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# *Mass media and lifestyle rationalization*

Critical theories of television share one or more of the following three assumptions: television has a homogenous audience; television produces homogenous programms; and television is a medium of misinformation and manipulation. On the basis of one or more of these assumptions, television is seen as an instrument of domination and manipulation of the audience. The function of television for the ideal of the responsible citizen is nihil. In this article I will contest these assumptions, but I will still defend a critical position with respect to television.

## Television as an arena of negotiations

My first proposition is that the conceptual assumptions of critical theory (Frankfurt Theory) about the homogenous audience and/or the homogenous production of programmes are not plausible. However, I like to preserve two things: first, its general sociological approach of mass media; second, its normative option of democratization of the lifeworld. My second proposition is that television has not only a function in giving political information and background knowledge from a pluralistic perspective; it also promotes the negotiations about lifestyles, and personal and collective identities which is already going on in the lifeworld.
My third proposition is that, when television has negative effects with respect to the normative standard of a culturally and politically active citizen, this is because of structural inequalities in housing, schooling or income. There is not exclusively one factor responsible for failing to meet the requirements of a culturally and politically active citizen. There is, however, no evidence that television in itself is responsible for creating structural inequalities or even in maintaining them by manipulating consent.
In the first section, I present three major trends in Western societies. In the second section, I discuss a normative concept of the responsible citizen which can participate in political discussions about political universalizable norms and in lifestyle discussions about life problems. Then I will introduce in the third section for analytical reasons two, I hope well-known, concepts of Habermas: lifeworld and system. In the fourth section I discuss with the help of these concepts four functions of modern mass media, especially of television, and my three propositions.

## Three sociological trends

According to modern sociology, Western societies are subject to a process of modernization. In this process three interdependent trends can be distinguished: societal differentiation, secularization and individualization (Naumann & Hufner, 1985; Beck, 1986).
Differentiation or division of labor is in western societies a universal pheno-

menon. Not only in economics, but also in society as a whole, processes of differentiation take place. It means that subsystems of economy and state have emerged, and that the educational system, mass media and informational institutions and other cultural institutions have got a relative autonomous place (Bell, 1976). Relevant for my second proposition is the rise of institutions of art and connected with it, the rise of cultural output. For example, in New York nowadays more than 150.000 artists claim professional status, exhibiting at some 680 galleries, producing more than 15 million art-works in a decade. Contrast this with the situation in 1945 with a handful of galleries and no more than a score of artists (Harvey, 1990, p. 290)

Sociologists analyze the process of modernization not only as a process of differentiation, but also as a process of secularization, of social-cultural changes ('disenchantment' as Weber would say). This means that traditional cultural and religious values lose their plausibility. The resulting 'gap' has been filled partly by scientific knowledge and some kind of utilitarian orientation (Gellner, 1989). However, also the 'spirit of consumerism' (Campbell, 1989) has emerged; this 'spirit' was already signalled by Weber when he spoke about the aestheticism of the Stefan George Kreis with its stress on individual style and its hedonism. With this spirit I do not mean consumerism, material hedonism, or some other kind of materialism, which centers around the consumption of material goods. The spirit of consumerism refers to a lifestyle phenomenon. Material goods are only important inasfar as they are the bearers of identity marks or expression of a specific lifestyle.

Individualisation means first individualisation of social inequality (Beck, 1986; Neuman & Hufner, 1985). Traditional social organisations of inequality, as classes and families, will finally vanish. As a consequence, only a minority of children is educated in the traditional family, with the father-figure as the representative of social roles and conventions.

Secondly, this trend of individualisation implies that the individual becomes his own 'identity manager'. The individual himself has to do the job: he has to make decisions whether to marry or to follow a guru, to stay unemployed or to be retrained, to have children or to adopt children, to live in the city where one works, or where one is married, to live in a splits family or to give up working, etc. As a consequence there is a continous search for personal and collective identitities (Harvey, 1990, p. 302)

Thirdly, the individual is also dependent on new agencies, mostly state agencies, which implicitly or explicitly determine identity models. Agencies in the sphere of medical and mental health care, housing or unemployment departments prestructure the choices of the individuals. It is here that mass media as well have an important role to play.

## Atomized consumer or responsible citizen?

These societal processes have significant impact on the personal identity of

individuals: the individuals are set free, they are no longer compelled to conform to norms and rules of traditional forms of life. The individual is free from traditional norms and conventions and has to choose between infinite role models.

The concept of identity in this sense stresses the atomized individual, who can privately choose out of infinite possibilities and who on the other hand is constrained by the functional imperatives from the side of economy and state. The post-traditional subject has to pay a price for modernization: it has to adapt itself to the fluctuations of money, power and commercial trends. As a consequence individuals become more or less the same.

Many sociologists identify the considerable costs of the process of civilization: they describe the difficulties individuals have enduring the burden of choices; they lay bare the invisible forms of symbolic or non-symbolic power which prestructure their choices (Bourdieu, 1979); they describe the fall of the family as one of the last resources of intimate relationships (Beck, 1986, p. 200); they complain about the loss of traditional popular cultures (Muchembled, 1978) and about the disciplining of everyday life (Foucault, 1976); they describe the rapidization of social life with its incessant changes of dominant lifestyles and commercialized interactions (Jacoby, 1987). They describe the consumerism and hedonistic lifestyle which individuals are compelled to live (Bell, 1976).

Common to these studies is the point of view of a passive lifeworld with the actors as victims of trends, propaganda, manipulation and advertisement. The victims are atomized consumers, boring men in the crowd. The common presuppositions of these critical studies is, that individuals need some kind of conventional context, which support their fixed identity. When everything seems to be in flux (as it is in the age of mass media), this kind of personal identity is in danger.

However, when we change perspective and see the process of modernization from a different concept of identity, we can discern this process as an essential ambigous phenomenon, which has also another side. It can be a challenge for the reconstruction of old forms of solidarity and for the rise of autonomous and unique individuals. Seen from the perspective of the individuals social differentiation requires especially in the core institutions of the lifeworld, family and public sphere, a new postconventional identity to cope with role conflicts and different diverging expectations (Korthals, forthcomming).

Individualization in the modernized lifeworld is a general trend, which has the consequence, that conventional, traditional lifestyles are becoming obsolete and loose their plausibility. Postconventional identity can become a real option. This concept stresses that ego-limits are not fixed, and that there are no fixed inner or outer boundaries between individual and society. The core element of the postconventional individual is the compentence to participate in discourses. This means for the modern citizen, first, that discourses on po-

litical questions become differentiated from discourses on cultural issues. Political questions about the equal distribution of power, chances and goods become logically more and more separated from cultural issues of e.g. collective identities, lifestyle and hermeneutic understanding of life problems. Political discourse about the coordination of social conflicts is supplemented with negotiation processes about lifestyles and collective identities. Secondly, it means, that in the lifeworld a pluralism of lifestyles and collective identities emerges. This pluralism implies a communicative form of negotiation and compromise, in which symbolic and aesthetic practices play an important role.
The quality of this kind of postconventional citizenship is dependent upon the free entrance to political discourse and negotiations about lifestyles.
The quality of citizenship is first dependent on information, on knowledge; a well informed public is a first condition for democracy as Habermas in his early work on the structure of the public sphere stressed (Habermas, 1962). Political problems presuppose information and free resources of information are therefore essential for a democracy to function. But besides the public debate about information and rights and obligations, there is a debate about lifestyles, about ways of handling interpersonal problems, and about personal and collective identities. Therefore, the public sphere is not only the sphere where political problems can and should be discussed. The public sphere is the place where negotiations of lifestyles and identities take place as well.
From this point of view I will analyze the modern mass media: in what sense can they contribute to the development of this kind of responsible citizen?

## The struggle between lifeworld and system according to Habermas

In order to analyze the role of the mass media in modern societies, I think Habermas's concepts of lifeworld and system are very helpful (Habermas, 1981; 1986). The concept of lifeworld characterizes the communicative coordination of action through traditional norms or through communicative actions of the actors themselves. Relevant in this context is that communication has always three aspects: cognitive, normative and expressive or identity aspects. In communicative actions actors negotiate about the boundaries between these aspects, and thereby define their goals. System is characterized by the coordination of the consequences of actions by steering media, for example money in the subsystem economy and hierarchical power in bureaucracy. In systems the goals of actors are determined by media; in systems communicative negotiation has not the function of a form of coordination of actions.
According to Habermas, social development of Western societies is determined from the Middle Ages on by the ongoing struggle between lifeworld and system. In the first place modernization means that the systems of economy and state are more and more differentiated from the lifeworld. Char-

acteristic for premodern western societies is that lifeworld and systems are identical.

In the second place, modernization means rationalization of the lifeworld. The lifeworld has three components, which in the process of increasing rationalization are differentiated from each other but in the same time are organized according to the principle of symmetrical discourse. The process of rationalization as a whole implies, that traditional norms lose their obligatory character and that processes of negotiation and discourse take their coordinating role. The first component, culture, has been differentiated in science, morality and law, and art. In the second lifeworld component, society, the public sphere gets a relative autonomous place, and discourses play in this sphere again a pivotal role. In the third lifeworld component, the socialization agencies have acquired a social place relative independent of the traditional norms and values of the particular forms of life, which is underlined by compulsory school attendance.

In the third place, the differentiation of lifeworld and system does not mean that they do not interact. On the contrary, the factual development of Western societies is a result of the constant conflictual interaction between these two kinds of principles of social organisation.

Seen from the systems, four roles regulate the interactions between lifeworld and system: the subsystem of economy and family interact on the one hand through the role of labourer, employee and on the other hand through the role of comsumer; the subsystem of state and lifeworld is regulated through the role of client of civil services and of citizen. The exact definition of these roles is the core issue of the struggle between modernized lifeworld and subsystems.

Only when this interaction has the consequence that lifeworld components are destroyed which are fundamental for the social integration of the lifeworld, Habermas speaks about 'colonization'. Only when the four roles are defined unilateral by the subsystems, one can speak of colonization. So the ongoing struggle between lifeworld and system, which leads to partly monetarization of parts of the life world, and to state influence in parts of the lifeworld is not a priori detrimental for the lifeworld. But colonization is taking place when in culture this means a civilizing offensive of state organs and professional groups of medical and mental healthcare against communicative relations. Another example is when in the component 'socialization' therapeutical or educational agencies intervene against the background of the huge state influence in everyday life. In general, the particular shape of lifeworld institutions and lifeworld events are the results of this struggle between lifeworld and systems.

Habermas stresses that the increasing influence of state agencies in the family and other socialization agencies is only possible on the basis of the preceding process of rationalization of the lifeworld, which implies the devaluation of conventional norms and of practices which regulated social life in premodern

times. One can describe this ironically as the triumph of civilisation which has left large groups of people estranged, uprooted and disoriented. State agencies jump, so to speak, in to the vacuum which arises, as traditional norms lose their plausibility.
But the lifeworld and its communicative actors are also able to react to this devaluation of social conventions. This reaction requires that the individuals built up new lifeworld institutions and new communicative, postconventional, identities. Everything then depends upon the issue, what these new institutions are.

**Mass media between business, state bureaucracies and lifeworld**

With the help of these concepts of system and lifeworld analysis of the functions of the mass media is very fruitful in the sense that I can substantiate my three propositions. In accordance with the two systems and the two relevant components of the lifeword, one can distinguish between economic, state-bureaucratic, political and cultural functions of the mass media. Modern mass media have therefore multiple functions: first, they fulfill economic interests, second administrative or state bureaucratic functions, third political functions and fourth cultural functions. In all these functions an interesting question is, which groups can make use of the institutions of modern mass media and under what conditions.
As a matter of fact, I am speaking about analytical distinctions, which in reality are very difficult to made. One television program can contribute to all these functions simultanously.

First, the economic functions, which are traditionally the only ones which Marxist theorists of mass media tend to take into account. According to them mass media are the instruments of capital owners or the instruments of the big corporate interest. They manipulate the public by compelling it to buy their products and indirect by their propaganda for the consumer way of life.
I will not totally reject this position, because mass media can have these functions. But I think that this position is one sided first because it does not recognize the relative autonomous place of the lifeworld communications. It underestimates the very large influence on the opinions and attitudes of people of their own cultural environment (Enzensberger (1974) has already argued for this position). Second, it neglects the many conflicts between the various corporate interests. These conflicts translate themselves in the content and form of the mass media. For example, on the one hand, advertisement in the mass media advocates a materialist way of life: to buy as many of those marvellous products as possible. But on the other hand, economic powers have a big interest in lower wages, and in this sense in a sober way of life. Also, mass media have critized big enterprises, for example Exxon, with

the Alaska Oil catastrophe. Even the powerful military industries are critized after the Gulf War in 1991.
In a direct way mass media themselves have economic functions: insofar as they represent an industry with many jobs. They are the market for e.g. news agencies or cultural enterprises. Here considerations of ratings do play an enormous role. But as long as there is competition among various enterprises, I think this direct economic function is not as detrimental as some may think. For example, the competition between the commercial and public networks in the Netherlands compels the commercial network to start with a serious political discussion program, modelled to the BBC programms.

Secondly, mass media have a function in respect to government bureaucracies. They can fulfill state-bureaucratic interests, in reproducing political themes which are preselected by the state bureaucracies (a factor exclusively stressed by Horkheimer & Adorno (1971); Schiller (1973). They can strengthen the role of state client and of passive citizen by giving the impression that medical and mental health care takes care of the people.
Chomsky (1989) for example, argues that this function is the only one. He gives sometimes plausible arguments that news programms of commercial television in the United States do follow in a slavish way the official policy of the Pentagon and the White House.
The French Marxist Louis Althusser (1969) also claims that television belongs to the cultural state apparatus. Television is an instrument of state power. It influences not directly through the messages, but by adressing the audience as an active subject, giving the audience the illusion that is has a say in politics.
I think this position overestimates the administrative function of television; state-bureaucratic interests are inherently conflictual. So the messages on the screen have not homogenous meaning and therefore the manipulative power of one message can be neutralized by another messages which are inconsistent with the first one. Enzensberger remarks rightly in my view: 'The degree to which the power struggles within the ruling class are extroverted by Western television is without precedent in history and all current theories of manipulation only observe to obscure this fact' (1977, p. 249).
Another objection raised to this position is that it underestimates the influence of the lifeworld (cf. Meyrowitz, 1985). Government and state bureaucracies are subject to legitimation processes in the lifeworld, which they can not control completely. In the USA the role of mass media in the Vietnam War, the Watergate affair, the Iran-contra affair was mostly against vested government interests. More recently is the very important role the mass media played in the liberation of the East European countries. Not only television, but also video recordings with political and cultural news, have accelerated the emergence and the expansion of the democratic movements in Eastern Europe.

In the Netherlands the parlementary inquiries about the relationship between The Dutch Shipbuilding Enterprise (RSV) and the government have been on television, and an other inquiry about the government housebuilding policy. Conservative circles have critizised the impact of these programms and indeed at least one conservative secretary for economic affairs had to disappear from public life.
Another example is the downfall of the iron curtain. Chomsky (1989) argues that the Cold War is in the interest of large political and military groups. Contrary to his statement, public opinion on television (see below, third function) has strongly contributed to the end of the Cold War.

With the next two functions the issue of active postconventional citizenship is at stake. With respect to both functions, the crucial question is, is there really a forum, not in the economic sense but in the sense of the agora, of the democratic marketplace of the free discussion of opinions, cultural conventions and lifestyles.
Mass media have, thirdly, political functions, in the sense of contributing to discussions in the public sphere about the political issues of a society and of the world. Because of the contradictions in state bureaucratic interests, the television has also a distinct function in the sphere of public opinion.
Here again, the internal competitition between networks (also cable news and local news) often compels television news to focus attention on severe political conflicts, on government scandals, on hidden agendas. For example, under pressure from cable news and local news, the main networks in US (ABC, NBC, CBS) have been edging away from the day's headlines toward features and themes. Documentaries about housing problems, the jobless, failing health care are the new direction.

Fourthly, the mass media have cultural functions, in the sense of functioning as a field of inter alia competition and negotiation for the pluralism of collective identities and lifestyles, which come up in the lifeworld. Modern mass media play a substantial part in cultural processes of negotiation of lifestyles and of collective identities. They do not only have an explicit political and implicit cultural role as the elder mass media, e.g. the printing press (Eisenstein, 1979).
Drama, excitement, images, novelty, theatre, personal and collective struggles, in short: the presentation of embodied selves on the screen is the core characteristic of television. Television is therefore very appropiate for communicating about lifestyles, the way people behave, move their bodies, but also, the way they in dramatic situations try be theirselves, try to give sense to their lives, to solve their life problems. For example, there emerges in my view a new kind of intimacy when during television programms people tell very intimate stories about themselves (e.g. loss of their child or husband) and still objectivate their feelings. As a matter of fact, television has not cre-

ated this new kind of intimacy; in literature and painting artists have always inter alia tried to objectivate their own intimate feelings and experiences without loss of authenticity and sincerity. So it is not a new phenomenon, only the scale of it is new and television is nowadays an important factor in the discourse about lifestyles and life problems.
Here also the inherent conflictual character of the organisation of television can help to promote a climate in which cultural debates and negotiations are normal. In television entertainment departments there are tensions between on the hand the cultural apparatus of producers, writers, actors and on the other hand the managers, and the corporate executives. Producers in the cultural apparatus are often interested in producing original, realistic or controversial programming. Interviews with television cultural workers indicate that many working within television do not want to produce bland, conformist works and attempt to create more provocative shows (Kellner, 1990, p. 119). Network managers however are often concerned with ratings and profits and thus desire programms, that will not offend their massive audiences, corporate sponsors, and special interests groups.

Because of these tensions, social movements often succeed in getting entrance to television networks with their view on lifestyles and life problems. Kathryn Montgomery shows in her book *Target: prime time* (1989) how in the United States network television was pushed to make concessions to the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the gay movement, the sexual revolution and other cultural movements. In the eighties, when in the United States the conservative right was in presidential power, television often was more progressive in showing diverse cultural images.
Therefore, television should also explicitly function in the communicative processes of negotiating about lifestyles with symbolic and aesthetic means. Social movements as ecological movements, feminist movements, third world movements and so on are also movements which criticizes certain lifestyles and types of identity, and television should give attention to this.

My third proposition implies that television can only have negative consequences with respect to all these functions in combination with structural inequalities and social factors. When family relations are broken down, when communications have sunk to a very low level, it is not possible to neutralize the negative aspects. But this is in a certain sense a truism: every communication that is not contrasted with other communication processes has negative effects. Also when towns or villages are so constructed that children can not come into contact with their peers, they do not develop that minimal capacity of critical and moral judgment, which is necessary for living in a rationalized lifeworld, and which optimizes television's democratic and liberating effects. Unequalities with respect to mere formal education through schooling is less relevant. As Piaget (1932) and his followers has shown, in

acquiring critical communicative competences peer communication is more important that the often authoritarian schooling and education.

## Conclusion

Ideology critique has often critized television as a means of covering up societal power relationships, and as instruments of economic and or state power. Mass media, culture industry as a whole, are often seen as ways of stupifing or disciplining political consciousness by delivering dull entertainment or dramatic and superficial shows. I do not deny that there is dull entertainment and also stupid and cheap amusement. But I think this critique underestimates the innovative power of the audience and the conflictual character of the medium itself. It underestimates the way people decode television with the help of their own cultural background and it underestimate the developments in these cultural background. Habermas has already pointed out the fact, that the Frankfurt School neglected the lifeworld (Habermas, 1981, I, p. 489f.). Secondly, this criticism neglects the power conflicts within society at large and the competition between and within the networks of television and other television producers as cable news and local news.
Thirdly this kind of ideology critique asks the wrong questions and my second proposition makes that clear. It conceptualizes television as an exclusively cognitive medium. But television has also a cultural function, not only a cognitive function in giving information from a pluralistic point of view. Seen from the perspective of the rationalization of negotiation processes of lifestyles and collective identities, the symbolic and aesthetic practices of mass media can and should stimulate these communicative processes, which enhance the quality of citizenship. Democracy has not only to do with a political structure of neutralizing power relationships and with the equal distribution of rights and obligations. Democracy has also strong connections with a democratic culture, i.e. with the way people discuss and negotiate their lifestyles, cultural values and their collective identities. Television, far from a medium of psychological control (Adorno), can influence these negotiation processes in a rational way.

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**SAMENVATTING. Michiel Korthals. Massamedia en de rationalisering van levensstijlen Massacommunicatie 1991/4, p. 291 - 301.**
In dit artikel wordt uiteengezet dat de traditioneel ideologiekritische benaderingen van televisie er ten onrechte vanuit gaan dat de produktie en de consumptie van televisieprogramma's op cultureel homogene wijze tot stand komt. De auteur verdedigt de opvatting dat televisie niet alleen een cognitief, informatief medium is, maar ook een cultureel, esthetisch medium. Op basis van deze functie kan televisie in een individualiserende samenleving in belangrijke mate bijdragen aan de rationalisering van het onderhandelingsproces over persoonlijke levenstijlen en identiteiten.