

## The evolution from “mass society” to “information society”. Fragmentation and specialisation in the information age.

### INTRODUCTION: “MASS SOCIETY”, A CENTURY OF CONSTRICTED SILENCE

The concept of “masses” used to be depicted as superstitious and ignorant human associations concentrated in small groups in the countryside or alienated in massive impersonal cities, where individuals were mainly concerned with trivial self-satisfaction on a profit-driven market. However, in industrialised countries the development of an industry based on mass production generated a crucial inner conflict between “the sense of self-reflexivity and particularisation” of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and “the alienating and impersonal tendencies in modern culture and society.”<sup>1</sup> “Massman”, was a term coined by Ortega y Gasset in 1926 referred to a “man previously emptied of his own history; (...) lacking an inner self, an intimacy inexorable and inalienable.”<sup>2</sup> Though this aristocratic approach, in the same line as Le Bon or Spengler, speaking of “the few” –cultivated and refined– leading “the masses” forecast the uprising of the National Socialist party in Germany, the brutal Spanish Civil War, which attracted “brigadas internacionales” from Russia to US, was fought so individualistically that caused the loss of the war. An unexpected reaction from a man “emptied of his own history.”

On considering the contemporary contexts of the above-mentioned authors we infer the lack of efficient and free of charge and censorship means of communication. Their works (from Marx to Weber) do not consider the positive output that technological progress has also made possible on the externalisation of the masses’ thoughts, sometimes without much success (it would be foolish to ignore the reaction of those who recently have used populations for their own benefit), but of which manifest events have also been recorded.

“Masses” is a term nowadays in disuse but, more than ever, citizens and consumers seem to be treated as hordes of mindless individuals. The conflict between the two poles, reality and advanced technological “jargon”, is showing widespread reactions.

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<sup>1</sup> Epstein, M., *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture*, Oxford, 1998, on: [www.focusing.org/apm\\_papers/epstein.html](http://www.focusing.org/apm_papers/epstein.html), Retrieved on 4.11.03

<sup>2</sup> Ortega y Gasset, J., *La rebelión de las masas*, Madrid, Revista de Occidente, 1960, in Giner 1976, p. 77

## THE SHIFT TOWARDS INFORMATION SOCIETY

### 1. Mass Technology for a mass consume

“Information” seems an obscure word when used as a qualifying term for society. Some believe that it is a commodity in itself, while others restrict this definition when being used publicly<sup>3</sup>. The “information society”, a “society in which its sociological and technological forms of organisation impregnate all the circles of its activity”<sup>4</sup> is basically a complex development of the industrial era with a decrease of employment in the primary and secondary sectors. Beniger’s idea on the control of information<sup>5</sup> as the crucial factor to understand the new era explains quite accurately the developments of the Cold War, in which American and Soviet Industries, funded by the Government, produced war-advanced technology. Computing (control of information), rocketry (control of means) and nuclear energy (control of power source) became then the basement for the birth of our modern consuming societies once their developers begun applying its discoveries for the “benefit” of the “mass”, first in the national market, then in the rest of the world.

The beginning of the “global information society” came to occur during the 1980s, after Regan and Thatcher culminated the privatisation of telecommunications, and academics, journalists and spin-doctors produced the textual endorsement of a promising capitalism without restrictions: “A global conversation in which every one will be able to participate”<sup>6</sup>. The great human family would then see the end of conflicts and the rise of true human solidarity. But this idealised “cooperation between nations” was primarily aimed at the opening of the telecommunication markets to global economic flows.

At first glance the “new order in the world” appears literally dominated by few Western transnational corporations, while the rest of the countries either struggle to survive in it or deepen themselves into increasing unbearable debts. Though this is the main picture, many of the countries that initially accepted such economic or cultural incursions have also become an independent developer of local and international products. In the case of culture, “techno-communication” “is creating a particular side of the world where differences count, (...) there is an inner conflict [in each of us] that has its impact upon the production of genuine

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<sup>3</sup> William, 1996, p. 96

<sup>4</sup> Castells, 1996, p. 51

<sup>5</sup> Beniger, 1986, p. 434

<sup>6</sup> Gore, A., *Remarks prepared for delivered by Vice President Al Gore to the International Telecommunications Union Development Conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on March 1994*, Washington DC, Government Presidency, United States, March, 1994 [[http://clinton1.nara.gov/White\\_House/EOP/OVP/html/telunion.html](http://clinton1.nara.gov/White_House/EOP/OVP/html/telunion.html)] Retrieved on 23.02.03

knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> And it seems clear that while “we should not respond to the deficiencies in the hypodermic model of media effects by celebrating the ‘active’ viewer (...) continually waging war on the structures of textual power, (...) equally we should not fall into any technologically determinist argument. Some technologies are used as proper tools.”<sup>8</sup>

Not long ago, millions of people reacted against the attacks on Iraq, and the Internet was an emerging key tool for such global agreement, but we all know the response of US and UK Governments. To explain this, Negri believes that the capitalist order is unable to control “the desires and creativity of the multitude, [therefore] it will have to create a state of permanent war in order to re-establish its control over us.”<sup>9</sup> But, if individuals are then more creative, more demanding, does it not mean that the capitalist order has helped in this process of awareness? And if so, is not this anticipating its own end?

## 2. Fragmentation of “techno products” and specialisation of the inner-self.

Over-informed societies produce two basic effects upon individuals: inattention of the informative environment and fragmentation of products and services, meaning, fragmentation of the message.<sup>10</sup> The absence of a logical and truthful argument averts the accumulation of critical and rational speech, and acquiring an object or piece of information is supposed to be satisfied by a new consume, which temporarily diminish the anxiety produced by the adulterated need. However, this vicious cycle has repeated itself so incessantly, that we sense the failure of the purchase of products, the serialization of behaviours (where to go, what to do) and the agreement with what our commanders (politicians, journalists and experts) say, to fulfil our needs.

We already consider external messages at earlier ages from different perspectives<sup>11</sup>. Our analysis depends on the quantity and quality of our knowledge, but low cost technology and a willing group of “reality informers” has improved the range of choices<sup>12</sup>. It is true though that ordinary people seek the deep understanding of the world only when they are able to

<sup>7</sup> Rodríguez, 2003, p. 7

<sup>8</sup> Morle and Robins, 1995, p. 127

<sup>9</sup> Negri, A., on *The End of Capitalism*, [Television broadcast] BBC 4, Saturday, 15/03/03 00:25 hrs.

<sup>10</sup> Any of the well-known Soap Operas would be a good example: there is no need to watch the whole series of *East Enders*, pick up an episode and you will get easily involved.

<sup>11</sup> See Brown, M., ‘*The less you wear, the more you sell*’, Media Guardian, The Guardian, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2003, p. 4

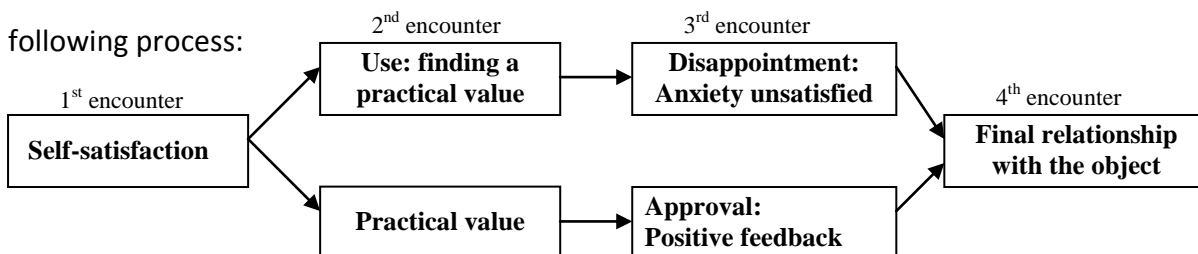
<sup>12</sup> “Big Blogger” is a British Council initiative in which Western and Middle Eastern journalists will report through the Internet the first World Summit on the Information Society in Johannesburg 2003 and Tunisia 2005. In Plunkett J., *Big blogger*, The Guardian, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2003

<http://media.guardian.co.uk/mediaguardian/story/0,7558,1076284,00.html>; retrieved on 3.11.03

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understand it in their own terms, but who turns to the “immediacy of ordinary life as soon as his feelings are tired of being controlled by their rationalisation,”<sup>13</sup> Thus, not everything is about being knowledgeable. For example, *Big Brother*, *Pop Idol*, *Model Behaviour* and so forth, make of externalisation a process leading to a quick success. And other programs like *You’ve been framed*, *Tarrant on... CCTV*, *Fake it*, *Blind Date*, *Wife Swap* or even *BBC news*, acquaint us with the methods of “direct observation” (CCTV or manageable cameras). The commonality between all of them is that voyeuristic observation is also a protagonist. However, if ratings reflect an innate desire to observe, the current media may be capable of masking it or debilitating it but not subduing it. There is a personal space that we, once matured, naturally defend from external intrusions and will not be exposed so freely.<sup>14</sup> We decide more cautiously on what can fulfil our needs in the best way. Consequently, TV channels<sup>15</sup>, local councils or supermarkets pack their shelves with the widest range of products. The particularisation of our senses has brought about a new reaction from providers. Cochrane, a former BT futurologist, affirms that “Speed of response matters more than ever before and customers want what they want, when they want it and at a price and quality they dictate. To fail to satisfy is to fail to survive.”<sup>16</sup>

Broadband, IP telephony or mobile videophones reflect our inner demand for a new technology concomitantly developed with our requirements. And yet, they need to be fully completed before their consuming potentials start being understood as tools of assistance rather than simple self-satisfaction utensils. In the medium term, our tangential desires<sup>17</sup> are kept as a result of the inertia acquired in the cycle: wish – consume – satisfaction – new wish; and mature later. It is necessary to break down the techno-tool into its satisfactory and practical values, and find out at what levels the person who has used it experiences the following process:



<sup>13</sup> Adorno, 1992, p. 57

<sup>14</sup> In contrast to this view, Channel 4 will be soon transmitting *The Importance of Being Famous*, where we will see ordinary people doing anything to gain fame.

<sup>15</sup> It is important to remember that the same TV channel that broadcast *Teenage Big Brother* or *Euro Trash* did so with *Travels of a Gringo*, *Dying for Drugs* or *The Day I’ll Never Forget*.

<sup>16</sup> Cochrane, P., Opinion, Talking Business, Nov/Dec 2003, p. 9

<sup>17</sup> Tangential (superficial, partially artificial but still humanly innate, secondary), in addition to ideal or primary desires (as the sensation of achieving final happiness). I consider that tangential desires are innate to humans and arise from the primary ones as a result of our individual external and internal circumstances.

What we know is that objects exclusively based on self-satisfaction do not last. Entertainment companies, financial groups and manufacturers know that, and when advertising on its own, for example, has seemed to be less able to create brand loyalty than before, a reward card has been needed to make your dreams come true in a heavenly island. These new consuming products enhance our desire to be mentally and physically satisfied, but the new special effects of the movies, reward cards, stock options or sensitive garments will not hide the wish to be told the truth on deficient public services, health and education. The truth about those issues is complex, but not impossible to thoroughly explain. Our demand reflects the tendency - perhaps constant and increasing - towards the specialisation of current knowledge and the self-awareness of our position to solve related problems. Technology is there to help too.

## CONCLUSIONS

Masuda wrote in 1980: “(...) as mutual exchange of information expand, so will mutual understanding deepen, touching problems that lie outside the boundaries of nations and states.”<sup>18</sup>

We might eventually overcome some of the major problems and setbacks of the information world, but there are more concerns waiting ahead, such as the commercial side of GM food and the Human Gene. Today, beyond the popular agenda, meetings of boardrooms from large chemical corporations are already setting up the groundwork for the so-called “Biology Century”. Will the advanced communication networks be of any assistance in the struggle for an equitable use of genetic breakthroughs? Professor Richard Rose from the Oxford Internet Institute presented last month a survey affirming that not using the Internet in the UK is not a matter of “social class or income but of age and education.”<sup>19</sup> But not everybody is able to pay the costs of being connected to the Net and attend a good school, and get by with £4.50 an hour. The decrease of “techno-prices” in, for example, Latin America and Asia-Pacific is a fact<sup>20</sup>, so are low wages and exploitative conditions for children.<sup>21</sup> Though these poor conditions seem

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<sup>18</sup> Masuda, 1990, p. 48

<sup>19</sup> Timms D., *How will the other half live?*, The Guardian, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2003

<http://media.guardian.co.uk/mediaguardian/story/0,7558,1076274,00.html>; retrieved on 3.11.03

<sup>20</sup> See ITU telecommunication indicators update on “International Internet Bandwidth in Asia-Pacific”:

<http://www.itu.int/itu-news/issue/2002/10/indicators.html>; Retrieved on 4.11.03

<sup>21</sup> Querejeta, E. (Producer), Corcuera, J. (Director), *La Espalda del Mundo*, [Motion picture, Documentary] España October 2000

to be sluggishly decreasing<sup>22</sup>, the pace at which rich countries advance makes the yawning gap even wider.

Solidarity, among ordinary population, gives the impression to be in good health. In the UK, where 1 percent of the population manages 90 percent of the wealth, general public donations to charitable work reached £5.41 billion during 2001/2002, more than seven times the amount provided by UK businesses<sup>23</sup>. Nowadays, these percentages appear to be increasing thanks to our accumulation of knowledge -a deeper understanding of local and international problems and their causes is already demanding more action from governments and official institutions. But in the case of the energy and chemical industries, helping disadvantaged local communities is a reality as long as the lion’s share of the business remains in their budgets.

After 1789, mankind has fought to gain total freedom, equality and solidarity among humans. Considering the current amorphous representation of the former two, solidarity seems doomed to be sentimentalised and consumed as a commodity to calm anxieties as well. The future seems more comfortable for a major number of people, but differences will widen and progress on current problems will not be so noticeable.

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<sup>22</sup> See Edstats on The World Bank Group, on <http://devdata.worldbank.org/edstats/query/default.htm>

<sup>23</sup> Ramrayka L., *Bridging the Gap*, The Giving List, The Guardian, 17th November 2003, p. 8