embodied interaction with things in the world; it reduces our capacity and motivation to take care of things and repair them when they break down. Instead, the throw-away mentality encourages us to see artifacts as replaceable and as not bound by any particular ties of time and space, as not bound up with a tradition.[36] Commodities are fluid in time and space, replicable, and for these reasons they are not bound by context. Context is absorbed and concealed by the machinery of the device; the lack of contextual ties to the commodity is "a mark of the freely disposable character of commodities, of the absence of commitments which a context would enact, and of the possibility of combining commodities with few restraints."[37] The freedom and fluidity of commodities is purchased at the expense of our engagement with the machinery which procures them; we are therefore destined to take up only with the replicable surfaces of technological reality rather than engage with things in their uniqueness and depth, in a way which fosters the enjoyment of exercising and developing our own skills.

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[35] Ibid., pp. 149, 47, 48.

[36] Ibid., p. 81.

[37] Ibid., pp. 50, 54.

So far I have outlined how information technology, as part of the machinery of devices, contributes in important new ways to further occlusion and concealment of that machinery as it goes about procuring commodities: in short, how it contributes to disengagement. However, the commodities that are procured by way of information technology are not necessarily information commodities as such: the commodity which is procured for final consumption is not necessarily information in the general sense of some pattern of signs, symbols and images. In other words, microcomputers can regulate the provision of heating, transportation, and a vast range of other commodities, as well as information commodities per se. Information commodities as such include a narrower range of goods and services such as books, videos, data bases, and the various devices needed to consume them at the point of end use, such as terminals and VCRs.[38]

The idea of information as an index of the availability of worlds, introduced in the previous section, is in fact the achievement of information as commodity. Information becomes a commodity in Borgmann's sense when it is constructed and delivered by way of modern information technology, and makes new worlds available to us in ways increasingly unconstrained by particularities of time and place. Borgmann offers the example of videocassette machines which enable recording of television programming at convenient times, or the rental of cassettes on virtually any conceivable topic. As more information is made available in this way, the substrate of technical means—what Borgmann calls the background of

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[38] Cf. ibid., p. 152.

technology—is secondary to the moment of consumption of the final information product.

From Borgmann's perspective, information commodities contribute to the second irony of technology, that of the movement from enrichment to distraction. The promise of technology is to disburden us from toilsome labour so that we may cultivate skills and knowledge in culture and the arts, and participate knowledgeably as world citizens in the affairs of the community: in short, to cultivate political and cultural excellence. We have already seen how the technological delivery of an abundance of commodities serves to disengage us from the depth and context of things in the world; this process is continued as our leisurely pursuits are taken up in the technological procurement of culture. Information devices, such as television, which take up a considerable proportion of the leisure of many individuals, subvert their own promise of enrichment.[39] On the face of it television promises to free us from ignorance and the confinements of time and space: all of the dimensions, activities, and wonders of the world can be made conveniently available to us in their "cosmopolitan brilliance." Television is enthralling, even addictive, yet it is also accompanied by disappointment at the mediocrity of most of the programming, and guilt and sorrow about not engaging in more enriching activities. Borgmann explains the distracting effect of television as mainly one of displacement rather than indoctrination as such: displacement from other, more vigorous and engaging

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[39] For evidence on time use, see Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, pp. 128-129; see also, John P. Robinson, "Television and Leisure Time: A New Scenario," Journal of Communication 31 (Winter 1981): 120-130; H. Sahin and J.P. Robinson, "Beyond the Realm of Necessity: Television and the Colonization of Leisure," Media, Culture and Society 3 (January 1981): 85-96.

activities such as games, reading, conversation, taking walks, and interaction during common meals. Television also is the medium par excellence for incessantly reaffirming the promise of technology in glamorous depictions of commodities in advertisements and programming. Borgmann's explanation of the attraction of television is similar to that of Horkheimer and Adorno: the routine of daily work leaves us exhausted and predisposed to easily succumb to the shallow relief of relaxing, beer in hand, in front of 'the box.' We are left blank-eyed and never really satisfied by what we watch, our faith in the promise of technology perhaps faintly rekindled by the glamorous depiction of commodities.[40]

Undoubtedly Borgmann's assessment of television is not a positive one, but the grounds for it are, I believe, deeper than the ones provided by Simonds contrast of print and television in the previous chapter. The reason for this can be found in Borgmann's observation, which in my view is a crucial one, that:

> the peril of technology lies not in this or that of its manifestations but in *the pervasiveness and consistency of its pattern*. There are always occasions where a Big Mac, an exercycle, or a television program are unobjectionable and truly helpful answers to human needs. This makes the case-by-case appraisal of technology so inconclusive. It is when we attempt to take the measure of technological life in its normal totality that we are distressed by its shallowness.[41]

Borgmann's point can be extended to include the whole gamut of media devices, from the weekly newsmagazine to the compact disc and the videotape, as components within an overall pattern of devices designed to procure information

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[40] Borgmann, <u>Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life</u>, pp. 141-143, 206.

[41] Ibid., p. 208. Emphasis in original.

commodities. Thus, against Simonds, I would stress that the printed text partakes of the commodity character in many of the same ways as does the video image/sound; indeed, when Borgmann says that television conforms to the device paradigm because it makes no demands of its viewers and "requires no commitment in dress, transportation, or manners," and is "equally available in its content," he could equally be referring to the newspaper. There is, to repeat what I have said earlier, no intention here to deny the important differences between the cognitive and affective features of print, image, and sound as they are replicated in media devices; what *is* stressed is the *continuities and connections* between these modes as they have become institutionalized in the social structure. The printed book, for example, can make a fairly serious claim to be one of the first modern commodities. The continuities between these modes are becoming even more pronounced as the integration and convergence of media modes and systems progresses. Photographic and televisual images are, it is true, ideally suited for conveying the colour and sparkle of the commodity, but this does not make them radically opposed to the achievement represented by the printing press, but the continuation of a single pattern of development. In Borgmann's words, "television is not so much the result of unfortunate developments in the media industry, as it is the inevitable completion of technological culture."[42] However, as I shall argue shortly, Borgmann's view of television as fitting into the fixed social pattern of the device paradigm is somewhat different from my conception of the social relations of

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[42] Ibid., p. 142.

information, which emphasizes that the perspicuity of the information commodity can vary to some extent according to the context in which it is produced.

The power of Borgmann's analysis of our experience of modern technology is that it pinpoints quite precisely the ways in the information commodity leads to disengagement and distraction. Information devices enable us to encounter worlds beyond our immediate reach without the risk or expenditure of effort, resources and skill which would otherwise be required. In doing so we become disengaged from the context from which the information emanates, and the process by which it is transformed into a commodity. The maximization of the availability of information becomes the imperative of information media. The information commodity distances the citizen from the world scene which it depicts in living colour. The formal constitution of relations between user and information device creates a detachment from the frequent depictions of the misery occurring in all parts of the world: we can always change channels or turn the page. There is little reason to expect this to change under futuristic visions of still more enhanced information availability which offer the ultimate promise of the information commodity: "All information in all places at all times."[43] Instead, the reality of world misery can be submerged even more as we marvel at the power of our devices and celebrate our freedom to zip and zap between channels and data bases, all the while enjoying the thrill of the chase and knowing that to stop would risk the vaguely unsatisfying fare of mass culture or, less likely, the disturbing encroachment of a suffering humanity.

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[43] David Godfrey and Douglas Parkhill, Gutenberg Two, 3rd rev. ed. (Toronto: Press Porcepic, 1982), p. 1.

Just as culture is less and less something that we make for and among ourselves, but is enacted for us upon the television screen, so viewing television news does not inform us as a preparation for political involvement, but is a substitute for it. Just as the device paradigm sets up a radical division between its machinery and the final commodity, so the television news commodity erases all traces of its own process of production.

However, it is important to ask to what extent is opacity the result of an ontological condition, and to what extent it is due to particular social arrangements. Television news, for example, is produced using sophisticated information technology, which as Borgmann points out tends to create an aura of impermeability; however, the actual processes of news production depend upon identifiable institutional policies, procedures and practices which are extirpated from public view and replaced by the omniscient, and objective eye of what Dahlgren calls the television news Subject.[44] It is as if the human producers of the news become extensions of the impermeable devices which surround them. There is, I believe, some degree of freedom in how the information commodity is constructed and portrayed: for example, it can take the form of an objective or naturalistic representation, or alternatively of a human construction which exhibits some self-reflexivity in acknowledging its own historically produced character. In other words, the content of the information commodity is important, because it may serve

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[44] The television news Subject refers to more than the subjectivity of the individuals who appear on the screen to narrate events; the TV news subject is the outcome of a collective institutional and technological effort. See Dahlgren, "TV News as a Social Relation," pp. 291-292.

to counteract some of disengaging effects of our interaction with information devices. If the news media, for example, offered more opportunities for reflection upon their role in society, and accordingly made their programming more open to outside comments and criticisms, then there might be some mitigation of the objectivity which underwrites their aura of authority (and also their opacity).

The content of information is in turn dependent on the context in which it is produced and circulated: the social relations of information. This leads to one further critical comment on Borgmann's perspective: if television and other media devices are part of a larger pattern of technological culture (and we concur that they are) then what are the principal sources of the momentum of this culture? This is perhaps too large a question to be answered satisfactorily at all, let alone in the present work. However, there is an obvious, even too obvious, aspect of the information commodity which should not be neglected: that on a global basis its leading producers are private corporations involved in profit-making. We do not need to accept that all of our civilization's current predicament can be simply attributed to the "laws of motion of capital" in order to still accept that a capitalist industrial structure, and American capitalism in particular, has generated the most voracious production of information commodities which have in effect flooded the international market, affecting audience tastes and local production values, and perhaps stamping an indelible model for the future of television in particular. What this suggests is that a full analysis of the information commodity would require a political-economic aspect.

Political economy highlights two important aspects of the information commodity. The first is that the relative availability of the information commodity will depend upon its monetary price. If there is a tendency towards the privatization of information industries and the provision of information on a user pay basis (which I believe there is) then information will only be available to those who can afford the relevant devices and services. The political economy of information thus highlights inequalities in the availability of information.

A second contribution of political economy relates to the predominance of advertising-supported information in the affluent liberal-democratic states. What is significant about this ostensibly free information is that its provision depends upon the audience itself taking on commodity characteristics.[45] The audience becomes an object which is measurable according to demographic and lifestyle characteristics, and it is the predicted attention of audiences to particular media content which generates the exchange-value for the production of information. In my view this is a very important aspect of the social relations of information. It suggests that many of the information media are primarily geared to creating audiences for advertisements, rather than attempting to stimulate the formation of an active and critical public. The orientation to the audience as commodity also means that media industries are not primarily concerned with conveying a particularly systematic ideology, but instead aim to attract the attention of audiences with whatever content (admittedly within a range of acceptability) will serve this purpose. The constitution of audience as having a commodity aspect, which is a direct consequence of modern

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[45] See, Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism."

capitalism, therefore locates citizens within social relations of information which are only secondarily, at best, oriented to fostering a critical and interested public.

From Borgmann's perspective these concerns may appear relatively marginal because they do not acknowledge that the primary status of the modern commodity rests upon the radical split between machinery and function; whilever this remains the case, then other changes are relatively cosmetic. Even if everyone had access to the most advanced information systems, for example, the problems of disengagement and distraction brought about by the device paradigm would persist, and indeed be exacerbated. On the questions of the audience as commodity, the possibility of other more participatory models of public involvement in the operation of media systems, and also the fostering of more self-reflexive kinds of media content, I believe there is considerable leeway for making the information commodity more perspicuous than it is at present. Even here, however, I would agree that the social pattern of expectations which drives modern technology make it difficult to introduce modes of communicative praxis which impose extra burdens, rather than offer instant availability.

Information as Self-Formation

The idea of information as self-formation is not often discussed in the literature, nor does it appear to be dominant in common sense understanding, although it has a legitimate etymology. This aspect of information refers to the process of shaping some or all of the faculties of the mind, as in when we say

someone's view of the world is informed by a particular sensibility or philosophy. Thus, according to Webster, information is "the act of animating or inspiring"; or in a more epistemological vein, it is the "process by which the form of an object of knowledge is impressed upon the apprehending mind so as to bring about the state of knowing."[46] This sense of information is hinted at in Simonds' definition of what it means for a citizen to "be informed": "the capacity to grasp, interpret, appraise, and draw appropriate inferences from factual information, the ability to follow and evaluate an argument, the ability to comprehend and employ abstract concepts (as opposed to simply using, perhaps blindly, an abstract term), the ability to make connections between events, or ideas, or attitudes—the ability, in short, to 'make sense' of the political world."[47] To be informed is the capacity to grasp, integrate, and ultimately judge a world.

The idea of information as that which animates or inspires the human mind is explored in an essay by John Kekes entitled "The Informed Will and the Meaning of Life."[48] Kekes' argument is framed as a response to the problem of the will, which is the "universal disposition of living things to maintain and perpetuate themselves."[49] The problem for human beings is that the will operates partly as a function of the meaning which people find in their lives; if they cannot find

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[46] Webster's Third New International Dictionary (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam, 1971).

[47] Simonds, "On Being Informed," p. 596.

[48] John Kekes, "The Informed Will and the Meaning of Life," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 47 (September 1986): 75-91.

[49] Ibid., p. 80.

meaning, they may not want to live. People want not only to live, they want to

live *well*:

> The insistence on the continuity between human and other forms of
> life must be supplemented by the recognition that while we seek
> meaning for our lives, and may or may not find it, plants, animals,
> birds, and insects do not. What is necessary and sufficient for a
> meaningful life is the satisfied want to live well. The simple will,
> striving for survival, is insufficient to bring this satisfaction about; the
> informed will, however, may do so.[50]

Humans find meaning in activities which enable them to live well. In order to find

an activity meaningful, the wants leading to the activity must have several

characteristics. First, they should be self-directed rather than manipulated. The

discovery that a want has been manipulated occasions a sense of violation and

destruction of meaning because we recognize that the want did not emanate from

our circumstances and character. Second, for wants to be meaningful, not only

must they be self-directed, they must also be directed to the appropriate object:

> [M]eaning is not a purely subjective matter, depending on states of
> mind, but also an objective one, depending on interaction between us
> and the world. It remains true that what endows activities with
> meaning is the will of the person engaging in them. The will,
> however, is not just simple wanting, but wanting the appropriate
> object, and that requires it to be informed.[51]

Kekes also distinguishes between objects ('goods') according to whether they are

internal or external, both of which Kekes considers necessary for a meaningful life.

External goods are "possessions or rewards we receive from institutions," such as

wealth or prestige, which are scarce and competitive, and which are often unequally

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[50] Ibid., p. 81.

[51] Ibid., p. 83.

or unjustly distributed. Internal goods, in contrast, do not depend on distribution from an external source:

> They are satisfactions obtained from doing well at the projects involved in our lives. The satisfactions may be greater or less, but their extent does not depend on a system of distribution. Internal goods come from the satisfactions we have in directing ourselves in accordance with our visions of meaningful lives. Their source is the belief that we are becoming proficient at the skills and beginning to possess the dispositions required by our visions, and as a result, we are making ourselves better.[52]

Kekes does not underestimate the difficulties, such as poverty and brute repression, in living life with an informed will. Nor would it seem appropriate to aspire to live well if this depended on constraining others from fulfilling similar aspirations—although Kekes does not specifically discuss this. Arguing explicitly against a philosophy of the absurdity of human existence, Kekes intends to open a space of hope in which humans can enjoy their partaking of the world. Overall, we can say that Kekes employs information in the sense of a process of giving meaning and coherence to life as a whole.

It should be understood, however, that we are not advocating Kekes' perspective as *the* substantive content of information as self-formation. Rather, Kekes perspective is chosen partly because he uses the formulation of the "informed will," although he nowhere explains why he decided to speak of the will as *informed* and not, say, as cultivated. Certainly, the content of Kekes' vision of the informed will is of more than passing interest. It is, moreover, convergent with Albert Borgmann's proposal that we begin to reverse the disengaging and distracting

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[52] Ibid., p. 88.

effects of technology through the cultivation of "focal practices," such as hiking or cooking, which develop our skilled and embodied interaction with things as they are deeply embedded in the context of the world. The cultivation of focal practices will, Borgmann hopes, encourage a reorientation to technology which recognizes the cultural price of procuring things technologically, and concedes that not all things can be so procured.[53]

Whether Kekes' informed will or Borgmann's focal practices, I cannot in this dissertation go so far as to attribute to any single such vision the status of an organizing principle for the meaning of life as a whole. Instead, I am introducing the idea of information as self-formation as an open-ended problem for culture and politics (or, a cultural politics) rather than as something for which this dissertation can offer a definitive solution.

As Kekes makes clear, attention to information as self-formation raises the problem of meaning: not in the sense of the conditions of intelligibility which a linguistic proposition must meet, but to the individual's sense of the meaning of his or her life within the socio-cultural order. This highlights how information and meaning are in one sense convergent, rather than opposites as is often assumed in common sense understanding. In much the same way as the Enlightenment split fact and value, science and ideology, so too the split between information and meaning is a separation of fact and interpretation. One aspect of the question of

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[53] Borgmann, <u>Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life</u>, Part Three. To explicate the idea of focal practices, and to do it justice, would go beyond the scope of the present chapter, which is primarily to suggest a classification of information relevant to informed citizenship.

interpretation is that of *self*-interpretation: the ways in which people orient themselves to the meaning of life, how they justify the worth of their own projects to themselves and others.

Albert Borgmann and others have argued that what I call privatism, the consumption of commodities procured through modern technology, is the central pursuit of the modern self, and thus one of the main sources for the meaning of life. The implications of this for politics and citizenship lie in the fact that the credibility of the liberal-democratic welfare state derives significantly from its ability to deliver the goods, i.e. to guarantee the conditions for continued and expanded commodity production. What will happen if social inequalities increase, as they appear to be, and various global, national, and local factors render the continued expansion of the commodity economy more tenuous? C.B. Macpherson expressed a hope that the instability of capitalist societies will induce a change of consciousness, a change in the deep structure of the self from a passive consumer of utilities to an active developer of inner potentials, which would generate demands for genuinely democratic participation in the state and the workplace. However, Macpherson also recognizes that the populace may opt for maintaining system stability and the promise of the consumer lifestyle, in which already-limited political participation would be further diminished into the pseudo-democracy of a "corporatist plebiscitarian state," aided by the latest opinion polling and electronic voting technology.[54]

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[54] C.B. Macpherson, <u>The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice</u> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 127, 100, 41.

We are living in a period in which the underlying assumptions and aspirations of the high-consumption lifestyle in the advanced welfare states are, I believe, likely to be increasingly challenged, even as the unmet and frustrated expectations of that lifestyle are played out in inter-group conflict over distributional issues. The implication of all this for the informed citizen can be comprehended if we consider the following proposition: the citizen who interprets information must do so on the basis of prior (or at least concurrent) self-interpretation as to the projects and aspirations which he or she considers meaningful. In other words the self must itself be informed—that is, engaged with a pattern of life which is relevant and precious—at a deep level for it to interpret and evaluate the flow of social information. The problematic of the informed citizen, then, cannot ignore this self-interpreting activity of the citizen as to his or her needs, motivations, and projects. The present era is one of great fluidity in self-interpretations, due to the initial demythifying effects of the Enlightenment, the disorganizing effects of contemporary crises, and the availability of a vast range of old and new modes of cultural, political, and spiritual practice which emphasize renewed communitarianism and, in some cases, renewed mystification. The New Age focus on techniques of personal and spiritual growth, the deep ecology of the Green movement, feminism, the moral reaction of the Christian New Right—these are just some of the more visible offerings to be found in the veritable 'meaning bazaar' of contemporary culture. We cannot digress here to analyze the mix of old and new truths and delusions which these offerings contain, but we do want to stress that the availability of and demand for new self-interpretations—for informing the deepest

levels of the self—is an integral part of the problematic of informed citizenship. The transparent, radically autonomous, and ahistorical self, of which Anthony Downs' apathetic citizen is a paradigm case, must be replaced by a self characterized by interdependence, translucency and self-interpretation, and social disequilibrium.

Information as self-formation plays a vital part in providing the citizen with a sense of what is important and fulfilling in life. This fundamental sense of orientation in the world is what also helps guide the citizen in his or her interpretation of incoming information. And the citizen should expect to be the object of even more intense information influx. An increasing amount of political struggle seems to be conducted in terms of a battle for public opinion using the whole gamut of information management techniques: audience targeting, message design, media strategy, and opinion management. Consistent with the technocratic strand of Enlightenment thought discussed earlier, we are witnessing the "scientization of politics," in Habermas' phrase. State agencies actively utilize democratic propaganda to supplement "meaning deficits" in contemporary culture. This attempt to manage meanings is not only a state activity, but is one which is undertaken by public *and* private institutions, who are not only seeking to sell their commodities, but to justify their existence. This pattern is likely to intensify if public dissatisfaction mounts against labour force 'adjustments' brought about by industrial restructuring and relocation, and out of growing recognition of corporate links to ecological devastation, militarization, and third world oppression. Both private and state agencies, therefore, have an interest in manufacturing credible

public images. The citizen can expect even greater bombardments of information as he or she is caught in the field of fire of high-powered public image wars.

Today's informed citizen must, therefore, be able to cultivate a sophisticated appreciation of the subtle strategies of technocratic politics. What Kekes calls the informed will is the source of the structures of relevance, of what is important for our lives and those that follow, relevances which enable us to choose what is important from the available information. No longer informed by a unitary and absolute tradition (to the extent that it ever was), the informed will must be manifested flexibly in everyday struggles for a balance between universalizing modes of information and the particularity of fully contextual, embodied engagement with the world of nature, people and things. The informed will provides the structures of relevance without which we cannot navigate the expanding universe of information.

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