

The Media and globalisation

An address given by Bernard Margueritte, President of the International Communications Forum, to an audience of 170 business, political and trade union leaders from Asia and the Pacific at the Panchgani Conference Centre, India, on 10th January 2003. The Conference theme was 'Globalisation – Embracing Opportunity – Creating Synergy'

The Media are both affected by globalisation and are also affecting it. We are witnessing a concentration of media power in a few big groups, acting worldwide. At the same time those corporations have a tendency to sell to the world their version of globalisation, without discussion. It is therefore about time to see how the media on the one hand can better react to globalisation and on the other hand have a positive impact on it.

The first result of the concentration in a few media groups is that it is becoming more and more difficult to respect and promote the local identity, be it of a town, a country or a culture. As we have “fast food”, always the same, we now have “fast-news”, the same kind of information, presented the same way worldwide. This has far reaching consequences: one of the main missions of the media is forgotten. We, in the media, ought to be “media-tors”, go-betweeners. One of our most important and exhilarating tasks was to report about far away people, about a country where nothing in particular was happening, and bring to our citizens back home the dreams, the fears, the hopes, the problems, the habits and culture of other people. Information was leading to understanding and to mutual understanding. It is my contention that if there is so much hatred and violence in this world, it is among other things because the media have not fulfilled their role. Hatred comes often from a lack of knowledge of the others.

In a recent article in the December issue of “Le Monde Diplomatique”, Ignacio Ramonet has shown how the industrial giants, from the utilities, electronic activities, telephone, water or armament sectors have jumped into the media world. America Online is controlling Netscape, Time, Warner Bros and CNN; Bill Gates is the king of software but also of the press photography through his agency Corbis; Rupert Murdoch owns a variety of British and American papers, like The Times, The Sun, The New York Post, a satellite network BskyB and also a major film production company the 20thCentury Fox. Some are trying in Europe to follow the model. Bertelsmann has a lot of papers, radios and TVs; the same is true with Sergio Berlusconi in Italy. In France our two biggest groups are controlled by Serge Dassault and Jean-Luc Lagardère, both involved in the armament industry.

As writes Ramonet, “all those concentrations are a danger for the pluralism of the press and for democracy. Moreover they put the emphasis on profits, instead of quality”. In democratic societies one precious right of the human being is the right to freely communicate one’s thoughts and opinions, the freedom of speech. And there is another right, equally as important: the right to be well informed. But, “this right is endangered by the concentration of the media, by the merging of newspapers once independent into hegemonic groups” says Ramonet before asking: “Should the citizens accept this hijacking of the freedom of the press? Can they tolerate that information is reduced to a banal commodity?”

Interestingly, at the same time Paul Krugman is addressing the same concerns in *The New York Times* (November 29, 2002). He says pleasantly that in the US you get your news from what he calls “AOLTimeWarnerGeneralElectricDisneyWestinghouseNewsCorp.” and he adds: “the handful of organizations that supply most people with their news have major commercial interests that inevitably tempt them to slant their coverage, and more generally to be deferential to the ruling party”. One recent example is the fact that the 100 000-people anti-war demonstration in Washington “was almost ignored by some key media outlets”. And Paul Krugman concludes: “for the time being, blatant media bias is still limited by old rules and old norms of behavior. But soon the rules will be abolished, and the norms are eroding before our eyes. Do the conflicts of interest of our highly concentrated media constitute a threat to democracy? I’ve reported; you decide”.

But the worst has yet to be said: those concentrated media are promoting worldwide a unique and dangerous version of globalisation. This is the globalisation of money and business alone, of a one-track way of thinking, of the mediocrity and stupidity of the Hollywood-made pseudo-culture, of a world in which the citizen has nothing to say but to accept as a given all that is dictated by these overpowering forces; this is also the globalisation of inequalities.

The economic and political orthodoxy is used, as said the Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, by people “for whom the human development is not a priority.” But, happily enough this version of globalisation promoted by the media is more and more rejected by all kind of people. In fact, Pope John Paul II has clearly indicated that the currently promoted version of globalisation is not acceptable for anyone, who respects Christian values, or, shall we say, any spiritual values. The Pope condemned “the growing gap between the rich and the poor— at the level of individuals and nations” and warned, speaking to the students and professors of the famous *Bucconi University*, that: “the logic marked by mercantilism with virtually exclusive advantages for all the powerful, can cause ulterior inequalities, injustices and marginalisation”. There are indeed “urgent ethical issues raised by the division between those who benefit from the globalisation of the world economy and those who are excluded from those benefits”.

But the same has been said by former president Clinton writing last year in *The Los Angeles Times* that “we cannot anymore express our satisfaction from development and not look at the dark sides of globalisation” (by the way it is interesting to remark how clever and wise can suddenly become politicians or civil servants as soon as they leave office— this is the case with Clinton but also with former leaders of the World Bank and the IMF, like Stiglitz and Camdessus). Similar things are being said by Clinton’s former Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich, who explains that “the gap between the richest 20% and the poorest 20% in the world has doubled over the past three decades. It is now seventy-five to one. That’s not a formula for a stable world”. The businesspeople of The Caux Round Table write in their last report: “half of the six billion people on earth live on less than two dollars per day. Another two billion are poor, but are making some progress. Then there are the one billion people who are doing well, some exceptionally well. Since half of the people are not progressing, the global income gap is widening. Only a small amount of wealth of the advanced nations is finding its way to the less developed countries. Economic progress and the benefits of technology are passing them by. It is not only a moral dilemma to have so many people on this planet living in poverty and receiving very little assistance from the wealthier people, but it may ultimately turn out to be dangerous and destabilizing”.

As we have seen however the problem is by far not only social and economic. It is also political and cultural. To quote again John Paul II, we are observing “the intrusive, even invasive, character of the logic of the market, which reduces more and more the area available to the human community for voluntary and public action at every level”. Furthermore, warns the Pope, “globalisation must not be a new version of colonialism. It must respect the diversity of cultures which, within the universal harmony of peoples, are life’s interpretive keys”.

Why are the world media addressing only marginally those urgent concerns? Isn’t it our mission to do so? Instead of promoting an inhuman version of globalisation, should not the media exert their influence by trying to shape globalisation? In which direction? The answer is easy: toward a globalisation of solidarity, a globalization of respect of the human person, and, yes, a globalisation of love. It is high time for the current globalisation to be completed, to quote once more John Paul II, by a “revolution of opportunity, which enables all the members of the human family to enjoy a dignified existence and to share in the benefits of a truly global development”.

We have now a new God: the GNP, but it doesn’t mean anything. You have there all kind of productions: the good and the bad, the positive but also the sales of harmful drugs or the building of prisons. Moreover, as wrote Philippe Saint-Marc in his book “*L’Economie Barbare*” (the barbarian economy) in our developed countries for each increase of one point of the GNP we have an increase of 1.5 points of all social illnesses (crime, suicides, drug abuse, etc.). Where are we going? Some months ago the American paper “*Harper’s Magazine*” had this question on its cover page: “Ever faster—But to where?” As said Vaclav Havel, “this is high time to stop and reflect: what kind of society do we want?” What kind of civilisation? Is money-making the only goal or is it the well-being of each human person? Can we continue to live in a world, where the environment is endangered, where according to *Forbes Magazine* 447 billionaires in dollars possess as much as half of the humanity (3 billion people), where the quality of life is diminishing?

When we ask the people what kind of society they want, the answers are clear. Even in America. In his book “The State of the Nation” Derek Bok, long time president of Harvard University, publishes the results of an inquiry among the American public: the US citizens in a vast majority want growth, but much more sustainable development, clean air, good drinking water, proper housing, a job, social security and health care, a rich family life, efficient community transportation, access to education, free time filled with sports, cultural activities, reflection. The answers would be the same everywhere. But things are indeed moving, even inside the business community. In France, the CJD, which represents more that 2000 young company directors and management executives, writes in its latest 150-page report: “we are convinced that non-regulated capitalism will explode as communism exploded, unless we seize the opportunity to put man at the heart of our society”. And it continues: “the greatest misery in our society is social and spiritual rather than material”. Isn’t this remarkable and encouraging, particularly coming from young CEOs?

So, we are not against globalisation. On the contrary, we are for more globalisation! For a globalisation of globalisation! Me too, I want the world to enter my heart, as so beautifully said Rajmohan Gandhi. But precisely the danger of this globalisation limited to business and the worst of culture may kill the noble idea of globalisation. This is why we need a humanist version of globalisation, a global globalisation, serving all the human beings and the totality of each human being.

I am sure that in this fight all people for whom the moral and spiritual values are important, no matter what their religion or background is, will be together. “To love each other,” wrote Saint-Exupéry, “is not to look at each other, it is to look together in the same direction”. And yes, ladies and gentlemen, India, the India of the Mahatma, whose spirit and values are so present and so respected, for example in Poland by the people of Solidarity or in the South Africa of Nelson Mandela, India has to show us the way! We, in the West, we need you, much more than you need us! And, yes, we in the media, we do have to change our vision and look in the same direction as the people of good will on this planet. At stake is our own credibility, as media people and as human beings, and at stake, ladies and gentlemen, is the future of our societies and our world.

Bernard Margueritte