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STEREOTYPES AND DOUBLE STANDARDS: THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE MEDIA IN A CONTEXT OF GEOPOLITICAL TENSION

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"The first casualty of war is truth." This dictum, often attributed to Aeschylus, the Greek dramatist, perfectly describes the dilemma faced by any polity under conditions of confrontation and rivalry within its confines or with other states.[1] Two and a half millennia later, the issue has become even more serious. Due to rapid technological innovation, the means of information and mass communication have become much more efficient and powerful, in terms of *intension* as well as *extension*, namely their pervasive social impact and global reach at the same time. Whether in "hot" or "cold" war, in situations of armed conflict or geopolitical rivalry, information policy has increasingly become part of a strategy of "hybrid war" where the borderlines between falsehood and truth are blurred and information quickly turns into disinformation.

Other than in previous centuries, the sophistication of social techniques makes it more difficult for the citizen to distinguish facts from propaganda. Under the term "public relations" a new scholarly discipline was established in the United States – in the wake of World War I – with the purpose to shape public opinion in the interest of the war effort. In his classical work, "Propaganda," Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud, speaks in a morally neutral sense of the "invisible government" that "molds" our minds, "informs" our tastes and "suggests" our ideas.[2] On the basis of his experience as public relations advisor of the government during WWI, he characterizes propaganda – without any negative connotation – as the "conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses" and as "a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized."[3] Similarly, Walter Lippmann, in his opus magnum entitled "Public Opinion,"[4] describes as one of the main goals of governance in a system of liberal (i.e. representative) democracy the "<u>manufacture</u> of consent." It is worthy of note that, in this school of thought, public information in a free, democratic society is seen as a field of *social techniques* that were developed and refined as result of a <u>war</u> effort (namely WWI), and that this approach is subsequently generalized and applied also in a time of peace. It would require further analysis to explain how this model can avoid a *circulus vitiosus* in terms of democratic doctrine, namely <u>how</u> it can be reconciled with the ideal of the mature, *informed* citizen as the source of power in a democracy – while that very citizen's

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[1] Aeschylus' assessment has been further elaborated on by Samuel Johnson in comments on the "Seven Years' War," involving major European powers at the end of the 18th century: "Among the calamities of war may be jointly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehood which interest dictates and credulity encourages."
[2] *Propaganda*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1928, p. 37.
[3] *Op. cit*.
[4] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*. New York: Macmillan, 1950. (First published in 1922.)

"consent" to the decisions for the common good is meant to be "manufactured" by the instance that derives its authority and legitimacy from him (the citizen).

At the same time, in discourses about the nature of modern democracy the media is often referred to as the "Fourth Estate" – an allusion to the idea of *separation of powers* as well as an emphasis of the role of journalism as a kind of *corrective force* against the abuses of power. It remains to be seen how this approach can avoid a similar *circulus vitiosus*, namely how it can be reconciled with the role of information as part of a strategy that is aimed at the "manufacture of consent" – an aspect that gains even more importance in times of tension and conflict.

With power not only comes responsibility, but also the risk of its abuse. How can the media act responsibly in a field that is defined by their *dual role* to contribute to a *stable society* (what is described as "manufacture of consent" in a polity that is based on competition among parties and interest groups) on the one hand, and the noble goal of "speaking truth to power" (what is alluded to in the phrase of the "Fourth Estate") on the other? The cases of failure not only in distant periods (such as during the last two world wars), but also in recent years abound. One of the most dramatic instances, in this regard, were the fake stories about weapons of mass destruction, in particular nuclear arms, in Iraq that were part of a large-scale disinformation campaign with the aim to garner public support for the invasion of that country, which in turn triggered a chain of events that led not only to the disintegration of that state, but to chaos and destabilization in the entire region – with serious repercussions in neighboring regions including Europe. It is one of the most challenging questions for those concerned about democracy and the rule of law to understand <u>how</u> and <u>why</u>, in a constellation like this, the media utterly failed in their role as "Fourth Estate," not to speak of walking the fine line between (a) "informing" public opinion in the national interest ("manufacture of consent")[5] and (b) questioning the authenticity and veracity of information used by the state and its intelligence services in the interest of the war mobilization. The answer to this twofold question can provide insight into the *nature of information* under conditions of modern industrial society where information and communication techniques have become an integral part of the technological system of the state.

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[5] On the notion of the "national interest" in today's geopolitical context see Hans Köchler, "World Order and National Interest," in: A. S. Zapesotsky (ed.), *Contemporary Global Challenges and National Interests: The 15th International Likhachov Scientific Conference, May 14-15, 2015*. St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg University of the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2015, pp. 85-89.

It has to be stated, nonetheless, that the only rationale for the operation of the media, whether public or private, their "mission statement," so to speak, in a democratic polity – where the rule of law prevails – is the double task of (a) providing *balanced* information, based on facts, that will enable a person to take part in public life as a mature, sovereign citizen, and (b) contributing to education and entertainment on the basis of human dignity, not of the vested interests of economic or other groups. This comprehensive mission of the media (in terms of information and culture) is increasingly undermined, or corrupted, by the "infotainment" approach also of the so-called *mainstream media* where the lines between (a) and (b) are blurred, and the balance is more and more tilting towards entertainment at the cost of information.

As regards (a), the great "temptation" (in whichever political system) has always been that of *selective* and *interest-driven* reporting, whether in the public or private sector; and this temptation is obviously much greater in a *situation of conflict*, whether domestic, regional or international. The concept of "embedded journalism," brought up in the course of the Iraq war of 1991, illustrates in an exemplary way the dilemma in terms of selectivity (when the journalist subordinates himself to the choices of only one party to a conflict). The "temptation" is even more obvious in terms of *commentary* when, in times of conflict, facts are reported *selectively* and according to the prevailing "political correctness." As was aptly diagnosed by a communications expert, "The media has become not the source of information, but of judgment. They do not show action, they make it, interpret it and exclude any interpretation that does not suit their interests."[6] Under such circumstances, the media effectively puts limitations on the choices of the people. This "controlling aspect," particularly relevant in times of war, was also stressed by English songwriter and activist, co-founder of the Pink Floyd Band, Roger Waters, in his description of the "walls" that exist between us and reality and that determine our perception of the world: "There is another wall between us and the reality of our lives. This wall is called the media. This wall is a tool that is used to divert us from inconvenient truths."[7]

The ideological use of core concepts such as "democracy," "human rights," "rule of law" – also and especially in those countries that aim to shape global political discourse and claim global supremacy, including the right to intervene militarily in defense of these self-defined principles – is clear evidence of the *political instrumentalization* of the media.

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[6] Abdellatif Zaki, Professor of Languages and Communication at the University of Rabat, "The Impact of Media and Stereotypes." *Morocco World News*, 15 September 2015.
[7] Roger Waters, *Fallen Loved Ones Gallery*, http://rogerwaters.com/fallen.php.

While the value system underlying these concepts is never precisely described or identified, events are nonetheless commented upon through this lens, and *stereotypes* are being created about the supposed lack of these values in rival or adversary countries. Ideological reporting of this kind may itself become part of the war effort. This was particularly obvious in the coverage of recent military interventions in North Africa and the Middle East.

This raises the basic question as to what constitutes the *freedom of the media,* which is intrinsically linked to *freedom of opinion*. As absence of interference into the process of reporting and commenting, freedom does not only relate to the question of state influence, but to that of (private) ownership of the media as well. Since there can be no objectivity in an absolute sense (asserting this would in itself be a totalitarian approach), the *integrity* of journalism essentially depends on the *honesty* of the writer of a report or commentary in regard to what <u>he</u> perceives as facts, and to his making his assumptions and value judgments *transparent*. This kind of integrity also means that undeclared interests and agendas – whether governmental or corporate – must play no role in the investigation of a story and/or the analysis of the respective developments. In authentic journalism, there is no place for what in Western newspeak is called "political correctness." The widespread and increasing mistrust among the European public vis-à-vis the mainstream media, especially in regard to the coverage of migration issues or the state of the European Union, results not least from a suspicion of undeclared motives and political influence. In this context, to give just one example, the term "Lügenpresse" (lying press) has become a buzzword that expresses the lack of confidence of the German public in the "information system."[8]

This brings us back to the question of why the media so obviously, and frequently, fail – under conditions of conflict and tension – in the accomplishment of their task of honest and balanced, not to speak of "objective," reporting. In spite of all the talk about press freedom and its essential role in liberal democracies, the cases of selective reporting and double standards in conflict situations are numerous and dramatic. Going back to the Cold War era, one could mention here the almost total failure of the mainstream media in the Western world to question the legality of the Vietnam War (while those same media characterized the Soviet war in Afghanistan as an act of aggression). One could also add the

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[8] "Lying Press? Germans Lose Faith in the Fourth Estate." *Spiegel Online*, 24 February 2016, http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/most-germans-think-the-press-is-lying-to-them-about-refugees-a-1079049.html.

selective coverage and systematic omission of basic facts in the reporting on the wars against Iraq (1991) and Yugoslavia (1999), especially as regards the deliberate, not accidental, destruction of civilian infrastructure or the use of depleted uranium, with devastating consequences for the civilian population in those countries. An even more serious case is the failure of the mainstream media to report without bias on the Iraq war of 2003 that was conducted without Security Council authorization. Similar cases are those of selective and biased coverage of the Palestine conflict since many decades and, most recently, of the migration crisis in Europe where the gap between *published* and *public* opinion is seriously eroding citizens' confidence in the state. Another case in point is the double standards applied by European mainstream media in the coverage of the conflict in Ukraine and their extreme bias in favor of the Western (or NATO) position. "Eurocentrism" of the media and the resulting double standards are also painfully obvious in the coverage of *war crimes* where the emphasis is, almost without exception, on the transgressions of those perceived as the "enemy" (as in the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s or the ongoing civil war in Syria). The same holds true for the coverage of the "global war on terror" and the use of the term "terrorism."[9]

There seems to be an almost total lack of investigative journalism whenever the facts to be reported, or investigated, are detrimental to the interests of the political establishment in the countries where the media operate or the public of which they serve. I have myself been witness to this reality – or predicament – of our "information society" when I served – on the basis of a binding resolution of the United Nations Security Council – as International Observer at the trial of two Libyan suspects of the bombing of a Pan Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988 (the biggest terrorist incident, to date, in the history of the United Kingdom). In view of my experience in a period of several years since 2000, I can attest to numerous cases of direct interference by intelligence services and the political establishment of the countries involved in the dispute with Libya on the media coverage of my reports on the criminal investigation and trial. These reports were critical of the handling of the case by the judicial authorities and challenged the official position of the states involved in the Lockerbie dispute.[10] More than in many other cases, I became aware

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[9] On the controversies and contradictions surrounding the use of this term see Hans Köchler, "The United Nations, International Rule of Law and Terrorism," in: *The Supreme Court Centenary Lecture Series. I: July 2000 – June 2001; II. September 2001 – June 2002*. Manila: Supreme Court of the Philippines / Philippine Judicial Academy, 2002, pp. 550-571.

[10] For details see Hans Köchler and Jason Subler (eds.), *The Lockerbie Trial: Documents Related to the I.P.O. Observer Mission*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. 27. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2002.

here of the relevance of Glenn Greenwald's observation that the media often act as propaganda for the government[11] – with, but often also without, open coercion.

This actual lack of independence, often resulting in outright manipulation of reporting, is camouflaged by a posture of self-righteousness and a hypocritical attitude that prevents deeper analysis of events and discourages those who ask critical questions. Not only under pervasive state influence, but also under conditions of the corporate media, is the lack of *genuine freedom* of journalists and the *pressure to conform* a structural feature of reporting and commenting. The issue here is not alone the more or less direct influence of lobbies and interest groups (whether economic, social, or cultural) via the ownership of a publication, but also the proximity of the ownership and/or individuals to governmental interests (that is almost never publicly admitted). Under such conditions, open censorship will often be replaced by (never declared) *self-censorship* of journalists.

Edward S. Herman's and Noam Chomsky's concept of the "propaganda model," critically assessing the earlier theories of Bernays and Lippmann,[12] helps us understand the "filters" through which news are presented and commented on in a corporate media environment.[13] It goes without saying that journalism also – and unavoidably so – means *filtering* of the news, and their analysis, through the lenses of those who report them. As we have stated earlier, there can be no objectivity in an absolute sense, detached from the observing, reporting and evaluating subject. (This can also be explained in terms of the philosophical theory of cognition.)[14] It is all the more important, however, to be *honest* and *transparent* about those filters. Of particular importance, in Herman's and Chomsky's analysis of the corporate media and the socio-political framework in which they operate, are the filters of ownership, advertising, "sourcing," and the exploitation of fear. Balanced news coverage has only a marginal role in a commercial context where the people buying a newspaper or watching a program are in fact "the product," which the publisher sells to the

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[11] Glenn Greenwald, "New study documents media's servitude to government: An analysis by Harvard students reveals that the press has shifted torture standards and even language on command." 30 June 2010, at http://www.salon.com/2010/06/30/media_258/. The author refers to a research paper of Harvard University students: Neal Desai, Andre Pineda, Majken Runquist, and Mark Fusunyan, *Torture at Times: Waterboarding in the Media*. Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy. Harvard Student Paper, April 2010, at http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/papers/torture_at_times_hks_students.pdf.
[12] See fn. 2 and 4 above.
[13] Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2002. (First published in 1988.)
[14] See the Kantian "transcendental" model of knowledge and its application in modern scientific theory: Paolo Parrini (ed.), *Kant and Contemporary Epistemology*. (University of Western Ontario Series in Philosophy of Science, Vol. 54.) Dordrecht/Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994.

businesses that buy advertising space or time.[15] Another decisive factor in the functioning of the media is what the authors describe as "symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information," i. e. governments or intelligence services.[16] This is even more crucial in situations of conflict and geopolitical rivalry.

Furthermore, in the context of modern consumer society, we have been witnessing an ever-increasing trend towards *trivialization* of reporting and a blurring of the lines between objective information and mere distraction. Because of commercial orientation and under the influence of the digital media, including the "New Social Media" (with their large percentage of audio-visual content),[17] "infotainment" has become a most formidable obstacle to the *independent* role of the media and to unbiased reporting – which is nonetheless essential for a mature democratic polity.

At a time such as ours, when – under the aegis of a prematurely declared "New World Order"[18] – prejudice and stereotypes are increasingly dominating mutual perceptions – within and between nations – and when the media risks to become a tool of geopolitical rivalry, indeed a corollary of a power struggle similar to that of the 20th century's Cold War, renewed consideration should be given to a *code of professional ethics* of journalism. "Truth and accuracy," "independence," "fairness and impartiality," "humanity," and "accountability" are often quoted as guidelines.[19] However, those principles are meaningful only if they are interpreted in a context of honesty and transparency where every journalist lays open the criteria according to which he defines them.[20] If this requirement is overlooked, we risk the instrumentalization of journalism by powerful vested interests – whether at the state or more specific social and economic levels – for the sake of ideological crusades where self-righteousness replaces the commitment of the media to

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[15] Chapter I: "A Propaganda Model."

[16] Chapter 1.3: "Sourcing Mass-Media News: The Third Filter," p. 18.

[17] For details see Hans Köchler, "The New Social Media: Anthropological and Ethical Implications," in: Anton Lisnik, Katarína Greňová, Marián Ambrozy (eds.), *Sociálne posolstvo Jána Pavla II. pre dnešný svet. "1989 a 25 rokov po ..."* (Zborník z medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie, konanej v dňoch 23. - 24. apríla 2015 v Poprade.) Ružomberok/Slovakia: Verbum, 2015, pp. 50-60.

[18] On the ideological implications of this notion in terms of hegemonial power claims see Hans Köchler, *Democracy and the New World Order*. (Studies in International Relations, Vol. 19.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1993.

[19] See the "Five Principles of Journalism" as identified by the *Ethical Journalism Network* (EJN), London, at http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/who-we-are/5-principles-of-journalism.

[20] On the problematic aspects of a dogmatic interpretation of these principles – not giving account of the specific socio-cultural framework – see e.g. the interview of the Director of the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN), Aidan White, with Oksana Boyko at Russia Today's *WorldsApaRT* program: "Ethical Bias," 20 July 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjhcIKva5Vc&feature=youtu.be.

serve the common good. In times of conflict, this unavoidably means the media becoming part of the inventory of what some strategists have characterized as "hybrid warfare."[21]

In the age of the Internet – when the worldwide outreach of the media risks to trigger new "information wars" – it may be advisable to have a fresh look at UNESCO's earlier concept, hastily abandoned under corporate pressure, of a better balanced flow of information at the global level. What the educational and cultural organization of the United Nations had then declared as the "New International Information and Communication Order"[22] could, in tandem with a commitment to professional ethics as outlined above, help to reduce the preponderant influence of the corporate media from just one region of an – again – increasingly divided world. This might contribute to reducing the bias of mainstream news organizations and to exposing as threats to co-existence in an emerging multipolar order exactly those journalistic undertakings and methods that better fit into the category of "propaganda" in the service of the most powerful global actor(s).

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[21] On the concept see Hans Köchler, *The New Threat: Hybrid Wars as Tool of Subversion*. Position Paper. Plenary Session 3: *Rhodes Forum 2015*. 10 October 2015, at http://i-p-o.org/Koechler-Rhodes_Forum-2015-Hybrid_Wars.pdf.

[22] For details see Hans Köchler, *The New International Information and Communication Order: Basis for Cultural Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence among Nations*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. 10. Vienna: Braumüller, 1985.