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Colecc. LR Beltrán
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1984

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U d rsta d n 1 4	P ur o pr ndr 9
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BETWEEN McLUHAN'S DREAM AND ORWELL'S NIGHTMARE

I will try to deal as briefly as possible with the situation in Latin America as located between two utopias: McLuhan's dream and Orwell's nightmare. Perhaps the best possible way to do so within the available time is to recapitulate what I take to be Orwell's view of communication. It seems to me that Orwell is saying, in general, that modern technology has become virtually omnipotent; handled by a few, it has come to constitute a great threat for human liberty. He is also saying, in particular, that modern communication technology will be used to impede communication between individuals so as to be able to subdue them all. It will seek the following: to eliminate independent and critical thought, to restrict the amplitude and diversity of language, to suppress doubt and inhibit creativity. Furthermore, today's communication technology will be used by all mighty totalitarian States to suppress all freedoms. It will make possible omnipresent and continuous surveillance, manipulation and homogenization of thoughts, feelings and behaviours, thus securing total compliance with the authoritarian society's rules. One finds through the novel several indications of this perception in some detail. Through them, it becomes clear that under such circumstances as he describes in his novel, Orwell fears man may lose his soul. By 1984, he predicts, man will have learned to be content with ignorance and passivity and will have forgotten love and become an obsessive hater. Moreover, he will have become truly happy with being a slave! This is perhaps the most dreadful prospect, that of coming to bless the hands that destroy you.

In summary, as I see it in Orwell's novel, men will have become by 1984 blind and obedient automatons. That is, no longer will they be human beings. They will be superprogrammed creatures able only to obey the mighty ones. Tragically enough, communication will be the key instrument to achieve such a dreadful goal.

In Western countries we have normally interpreted this Orwellian nightmare as directly referring to a distortion of original socialism by Russian communism of the days of Stalin. In fact this is not, unfortunately, the only possible interpretation. Erich Fromm says, "We present our society as being one of free initiative, individualism and idealism when in reality these are mostly words. We are a centralized, managerial, industrial society, of an essentially bureaucratic nature and motivated by materialism, which is only slightly mitigated by truly spiritual or religious concerns."

Orwell, Fromm notes, "is simply implying that the new form of managerial industrialism in which man builds machines which act like men and develops men who act like machines is conducive to an era of dehumanization and complete alienation in which men are transformed into things and become appendices in the process of production and consumption."

I will not have time to trace further from the pages of the novel the numerous elements from which one could draw certain connections between this nightmare and the present-day reality in our societies, not only or necessarily in an established totalitarian Stalin-type State. But I am sure that those who still remember the novel will easily find out, for instance, connections between what is called in it "The Eye," or the representation of "Big Brother," and the "telescreen" and the "audiovisual file." They all resemble very closely today's data banks.

Likewise, I cannot avoid making the analogy between the almighty power of today's advertising and Orwell's "Ministry of Truth." Because it is through advertising that we are being told today what to think, what to feel, what we are, what we should do and how should we behave in order to be "happy."

On the other hand, we trust the press to a point that, if something is in the newspaper, then it must be true. I find in it connections with the "omniscience" of Orwellian world and with the "Ministry of Truth" itself.

Also easily to memory comes the vision of Winston and the other citizens of Oceania performing every day a terrible "2-minute hate exercise." I identify connections of this with the instillation of aggressiveness, violence, racism and elitism that we see every evening in our homes through television.

No less easy a connection can be made with what exists in Oceania instead of the natural language, which in the novel is called "speak-write." This tool is meant to replace the pen since the Oceania citizens should not write very much; they should just choose terms or phrases from sets of cards pre-programmed in a dichotomous fashion to make just the minimal selection possible. In this manner, they did not have to think much, they did not have to make reflections; they just had to decide quickly and obey rapidly.

Our great array of facilities in recorders, computer combinations and visual gadgets today really approximates us to the possibility of acting in an automaton's way. More and more children are watching television; they don't want to read much, they don't want to write much. We are not apparently too far from "speak-write," one of the terrible inventions in the Orwellian nightmare. As a character in the novel put it, this is "cutting the language down to the bone." Television watching imposes silence in our homes, indeed trimming down human discourse to a minimum. Families no longer talk much, everybody is often watching the tube and not dialoguing. And what about the electronic games, the apparently innocuous modern fun-devices that children are today so obsessively using? Do they not, up to a point, approximate the dangerous "speak-write"?

Certainly, we do not have time even to begin answering these questions here in a short time. However, we can keep them in mind when we next analyze

the communication system and the political system of societies such as those of Latin America.

I would like to compare the Orwellian nightmare with the essence of McLuhan's thought in this respect. I will try to summarize McLuhan's thought only in reference to its connection with this form of analysis.

As I recall it, McLuhan feels that technology decisively determines human behaviour, but he does not think technology is almighty. Man, he feels, can learn to adapt himself to technological innovations in manners that make them useful to his ends. McLuhan also says that modern technology can be used to expand and improve communications. It can enlarge and refine the perceptions of man, he claims. He also believes that modern communication technology is not homogenizing and enslaving. On the contrary, it promises to help man gain freedom to unprecedented degrees. And electronics establish, in his view, a new regime of interdependent relationships. This, he feels, "retriberalizes" men into what he calls the "Global Village."

The present communication media, McLuhan feels, open unforeseen dimensions for man's growth. They foster the evolution of a popular culture and provide or facilitate full participation of people in life in a multi-sensorial manner. They also foster action rather than meditation, involvement instead of withdrawal.

The notion of the "Global Village" itself proposes a viable new form of social organization made possible by the mass media and other communication technologies of today. And he feels that this new social format will bring man back to the old and wise forms of social existence of tribal days. This means to trust your fellow men, to stimulate closeness, and to build a fraternal identity of a universal nature. Altogether, this leads to peaceful coexistence, to a fuller life and to higher levels of freedom and creativity.

This is my interpretation of the dream, McLuhan's dream, of the "Global Village." It is not just a matter of electronics criss-crossing the universe. That is one component. But the essential element in the poetic vision of McLuhan is the nature of the "Global Village" as a very humane and desirable experience towards which the world, in his eyes, is probably heading.

Finally, the Canadian thinker singles out television as a medium highly instrumental to the construction of the "Global Village." He claims this is so because television can restore the balance of the senses. It is a "cool" medium, as he calls it, because it delivers little information but generates much participation. And this forces us to be involved, to struggle to complete the lines imperfectly reporting the images; we must use all of our senses, especially the tactile. Television is an extension of our whole central nervous system, he claims, as you well know.

These views, McLuhan's and Orwell's are to me quite opposite views of the roles of modern communication technology in society.

I shall now attempt to sketchily describe the Latin American situation to see which of those different roles communication technology is apparently performing. That is to say, which of the two utopias - McLuhan's optimistic conviction that communication technology can be good for man versus Orwell's pessimistic prediction that the said technology will prove bad for man - is prevailing in Latin America.

What does the data available in this part of the world tell us in relation to these two opposite possibilities?

Communication research in the region has been very active for the last 15 or 20 years. It has produced a large volume of information. Unfortunately, this stock of knowledge is not sufficiently organized and distributed as it should be. Available materials do, however, provide a fairly clear picture of the Latin American communication situation.

Mass media availability is more or less acceptable. It is never as ample or as highly advanced as it is in the developed countries. However, in comparison to other regions of the developing world, Latin America is relatively well endowed. For instance, Latin America has more than 1,000 dailies, close to 4,000 radio stations, more than 400 TV transmission facilities. However, almost all of these facilities are located essentially in a few big cities. Partly because of this circumstance, the messages of the mass media do not really reach the masses. Not even radio, the most widely-spread medium thanks to transistors, reaches much more than half the population, which is now getting close to 400 million people.

Communication follows very tightly the patterns of social stratification characteristic of archaic communities. The Latin American societies are still structured in ways resembling colonial days. Sheer minorities concentrate power-economic, political and cultural power. Communication follows that line of internal and external domination quite neatly. It does not work against such unfair arrangements. Understandably, it works rather to perpetuate them.

Mass media institutions are numerous but they do not reach the peasantry, which is still the majority in several countries.

Although the growth rate of radio is extremely high, this growth takes place in an irrational manner. Most stations have a very limited transmission power, show low professional standards, and are concentrated in a few cities. Even in a relatively small city, there can easily be 30 or 40 stations, whereas only very few are located in rural towns. A country like Colombia, which has the same population as Canada, has about 400 radio stations. In terms of distribution of mass media messages, the privilege of

the few prevails. Educated, better-off socially, and well-to-do citizens will have communication consumption standards not only as good as North Americans or Western Europeans, but in some cases they will have even higher standards. But this is the privilege of very small minorities. On the opposite side of the spectrum, about 150 million people, if not more, hardly have adequate access to the mass media.

Evidently, in some areas of activity, media are abundant but ill-distributed, as in the case of radio. In other areas, such as those of books and movies, the problem is scarcity. But quantitative considerations do not suffice to properly assess the situation. Even if Latin America had mass media institutions in quantities adequate to its population and even if the mass media messages were more evenly distributed, problems would still remain. Availability and dispersion do not by themselves provide full insight into the situation. Content, Latin American researchers claim, is a paramount factor, without denying the fact that the very presence of media, as McLuhan taught us, does constitute a message.

What kind of messages are reaching those who have access to the media? What do the media tell Latin Americans? Are they doing good to people, as McLuhan believed, or are they causing people harm as Orwellian thought would have it?

There are numerous studies on the content of mass media in Latin America. Some follow the traditional lines established in the United States of America while others follow innovative European thinking.

In essence, this research has found that an appreciable proportion of mass media messages tend to be trivial, unrelated to development goals and tasks, unconcerned with conflictive issues and alien to mass education purposes. This runs opposite to theories of development communication that see the mass media as being highly functional for social transformation and national development. In Latin America, they are rather working against social change, in favour of the preservation of the status-quo.

Why is this so? There are several possible explanations. Content is so, we are told by numerous researchers, on one count because of the media ownership patterns. In Latin America the great majority of the mass media are private and commercial. The State is not often allowed to have, even if it wanted, public service monopolies such as the CBC in Canada or the BBC in England. Those are not easily permitted in Latin America by private and conservative interests. Almost anything the State does to have adequate communication institutions in the service of development is taken by those interests as just a propaganda move and as a threat to information freedom. By contrast in the USA and in Canada, as well as in virtually all Western European countries, there are numerous public communication institutions and nobody accuses the government of being undemocratic or constituting a danger to information freedom.

In Latin America, instead, media property is over 90% private. Take for instance, Bolivia, which has about 100 radio stations for a population of less than six million, but only one of them State-owned. The cases of Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Chile and Venezuela are comparable. And Central America has virtually no public broadcasting.

As a rule, governments do not own newspapers, only radio stations. A few of them have television stations to serve educational and cultural purposes. However, be it radio or television, official media are not among the best endowed or most widely heard of all.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with media being privately owned and, certainly, a full State monopoly of all media would be undesirable and dangerous. The question, however, often becomes compounded in Latin America when media ownership is concomitant with ownership of the means of production. This dual ownership pattern gives a minimum of individuals too much power to dominate not only the economy and politics but also culture. And, in this manner, people's emancipation becomes hardly possible.

Internal domination is not unrelated to external dependence.

It is a well-known fact that the Latin American economy is strongly dependent upon the economy of the United States of America. The terms of trade exchange between one and the other neatly resemble colonial relations. Latin America is forced to perform the primitive role of exporter of raw materials and importer of manufactured goods from the USA. The region always sells less at lower prices and always buys more at higher prices. The resulting differences account for a chronic deficit that forces the Latin American countries to become indebted to public and private financial sources in the USA itself. Over the last few years, interest rates have been sizeably increased while repay periods have become shorter. In addition, protectionist barriers have been raised against Latin American manufactured exports, making the situation critical. Furthermore, the consequences of the oil crisis have hit the region very badly as it cannot defend itself against them in the way that industrial nations do, because of its technological dependence. Inflation reaches unbelievable levels in some of the countries and unemployment often affects as much as a third of the labour force.

In just a few years, the region's foreign debt has skyrocketed from less than 70 billion dollars to more than 300 billion dollars. Many countries just cannot afford to cover such an obligation. Even some of the largest and less underdeveloped countries, such as Mexico and Brazil, have recently fallen into a situation close to bankruptcy. Indeed the region is undergoing its worst crisis since the 1930's. Its growth rate was, on the average, 7% for the last decade but nowadays it is below 1%, a level close to stagnation.

The classical model of development has proved to be a failure. For 30 years, Latin Americans blindly embraced a materialistic "modernization" scheme which will not redeem the majority of people from underdevelopment.

Along with it, the mass media system has been clearly instrumental in perpetuating injustice.

Just as the economies of our nations depend so much on the United States of America, our culture has become considerably dependent on it. At least 50% of all films shown in the region are made in the USA. About the same proportion is applicable to canned TV programmes. In the daily newspapers, the influence is less strong in terms of the text, but not in terms of advertising. Almost all large-scale magazines are reproductions or imitations of North American magazines. Radio, commercial music in general and motion picture films also fall under significant US influence.

US advertising has greatly increased in the last 20 years in Latin America. About 10 US advertising agencies control close to 90% of the advertising market in the region. This is not a small market; it moved in a short time between 1968 and 1974, from about one billion to about two billion dollars. The main newspapers have now at least 60% of their space devoted to advertising with a sizeable proportion of it being US-sponsored. But where US advertising is most notorious is in radio and especially in television. Researchers have found that 30 transnational US firms, through 10 advertising agencies of the same country, really dominate practically all advertising businesses in our region.

Although it does not have the magnitude that advertising has, foreign news business is no less important. International news in Latin America is handled at least up to 60% by AP and UPI. These agencies control the traffic in all directions: to the rest of the world from this region, from the world to Latin America, and even between Latin American countries themselves.

Numerous studies have pointed to multiple deficiencies in these services. A small out-going volume of news is one. But qualitative problems are much more important. Ill-reporting because of the application of a commercial concept of news is most frequent. Scandalous, violent, bizarre or trivial matters are preferred to significant events and constructive facts. News is distorted to suit stereotyped views of Latin America. Negative events are played up.

When Latin American countries manage to elect a democratic government, this hardly gets noticed by the transnational agencies. Strikes, subversion and political instability are, instead, played up. What prevails is the classical concept that news occurs when a man bites a dog and not the other way around. Because of such criteria and other reasons, foreign news reporting neglects to show the struggle of Latin American nations to attain true independence and overcome underdevelopment. Suriname is not a tiny island but a country as big as Ecuador, located next to Brazil and Venezuela

and the first producer of bauxite in the world. Nevertheless its birth as a nation in 1975 went almost fully unreported in the Latin American press. This was only in part attributable to the US agencies. To a large extent, it was the fault of cable editors in the local press. Their mentality, their concept of news, is not different from those prevailing in the US agencies. Indeed, some studies even show that at times, those agencies do provide sufficient and relatively adequate materials to the mass media on certain important events. But then it is the Latin American foreign news editors who fail to use such materials in order to favor more "newsy" ones. Therefore, we are a region which is rendered "incomunicada" in that you are not accurately informed about our life; our realities do not transpire to you.

In reverse, the news we get through the same channels about the rest of the world often emphasizes unusual events or trivial materials. Thus, neither can we form an accurate image of real life in other societies. It is ill-information in both directions.

Some feel that this regrettable situation is conspiratorial. Personally, I do not think this is necessarily so. I think the situation is essentially structural. There is behind the news a whole mentality that forcefully spreads across the USA and our own nations, a mercantile attitude opposed to social transformation. Anybody who wants to question the rule of the few to change the situation, to criticize injustice, is likely to be either ignored or treated derogatorily through name-tagging by the foreign news agencies.

It is by itself difficult to assess fully the effects of the standard mass media of communication (press, radio, TV and films) on our people. But before we have even learnt enough about what these traditional media are doing to our society and understood how to use them in order to overcome our problems, a new set of technology of the kind envisioned by Marshall McLuhan with optimism is coming on us. We feel confused and often frightened by it.

The day of "telematics" is here now; it is not a fiction, it is here to stay. This innovation penetrates our existence so unavoidably and rapidly that our nations have no idea of its consequences and, therefore, have no policies to deal with it. We are made to buy all kinds of fancy gadgets but we do not know how to best use them. Some are incompatible with others. Many soon become obsolete. Moreover, we lack the ability to collect, store and organize information. Thus the data to feed the wonder machines is accumulated, processed and sold abroad, making us much more dependent on the big powers.

Indeed, if one is to listen to those who know, one cannot avoid being worried. For instance, a former USICA director, Mr. Leonard Marks, noted before an international gathering that the new technology for communication (for instance, the combination of satellites and computers) is so powerful, that it will be impossible to control it, and will have "far stronger impact on national culture and identity than any other existing medium." If this

prediction is proved correct, then we have reason to be worried. We cannot dismiss such danger as trivial.

Can we do anything about it? Inasmuch as we can, we are doing our best to modify and improve the communication situation. Consciousness of these problems has come to the forefront in the last 10 years or so, when the world was shaken by acid debates on the proposal for a "New International Information Order." But this concern was already significant in Latin America 30 or more years ago. Politicians, researchers, intellectuals and communication practitioners are worried about what they see in the horizon of communication. In recent years, some of them have come to propose the democratization of communication in both theoretical and practical terms. They feel the present format of communication is not democratic because it is mostly a monologue through which a mighty source will persuade a weak and passive receiver into obedience for either mercantile or political purposes. There is a marked imbalance in the very communication act. To be truly democratic, we feel, communication should have the possibility to provide each human being with comparable opportunities to be alternatively source and receiver of messages. If only a few human beings enjoy these options, monopolizing communication power, then there can be no real democracy.

The search for democratic communication amounts today to a movement in which many people participate, often without knowing each other but nonetheless sharing ideals and exchanging experiences.

Latin Americans have shown imagination in creating alternative communication technologies that foster balance and dialogue. One of the oldest and most developed is called "The Radiophonic School." It is a 30-year old Colombian invention: a combination of specially beamed educational radio programs designed for the much neglected rural population. It makes use of small groups organized for discussing the programs and then taking action at the community level. This was started with his bare hands by a humble priest in a small Andean town. It is today one of the biggest and most important mass education enterprises in the world. In contrast with the oldest and the biggest, there is a smaller and more recent experiment: the "Rural Cassette Forum," first tried in Uruguay. It is a simple technology not based on actual radio broadcasts but in recordings. Researchers talk to farmers, collect their views, their issues, their needs and assign some of them to report these matters into cassette form. They then edit the material and send the tapes back to many organized farmers' groups all over the country. These groups then discuss the questions raised by the recordings and, in turn, record their reactions and send them back to the central editing point. In this manner, a "forum" is established through a humble but efficient format of "telecommunication."

Still in the domain of radio, some experiences in Bolivia, a country with a high proportion of indigenous population that does not have Spanish as its native tongue, have proved most significant. One of them is a set of small provincial radio stations established, financed and fully operated by miners' unions without recourse to advertising. They are essentially tools for communicating with the rest of the nation and for supporting the struggle

in search of social, economic and political revindications. Another is a number of early morning radio programs in Aimara language, produced and broadcast by Indian radio programmers and technicians on a semi-commercial basis. Many of them, in addition to news and entertainment, have service programs substituting for the postal, telegraphic and telephonic services with which the State fails to provide the peasantry. Yet a third inspired by the Catholic Church, is a 12-station network of educational radio for the rural areas, which operates in Aimara, Quechua and Spanish. These enterprises have considerably alleviated the isolation of the rural dwellers and contributed to national development plans and cultural integration efforts.

In the area of printed communication, Peru attempted to build a few years ago an original format of mass media ownership: a press owned and run by labour communities rather than by private commercial firms or the government. Under legislation determined by a progressive military regime, the main dailies of Lima were passed to the domain of the State, who handed them over to the said communities. This was known as "the socialization of the press." The experiment was frustrated when the government retained too much control over operations. Eventually, the dailies went back to their original owners, but the episode left behind a very valuable lesson and made way for new journalistic enterprises of a popular orientation. Another significant experience in seeking the democratization of print media was the insurgence in Brazil of the "prensa nanica" (midget press), an assortment of small periodicals questioning the state of society and promoting social change in favour of democracy.

"Alternative," "dialogic," "popular" and "supplementary" communication experiments are also being conducted in many parts of the region in the area of small group communication, usually employing low-cost audiovisual materials and including a strong component of popular participation in the planning, production and distribution of messages. Some of these experiments are rural while others have evolved in the slums of the largest cities.

Innovativeness is also noticeable in other fields of endeavour. For instance, in the re-conceptualization of news as social goods rather than as merchandise. In the revision of premises, objects and methods for the conduct of communication research. In the rethinking of the basic models of communication themselves. In the creation of regional news agencies.

Another major avenue for change is the proposal to formulate and apply overall national communication policies as sets of consensual norms to orient the behaviour of communication institutions in each country.

Sponsored by Unesco, there was in 1976 a meeting in Costa Rica (the most democratic nation in the region), in which all ministers of communication and information formulated what amounts to the basis for a doctrine of democratic communication and made 30 recommendations as to what to do at the national and international levels to overcome or at least alleviate the situation.

These and other similar attempts at changing the communication system in the direction of democracy are often taken as dangerous by some and as naive by others. The former fear that any changes in the present formats will curtail information freedom and will allow for totalitarian State control. True that this, unfortunately, may not be impossible in some cases but this is not equal to assuming that the present system is democratic just because it is private and commercial. The Orwellian dangers of irreverent manipulation of human beings through communication technology cannot be solely attributed, in the case of Latin America, to State intervention. As for the charge of naiveté, perhaps it is right to fear that the proposed alternative formats are likely to be little more than "aspirins to treat cancer." But some feel, nevertheless, that "it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness," to do all possible under the circumstances.

Communication has to become a tool for liberation.

So far, it seems rather to have been an instrument for oppression in Latin America. And many fear that the fabulous technologies of today may make the situation worse rather than improving it.

Let us hope they are wrong. Let us wish that Orwell's nightmare never comes true. Let us wholeheartedly predict instead that McLuhan's wonderful dream will turn into reality for us all.

Résumé
de la communication de
Luis Ramiro Beltrán

Après avoir tracé le profil d'une société archaïque et décrit brièvement l'état de sous-développement dans le continent sud-américain, l'auteur rassemble des données sur la faillite dramatique du modèle classique du développement non-démocratique des nations en développement par les nations développées. Il cerne la situation des communications en décrivant les institutions de chaque pays de la région sud-américaine. Apparaît alors une distribution inégale des modes de communication qui fait soupçonner l'énorme dépendance à l'égard du big brother américain, que ce soit au niveau des systèmes électroniques ou des messages négatifs véhiculés parmi une population coite. C'est le cauchemar.

Ensuite, l'auteur échafaude un rêve fragile. Dans une recherche de justice, il étale idées et pratiques innovatrices issues de la région sud-américaine. Rêve d'un village où s'établit la communication démocratique, laquelle engendrera une société démocratique grâce à un modèle de développement démocratique. L'Amérique du Sud veut participer, à sa façon, en tablant sur les nouveaux concepts de liberté d'information et la liberté à l'information, à la construction d'un nouvel ordre - légitime - international de l'information. Entre le cauchemar et le rêve, l'Amérique du Sud veille.