The Information Superhighway, Media Culture, and the Struggle for the Future

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All the utopian talk of information superhighways and the great media societies of the future helps to mask the fact that contemporary capitalist societies are in a situation of seemingly permanent crisis with increased human suffering due to deteriorating social conditions. In the United States, more than 34 million people live below the poverty level; over 3 million are homeless; over ten million are out of work; and millions lack basic health insurance and guaranteed medical care (Hoffman 1987).

 During the 1980s, the distribution of wealth took billions from the poorest 20%, while the wealthiest grew vastly richer. At this time, under the neo-conservative economic politics of Reagan and Bush, "the gap between the richest and poorest families became wider than at any time since the 1940s: the take home income of the poorest fifth of the nation fell 5.2%, while that of the wealthiest fifth grew 32.5% and the middle fifth's grew only 2.7%. The inflation adjusted, after-tax income of the richest 1% grew 87% and nearly equals the total income of the poorest 40%. In 1990, according to a report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the top fifth's after-tax income will equal that of the rest of the population combined" (Grossberg 1992: 313).

 Data released by the Congressional Budget Office in March 1992 showed that "between 1977 and 1989, income expanded for all Americans by a total of $740 billion, and an astonishing $550 billion of this -- 74 percent -- went to the top 1 percent of U.S. families. The incomes of this tiny elite of 600,00 families grew from an average of $315,000 to $560,000 over the twelve-year period (in inflation-adjusted US dollars)" (McQuaig 1993: 62). Moreover, these statistics show that people on the low end of the income-scale actually saw their incomes decline.

 Currently, the proportion of low-income earners in the U.S. labor force continues to rise and their condition continues to decline, while high-income workers' wages continue to rise, creating a two-tier wage structure and growing class divisions, according to a 1994 report issued jointly by the Labor and Commerce Departments of the Clinton administration (Associated Press, June 3, 1994). The report noted that the "real" hourly compensation of American workers stagnated in the last two decades and actually fell for male workers, a development "unprecedented in the past 75 years in this country" (ibid). In Britain as well, the richest 10 percent is reportedly "almost twice as well off as it was in the late 1960s, while living standards of the poorest sixth are worse than at the beginning of the 1980s, according to two major reports published in 1994 (The Daily Telegraph, June 3, 1994).

 Furthermore, in 1988, "the nations of the world spent over $110 for each man, woman, and child on military expenses -- overwhelmingly more than on food, water, shelter, health, eduction, or protecting the ecosystem" (French 1992: 37). Moreover:

> From 1980 to 1984, world military spending grew from $564 billion to $649 billion (in 1980 prices), a growth rate of over 3.5 percent. Over 5 percent of the

production of the world, 27 times more than was spent on overseas development, was spent on the military in 1983, most by industrialized countries. Global military expenditures in 1985 were $900 billion, more than the income of half the human race. Military expenditures surpassed the combined GDP of China, India, and all of sub-Saharan Africa-- a sum comparable to the combined GNP of all of Africa and Latin America (French 1992: 37).

Meanwhile, the conditions of everyday life, even in the metropoles of the United States, are disintegrating dramatically. Numbers of homeless and unemployed continue to grow; epidemics of cancer, AIDS, and other deadly diseases proliferate with no cure in sight; crime and violence are on the rise; tobacco, drugs, and alcohol take millions of casualties yearly; drinking water continues to be contaminated by toxic chemicals and basic foods are adulterated with chemicals, additives, and pesticides, many of which contribute to deadly diseases. Accidents and deaths in the workplace grow, while people are subject to increased surveillance, insecurity, and cutbacks in social benefits.

As compensation for decaying social conditions, those who can afford it are offered an always increasing dose of media culture and consumption. Numbers of channels on cable television continue to multiply, with current estimates of more than 500 channels on the horizon. There are also predictions of the imminent arrival of supplementary programs available on demand via computer in the immediate future. The hours of television watching continue to grow, the amount of advertising continues to increase, thus the colonization of leisure and society by media culture continues apace.

But those who are most exploited and oppressed by the social order can afford little more than the "free" entertainment provided by media culture, especially television. As an escape from social misery, or distraction from the cares and woes of everyday existence, people turn to media culture to produce some meaning and value in their lives. Sports offer identification with glamour, power, and success, "empowering" those who identify with winning teams and stars. Soap operas and situation comedies provide education for coping in the contemporary social order, while action entertainment demonstrates who has power and who doesn't, who can and cannot exercise violence, and who does and does not get awarded with the benefits of the "good life" in the media and consumer society. Advertising demonstrates how to solve problems and how to be happy, successful, and popular -- through proper commodity behavior. Films glamorize the "American way of life" and provide unreal models of identification, while images of violence constantly increase.

Many individuals practicing cultural studies celebrate this culture and way of life and thus contribute to the perpetuation of an unjust and oppressive social order. In addition, those who celebrate the coming information society tend not to focus on what kind of society produces an information highway and multi-media cornucopia for its privileged denizens while denying others the basic necessities of life. Without critical perspectives on contemporary media society and its emerging information and entertainment infrastructure, all celebrations of an information highway and coming media utopia are purely ideological, serving to pave over the current misery of millions and increasing poverty of U.S. culture and society.

Indeed, surrender of criticism and oppositional resistance to the injustices and oppression in the contemporary technocapitalist societies is nothing more than capitulation to a way of life that produces incredible misery and suffering for people throughout the world. Moreover, to some extent the media and information society is already here and what wonders has it wrought? Has, indeed, the entertainment and information of the present age brought about increased happiness, freedom, and well-being, even for those privileged to access it?

Perhaps a future age will look back at this era of political and media culture with disbelief. Perhaps denizens of an age of interactive technologies will look back at the passive couch potatoes of this era in wonder. Perhaps those able to access information from a wealth of sources from computer data bases will be astonished that in this era the vast majority of people depended on television for their prime source of information. Perhaps later generations who have access to a vast array of significantly different and better cultural texts at their fingertips will be amazed that people actually watched the programs of commercial television, radio, and film during the present era. Perhaps individuals in a future age will be astonished that people watched so much television, saw so many poor films, listened to so much mediocre music, and read such trashy magazines and books, hour after hour, day after day, year after year.

People in the future may indeed look back at our age of media culture as an astonishing age of cultural barbarism, in which commercially driven culture industries pandered to the lowest common denominator, pouring out films, TV shows, novels, and other artifacts which depicted violence as the way to solve problems, that debased women and people of color, and that repeated the same old tired genre formulas over and over. The endless sequels of popular film and eternal recurrence of the same in the fields of television, popular music, and other forms of media culture might strike a future age as highly primitive and barbaric. A future age might look at an era that idolized Sylvestor Stallone, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Beavis and Butt-Head, fashion models, and other celebrities as highly peculiar, as very weird. Future generations may look at our advertising-saturated culture as the crudest and crassest commercialism, as the one of the most amazing wastes of time and resources in the history of civilization.

Perhaps future historians will be astonished that during the 1980s and 1990s, mediocrities like Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton were Presidents of the United States; that reactionary Margaret Thatcher and nullity John Major ruled England; that Helmut Kohl and his pedestrian conservative party ruled Germany; that Italy was ruled by Christian and Social Democrats who were revealed to be highly corrupt, followed by the election of a media baron who used disgust with the current political system to mask his reactionary political ideas; that lackluster conservatives Brian Mulroney and Kim Campbell governed Canada; that drunken thug Boris Yeltsin ruled Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union; and that similar mediocre, greedy, corrupt, and vicious individuals ruled much of the world.

Future ages might look back on the incredible concentration of wealth and striking class differences, the phenomenal amount of world hunger and poverty, the deadly diseases, the violence and social disorder, and lack of humane and egalitarian social institutions and perceive this condition as truly astonishing. Our time might thus be looked upon one day as a dark age of incredible ignorance, backwardness, and brutality where life is much more nasty, brutish, and short than it needs to be.

Perhaps our time will be looked at as an especially backward period when individuals had not yet adjusted to new technologies, when they were overwhelmed by new media, and were not yet well enough educated to govern themselves and control the technologies and media. Perhaps a future generation will come to terms with the new media and technologies and use them to enhance their individual lives. Perhaps the growing choice of media artifacts will empower individuals to increase their realm of choice and control over their culture and thus to increase their autonomy and sovereignty. Perhaps in the future there will be media study groups, like the book study groups of our era, in which individuals gather together to critically dissect media artifacts and media education will be a standard part of schooling from grade school on up to the universities and beyond. Perhaps individuals will learn to use the new technologies to communicate with each other, to produce their own media artifacts which are circulated and distributed throughout society, so that previously marginalized voices are able to speak, so that the full range and diversity of cultures find expression, so that individuals and groups can speak to others, be creative, and participate in the production of society and culture.

Perhaps future individuals and governments will discern the importance of culture and subsidize a wide range of cultural artifacts, freeing cultural expression from the tyranny of the market and the iron yoke of advertising. Perhaps the works of the monstrous media conglomerates -- Time/Warner, SONY/Columbia, Paramount/Viacom/Blockbuster, Disney/America -- will be shunned and abhorred by audiences who find their products intrinsically debased, insulting, and boring, and these conglomerates will wither away, to be replaced by a vibrant spectrum of media cultural expression and a wide range of visions and voices.

Perhaps, ... but perhaps not. Perhaps the future will spend more time watching more and ever stupider products and the lowest common denominator will sink ever lower, to an era of cultural barbarism impossible to envisage in the present. Perhaps the present will appear as a Golden Age of individualism, freedom, and democracy to future inhabitants of dystopic societies, much as the post-holocaust, apocalyptic science fiction films present our late 20th century present as utopian compared to the dismal future depicted in the films.

In any case, the coming media culture and information highway is probably, in one form or another, our shared fate and so we should begin thinking what sort of a future we do and do not want and should act accordingly. Cultural studies and media activism can play some role, however modest, in this struggle for a better future. Cyberpunk, science fiction, and a future oriented cultural studies can articulate imagined and possible futures and help to guide our present and future choices and action. Reflection on possible media futures calls attention to the urgency of impending tasks for cultural studies and politico-cultural activism that have been neglected or suppressed in the tumult and confusion of the present.

On the positive side, we are living in exciting times in which new media and technologies are producing new possibilities for communication, cultural expression, and ways of living everyday life -- at least for privileged individuals. We should not forget, however, the great discrepancies between rich and poor, the overwhelming excess dissipated by the rich and thus sufferings of many others at their expense, and should struggle so that the underprivileged and wretched of the earth can attain the same opportunities as those more fortunate. Moreover, we need to

consciously come to terms with our new technologies and culture, and devise ways to use them to enhance our lives and to make them available to all. This requires reflection on media and technology and the challenges and problems of living in a new media/technological society. With these concerns in mind, I would suggest that cultural studies needs to address several topics that have been pointed to in recent years, but not really incorporated into its projects and problematic.

<u>Critical Media Pedagogy</u>.

 Cultural studies has often underplayed the importance of developing pedagogies for promoting critical media literacy. While the Frankfurt school believed that the culture industries were overwhelmingly manipulative and ideological, some versions of cultural studies argue that the media merely provide resources for audience use and pleasure. Avoidance of its images and messages seems to be the upshot of the Frankfurt School critique, while some cultural studies simply celebrate sports, Elvis, fandom, Madonna, and other media phenomena.

 The Frankfurt school's total rejection of mass culture seems inappropriate, as media culture is here to stay and, if anything, its products are becoming increasingly popular and powerful. Yet mindless celebration of media culture, without cultivation of methods to promote critical media literacy, is equally pernicious. Thus, it is important to pursue a project of developing a media pedagogy and to teach ourselves and others how to critically decode media messages and to trace their complex range of effects. It is important to be able to perceive the various ideological voices and codes in the artifacts of our common culture and to distinguish between hegemonic ideologies and those images, discourses, and texts that subvert the dominant ideologies.

 It is also important to learn to discriminate between the best and worst of media culture and to cultivate oppositional subcultures and alternatives to media culture. You are what you see and hear every bit as much as what you eat, and it is therefore important to impress upon individuals the need to avoid media culture junkfood and to choose healthier and more nourishing wares. This requires learning discrimination and cultivating tastes for the better products of media culture, as well as alternative forms of culture ranging from poetry, literature, and painting, to alternative music, film, and television.

 McLuhan to the contrary, today's media-saturated younger generations are not naturally media-critical or truly media-literate. Thus, developing critical media literacy requires developing explicit strategies of cultural pedagogy and many dominant schools of contemporary theory -- such as the Frankfurt School, cultural studies, and most postmodern theory -- have failed to develop a critical media pedagogy.[1]

 Within educational circles, there is a debate over what constitutes the field of media pedagogy, with different agendas and programs. A traditionalist "protectionist" approach would attempt to "inoculate" young people against the effects of media addiction and manipulation by cultivating a taste for book literacy, high culture, and the values of truth, beauty, and justice. Neil Postman in his books Amusing Ourselves to Death (1985) and Technopoly (1992) exemplifies this approach. A "media literacy" movement, by contrast, attempts to teach students to read, analyze, and decode media texts, in a fashion parallel to the cultivation of print literacy. Media arts education in turn teaches students to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of media and to use

various media technologies as tools of self-expression and creation. Critical media literacy, finally, builds on these approaches, analyzing media culture as products of social production and struggle, and teaching students to be critical of media representations and discourses, but also stressing the importance of learning to use the media as modes of self-expression and social activism.[2]

Critical media literacy is concerned with developing skills that will empower individuals and that will make them more motivated and competent participants in social life. Critical media literacy is thus tied to the project of radical democracy and concerned to develop skills that will enhance democratization and participation. Critical media literacy takes a comprehensive approach that would teach critical skills and how to use media as instruments of social change. The technologies of communication are becoming more and more accessible to young people and average citizens and they should be used to promote democratic self-expression and social progress. Thus, technologies that could help produce the end of participatory democracy, by transforming politics into media spectacles and the battle of images, could also be used to help invigorate democratic debate and participation, as I shall argue in the following discussion.

Media and Cultural Activism

Cultural studies has been especially negligent of developing strategies and practices for media intervention and the production of alternative media. There has been little discussion within cultural studies circles concerning how radio, television, film, computers, and other media technology could be transformed and used as instruments of social enlightenment and progress. Likewise, the Frankfurt School seemed inherently skeptical of media technologies and viewed them as totally controlled by capitalist corporations.[3] Indeed, when the classical theories of the cultural industries were being formed, this was more or less the case. The failure of cultural studies today to engage the issue of alternative media is more puzzling and less excusable since there are currently a variety of venues for alternative film and video production, community radio, computer bulletin boards and discussion forums, and other forms of communications within which progressives can readily intervene.[4]

A critical theory of the media (or technology) should discuss the ways that new media and technologies can be used both as instruments of liberation and domination, analyzing how media and culture serve interests of domination and control, and how the media and technologies can be transformed into instruments of social enlightenment and progress. This requires more focus on alternative media than has previously been evident in cultural studies and reflections on how media technology can be reconfigured and used to empower individuals. It requires developing activist strategies to intervene in public access television, community radio, computer bulletin-boards, and other domains currently emerging. To genuinely empower individuals requires giving them knowledge of media production and allowing them to produce media that are then disseminated to the public. Increasing media activism could significantly enhance democracy, making possible the proliferation of voices and allowing those voices that have been silenced or marginalized to speak.

Critical media pedagogy and activism require new roles and functions for intellectuals. Media and computer culture is producing new cyberspaces to explore and map, and new terrains of

political struggle and intervention. The new cyberintellectuals of the present may not be the organic intellectuals of a class, but we can become technointellectuals of new technologies, cultural experiences, and spaces, charting and navigating through the brave new worlds of media culture and technoculture. These technologies can be used as instruments of domination or liberation, of manipulation or social enlightenment, and it is up to the activist cultural producers and intellectuals of the present and future to determine which way the new technologies will be used and developed and whose interests they serve.

A democratic media politics will accordingly be concerned that the new media and computer technologies will be used to serve the interests of the people and not the corporate elites. A democratic media politics will strive to see that media are used to inform and enlighten individuals rather than to manipulate them. A democratic media politics will teach individuals how to use the new technologies, to articulate their own experiences and interests, and to promote democratic debate and diversity, allowing a full range of voices and ideas to become part of the cyberdemocracy of the future.

Media and Cultural Politics

There has also been a failure in cultural studies to discern the importance of media and cultural politics. Who will control the media of the future and debates over the public's access to media, media accountability and responsibility, media funding and regulation, and what kinds of culture are best for cultivating individual freedom, democracy, and human happiness and well-being will become increasingly important in the future. Indeed, there are currently powerful struggles going on within and between government, business, and the public concerning who will control the new technologies of the so-called information superhighway, who will profit from them, and what role the public will play in determining the future of our new technologies and media culture. Individuals need to get involved in these debates and informed concerning the importance of the issues involved.

There are recent attempts to censor communication on the Internet, to commodify communication on it, charging for what is now free, to allow commercial uses of it, and to open it to corporate domination. Other groups are struggling to preserve free communication, to guarantee democratic access and participation, and to make the resources of the new technologies open and accessible to everyone, thus promoting, rather than restricting, democracy. These struggles will determine the future of our culture and society and are therefore of prime importance to those concerned with the future of democracy and of our society and culture.

The proliferation of media culture and technologies thus focuses attention on the importance of media politics and the need for public intervention in debates over the future of media culture and communications in the information highways and entertainment by-ways of the future.[5] As suggested, one of the key issues of the future will concern whether communications and culture are increasingly commodified or are decommodified. Defenders of commercial television in the United States are always praising "free television," a dubious product, however, only made possible at the expense of allowing advertising to clutter the airwaves and giving advertisers and commercial interests significant power over programming. In the future, however, even

individual TV programs may be commodified, owned by corporations which will charge for everything. Likewise, today computer bulletin boards and routes of communication on the Internet are free to those who have University, or government, accounts, whereas all computer communication may be commodified in the future, as is telephone communication. The struggle here is therefore to decommodify computer communication and information, to make the Internet and other information highways of the future open and accessible to everyone, free of charge, to expand public access television and community radio, and to develop alternative cultural institutions and practices that are funded by the community or state and made available to the people.

In France, the government carried out an experiment, providing free Minitel computers to all telephone customers. These computers were initially to be used for getting information, like time, weather, train and airplane schedules, and the like. But they were soon used for public computer communications, with discussion groups, bulletin-boards, and other uses quickly developing. The point is that computers will be part of the standard package of every household of the future, much like television today, and efforts must be made so that everyone who does not currently own a computer can get one and become part of the new culture and society that they will make possible, rather than restricting use of the new technologies to those privileged groups able to purchase them.

Indeed, the very concept of "information superhighways" contains a democratic core that could provide a terrain and discourse of struggle. While the notion that information superhighways will automatically guarantee a free flow of useful and abundant information to all is obviously ideological, a flim flam promotional discourse to sell the agenda of powerful corporations, the superhighway metaphor has some significance for democratic struggles. For our national highway space is that of a public domain, part of a public space open and accessible to all, free of charge. The danger of the corporate information and entertainment scenarios of the future is that megacorporations will own and control these resources, charging tolls for entry and use, transforming freeways into tollways.

Thus, while the Internet and other computer networks are currently free, at least for some users, there are plans to privatize them and to take them over, charging for use and access. Against such plans, one should utilize the discourse of the public sphere and public domain and struggle to keep these highways open to and accessible to all, free of charge and corporate control. Likewise, a democratic media politics will struggle for community television and radio, providing public access to all citizens so that the entire community can take part in democratic discussion and debate (see Kellner 1990).

The free flow of information and communications is essential to a democratic society and thus democracy requires that powerful instruments of information and communication be accessible to all. Keeping the information superhighways open to all, protecting current highways like the Internet and struggling to open it to more people, is thus a key element of a contemporary democratic media politics. Without a free flow of information, citizens cannot be adequately informed and without access to forums of public discussion and debate, citizens are excluded from the dialogue that constitutes the very soul of participatory democracy.

It is possible that failures to address political economy and to adequately develop a media politics within cultural studies is a main source of the avoidance of public policy concerns within cultural studies that Tony Bennett has been criticizing (1992, in Grossberg et al). Without a sense of how the larger social forces (i.e. the nature of the broadcasting industry, state policy towards communications, etc.) impinge on everyday life, it is impossible to grasp the relevance of public policy and media politics for the nature of the system of communications and culture in a given society. Yet in a context in which new technologies of communications are creating dramatic changes in culture, leisure activity, and everyday life, it is important to perceive the importance of media politics and the ways that the system and framework of communications in a given society help determine what sort of programming and effects are produced.

But without situating discussions of public policy within the context of social theory and political economy that analyzes existing configurations of power and domination, discussions of public policy are hopelessly abstract and besides the point. In the United States, during the reign of Reagan and Bush (1980-1992), there really weren't any openings for progressive public policy interventions, on the national level. Instead, the political urgency at the time, on the level of national politics, was defending liberal gains of the past against conservative onslaughts (I would imagine that something like this was also the case in England during the regimes of Thatcher and Major, and in other countries ruled by conservative governments).

On the other hand, the era of conservative rule saw many exciting local interventions, with lively alternative cultures proliferating and intense political struggles, often cultural in focus, taking part on the local level. This experience perhaps influenced the postmodern politics which emphasized local, rather than global, struggles, but it is important to see that both local and national struggles and issues are important. On the local level, one can often more visibly make a difference, though even rearguard defensive operations on the national level are important, as are public policy interventions that advocate genuine reform on any level. The neglect of cultural politics by critical cultural and communications studies that should advocate such a cultural and media politics is distressing and is a sign of the depoliticalization of intellectual life in the present moment.

Thus, cultural studies can be of importance for the radical democratic project. A critical media pedagogy can cultivate citizenship by helping form individuals free from media manipulation, capable of criticizing media culture and of obtaining information from diverse sources, allowing an informed citizenry to make intelligent political judgements. Critical media pedagogy can thus serve as part of a process of social enlightenment, producing new roles for critical and public intellectuals. Media culture itself is producing new public spheres and the need for intervention in new arenas of public debate -- community radio, public access television, computer bulletin-boards, and so on. Media culture is producing new texts and the need to cultivate a media literacy able to read and decode images, scenes, narratives and spectacles of the sort central to media culture.

Yet media culture also presents the challenge to cultivate new spaces for political discussion and interaction, to produce alternative forms of media and culture, to use the media to promote social enlightenment and to think how media culture can be used for democratization. The challenge of media culture thus produces new vocations for the intellectual: its ubiquity and complexity

requires critical intellectuals to subvert disciplinary boundaries and to draw on a range of disciplines to understand media culture. It challenges public intellectuals to use media culture to promote democratization and to produce new spaces and alternatives alongside media culture. In other words, it is both a mistake to turn one's back upon and to ignore media culture and to totally embrace it. Media culture must be thoroughly analyzed, and possibilities should be explored to intervene within media culture and to provide alternative modes of culture and discourse outside of its conventional forms and genres. Media culture is perhaps our fate and cultural ambience as we rush toward the future and we must therefore chart this new terrain and see how we can make it work for the goals of increasing freedom, happiness, democracy, and other values that we wish to preserve and enhance as we race toward a new century and new forms of society and culture.

 Thus, cultural studies has some important tasks for the future and can become part of a process of empowerment and enlightenment. On the other hand, it can easily degenerate into just another academic niche, with its canonized texts, stars, and comfortable institutional homes. It is up to the next generation to determine the future of our media and technological society and it is to be hoped that they will use cultural studies as a weapon of social critique, enlightenment, and change, rather than just as another source of cultural capital.

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Notes

 1. On critical media pedagogy, see Giroux 1992 and 1994; Scholle 1994; and McLaren, Hammer, Reilly, and Sholle 1994; and Kellner forthcoming.

 2. I derived these categories from a report on a conference on Media Literacy at the Annenberg School of Communications in 1992, as described by Michael Starenko in]Afterimage[(November 1992): 5.

 3. The exception here was Walter Benjamin (1969). Baudrillard (1983) is especially contemptuous of alternative media.

 4. For more on alternative media, see Kellner 1990 and forthcoming.

 5. On media and communications politics, see Kellner 1990 and Schiller 1989.