

Ten Myths on Democracy and Communication

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True False

1. ☐ ☐ Dictatorships are sworn enemies of news media.
2. ☐ ☐ Public opinion is effectively manipulated by dictatorships using mass media.
3. ☐ ☐ Alternative media (weeklies, mimeographed pamphlets) have only marginal influence compared to the big press and electronic media.
4. ☐ ☐ As censorship disappears, the alternative media gain ground.
5. ☐ ☐ Alternative media must stick to rudimentary methods in order to remain authentic.
6. ☐ ☐ Political parties that wish to grow must possess their own news media.
7. ☐ ☐ In a democracy, audience and circulation rule the fate of a program or a publication.
8. ☐ ☐ In a democracy, the press is not subject to official control.
9. ☐ ☐ Only democracies are interested in democratizing information.
10. ☐ ☐ Even if willing, it is difficult to change the contents of news, for there are no alternative sources and programs.

1. False. Only some news media have been the target of southern Latin American dictatorships, suffering closures, censorship, and repression through well-known procedures. Meanwhile, perhaps to make up for the loss of economic prospects, dictatorships tried to light up the stage. Technological innovations, such as colored TV and satellite communications linking directly with the great culture-producing centers, were encouraged by the "national security" regimes which followed the consummation of the 1964 coup in Brazil. Electromagnetic waves (FM and UHF), offered new opportunities for private investors.

Consequently, over the past 20 years, the news industry became one of Brazil's most dynamic sectors, ranking among the top in terms of growth rate. This is likely to happen in Chile and Argentina too, largely because of the scientific-technological revolution. One may conclude that things would have been very much the same without authoritarian regimes.

Dictatorships, however, have no doubt encouraged the absorption of local radio stations by giant broadcasting consortiums, like the Brazilian Rede Globo, while siding with the big press in its controversies with local newspapers. Likewise, they allowed press tycoons to go into financial and real estate speculation (to mention only those areas most sensitive to mass communications), and used credit facilities to stimulate automation in newspapers...Such favors were paid back in silence, compliance, servility, or complicity through omission.

2. False. National security regimes not only crushed every hostile voice, and neutralized or corrupted other media outlets, but also spent millions in retaining the most expensive US publicity agencies to promote their image and think up slogans like the one well-known in Brazil: love it or leave it.

Both the regimes and their victims were naive enough to believe in the power of mass media over the mind. On 30 November 1980, a group of outstanding Uruguayan exiles in Mexico warned a TV audience that the result of the plebiscite being held by the military should be overlooked as it had surely been induced by overwhelming official propaganda: almost simultaneously, cables were beginning to unveil the radically different and unsuspected reality.

Sociologists may account for that memorable "No", and perhaps explain how Argentinian leader Peron rose to power in spite of an overtly hostile press to later fall while enjoying great popularity with the media. Meanwhile, we may reasonably conclude that, luckily, public opinion may be rather insensitive to press campaigns.

3. False. The size of the audience is just another element to evaluate the influence of a specific medium. At first, the "southern cone" dictatorship tightly controlled and censored every form of ideological expression. In time, perhaps yielding to international pressure or because it gained confidence, the military relinquished their hold on the reportedly less influential media. Weeklies, movies, plays, and popular music were thus granted greater room for maneuver and gradually became channels for the silenced majority. But controls remained tight over radio and TV on account of their larger reach.

Humor took the lead with a more daring stand (Pasquim, Satiricon, and El Dedo in Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, respectively) and cleared the way for more formal criticism. If a specific way of calling or saying things managed to get through to the public, other news media might pick it up, thus triggering nation-wide responses of doubtless significance.

Every paper on the Brazilian press takes into account the leading role played by the *nanica* (dwarf) press. Likewise, weeklies and radio broadcasts in Uruguay are given analogous credit.

4. Unfortunately false. Paradoxically, alternative news media, although the most affected by censorship and by their most active opponents, are the first to succumb...when freedom is restored. At least, this was true for Brazil and Peru, to mention just two cases. Formerly the only dependable source of information about trade unions, unofficial politics, and cultural events, the alternative media are gradually displaced by the big press, which is uncensored, has relaxed self-controls, and now deals with sensitive topics, and even copies successful schemes devised by the more daring competitors, applying them with better technology and skill.

Lacking in management and business support, the alternative media lose ground

and eventually fall out of the race. In 1979, more than a hundred political weeklies sold approximately half a million copies in Brazil. Today, just one predominantly political weekly (*Jornal do Pais*), has a national distribution, while the satirical *Pasquim*, which, in the "good old days" of Medici, sold over 100,000 copies a week, now prints a base 5,000. Feelings aside, this is still a much regrettable loss considering the following priceless contributions made by the alternative press: the radical and new way it does the news; the fresh contents in its messages; its unorthodox means of conveyance; and its unconventional distribution pattern. All these, rather than an unfriendly stand vis-a-vis government policies.

5. Equally false and dangerous a myth underlying many frustrating experiences in alternative communication. As Brazilian carnival organizer Joazinho Trinta puts it: "only intellectuals enjoy misery, ordinary people like luxury". The subject is controversial; in any case, it will not hold that rudimentary printing is a requisite for authenticity. On the contrary, advanced technology allows practitioners themselves to organize and record their original messages at low cost, to be broadcast on short-range transmitters or entered into private video-cassette circuits. For example, Brazil's large mass-media oligopolies have, so far, been successful in blocking legislation that would enable neighborhood organizations (*favelados*) to operate short-range radio frequencies of no commercial value.

This does not mean that every innovation should be welcomed or that we should overlook the negative effects of dependency aggravated by the large-scale utilization of micro-electronics and teleinformatics, as is the case with repressive forces, finance conglomerates, and transnational-gearred mass media. We only wish to warn against the blunt rejection of any technological advance, against the thinking that the Third World must remain poor to be happy, that natives must go barefoot and hungry to preserve their cultural identity.

6. False, too, even if political parties share this belief and wishfully think that printed messages communicate better than electronic images. As shown above, mass media may perform poorly as public opinion-makers. Party press serves rather as a domestic tool, to reinforce existing convictions or educate followers, than to gain political ground in

the course of an electoral campaign. Leonel Brizola could not count on a single newspaper, TV, or radio station of his own, yet, won the Rio de Janeiro elections by taking advantage of the limited opportunities given by the existing media, particularly TV.

Democracy and civil society would greatly benefit if political parties devote some of their efforts to building a more democratic national information order, instead of striving to reinforce their own sectarian press.

7. One of the most ingrained and false beliefs concerning mass media. Privately-owned radio and TV (unusual outside the US and Latin America), live off advertising. The price paid for newspapers and magazines barely covers the cost of papers. As pointed out by Adolfo Aguilar Zinser (CESTEEEM: Third World Centre of Economic and Social Studies, Mexico), from an economic point of view, news media are suppliers of services. They sell space or time for advertising. British press tycoon Lord Thompson sarcastically admitted this in his notorious definition of news: "nonsense used to fill in the space between ads".

If advertising holds the purse strings, and if a customer is always right, then decision-making lies in the hands of advertisers, that is to say, governments and a handful of transnationals. In 1980, Rafael Roncagliolo and Noreen Janus investigated 22 Latin American newspapers. Research revealed that transnationals took up 31 percent of the advertising space (occasionally reaching 50 percent), while local ads were mostly small (classified ads) and showed little among the rest, thus losing negotiating power. Other local advertisers hired the services of transnational agencies (J. Walther Thompson, Young and Rubicam, McCann Erickson, etc.).

The assumption that these agencies and companies are not politically biased and have no influence on the contents of the "nonsense" printed between ads, is a bet on the ingenueness and simplicity of the audience.

When *Third World* magazine had reached a circulation of over 100,000 copies a month, while selling more than any other publication in many African countries, we contacted one of these agencies to offer our pages as a suitable vehicle for

Brazilian advertisers interested in reaching African markets. To our surprise, we were not included in their register of media. Had they possibly overlooked us? "Political press is not considered media by our agency", was the laconic answer. No comment.

8. Another myth, as false as the previous one and largely for similar reasons. Over the past decade, in spite of pronouncements by the "Chicago Boys", the state has expanded its economic grasp in Southern Latin America. Consequently, a substantial share of the money currently spent in advertising flows out of the public sector, whether authorized by state enterprises or supplied by lavish divulcation campaigns, official announcements, communiques, and so on. If this were not enough, governments also decide over concessions on electro-magnetic waves, subsidies on paper, tax exemptions, and, in some cases, even consumer prices. They need not resort to hateful censors to stifle hostile news media; neither do they have to go beyond their faculties to prop up friendly publications.

What is actually surprising about the newborn democracies on the southern tip of Latin America, is that such broad powers have, so far, been used discreetly. The present situation, however, should not be taken for granted, and, in any case, if democracy is to be preserved, regulations must be passed to control the discretionary use of pressure by governments. How is official advertising managed? Is it allotted to those media that really need it? Mass communications can be effectively steered, operating this through a subtle system of punishment and reward. This is another reason why it should be clearly exposed and subjected to public debate.

9. Unfortunately false: The most serious and radical attempt at democratizing the press in Latin America was Velasco Alvarado's, whose military government expropriated all the Peruvian newspapers with national circulation in 1974 and turned them over to the mass organizations: peasants, urban workers, artisans, liberal professionals, cooperativists, educators, and others.

Under the new administration, newspapers gained creativity, a critical approach, a broader outlook, and sold more

copies than ever before or after. In 1975, Velasco was ousted and the papers were returned to their former owners, but the lesson remained that free press need not be synonymous to a privately owned media. Of course, at least in theory, nothing can prevent governments from legislating the democratization of mass communications, in spite of which we must admit that such a task is yet to be undertaken.

Mexico is the only exception, for in 1979, after a long public debate, the constitution was amended to include the right to information as a necessary complement of the freedom of expression. However, five years have since gone by, and the regulations to make it effective have yet to see light.

10. The tenth most common false statement turned into a myth by news media. Alternatives do exist. Over 80 Third World national news agencies currently cover international events, with a pool linking them. Special news services are supplied by ALASEI, a Latin American agency; alternative sources can also be found for photographs; and more films are produced annually in the Third World than in the US and Western Europe combined.

Creativity is to be found at home. There are more theater groups in Montevideo than in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo together; yet, there is not a single locally-produced "soap opera" on Uruguayan screens.

We lack the political decisiveness to make use of the existing alternatives, while refusing to buy US "dumped" cultural productions whose unfair competition is a truly harmful practice, unlike the insignificant price cuts needed by Brazilian shoes or Uruguayan textiles to penetrate the US market. Notwithstanding this, accusations are plenty at a moment when both South American countries must desperately increase their exports in order to preserve their painfully recovered democracies.

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