

the next step into virtual reality, but before I could think about raising the question the step had already been taken. Now we are being told that the solution to our woes, public as well as personal, is to be found somewhere on the Internet.

What can you say to people who think that every day, when they wake up, the world is a blank slate on which to scribble a new reality? This is going Locke one better. It is no longer the mind of a newborn individual that is a *tabula rasa* but the world itself, newborn with every innovation. We are always either at the dawn of a new age or at the end of history. Unhappily, this utopian optimism reveals that the one really blank slate is the American mind.

The Internet, we are told, represents the next wave of personal and political liberation. We can make our travel plans, find new recipes, and make friends with disembodied spirits who use code-numbers and aliases. According to stories in the popular press, real marriages, however frail, are undermined when husbands spend so many hours talking to their imaginary friends that they have no time for their family. Women are not immune. A jilted husband, writing recently to Ann Landers, complained that his wife had been seduced by one of her electronic penpals and was refusing to return to him. This is some nightmare out of *Poltergeist*, when the ghosts on the screen invade our living rooms.

Not only our living rooms and our bedrooms, but also the voting booths. According to the author of *The Electronic Republic*, the Internet will restore the direct, participatory democracy of ancient Greece. Now, I am all in favor of restricting the vote to adult male children of native-born citizen parents, but even supposing that we had access to real information on home pages and bulletin boards set up by candidates and interest groups, one essential item is being left out of the equation: personal knowledge of a man's character. Even a television image or a stump speech gives us more insight into what a candidate is really about than all the information in the world on his voting record or official positions. If Bill Clinton suddenly adopted a pro-life/antigovernment platform, would any sensible conservative trust him? Look into his eyes: the two-dimensional television screen is deep enough to plumb the depths of his character.

Each new advance in "information technology" begins by promising us individual liberation and ends up making us the prisoner of the technology. Gossip is a better guide to politics than the newspapers, because good gossip sometimes represents a genuine leak of information through unfiltered sources and almost always reflects, even when it is entirely false, the sense of the people. The wildest rumors about the Vincent Foster suicide may turn out to be closer to reality than the official story, but whatever the truth, the rumors say a great deal about the public's perception of this administration.

But the worst of newspapers is better than the best news program, because we can put down the newspaper, have second thoughts about the facts or point of view, compare it with other papers. With television, we are caught up in the imaginary stream of someone else's consciousness. We can turn it off, but we cannot, so long as we are in the stream, exercise our critical judgment, unless the story goes so roughly against our grain that it turns us into the antagonist who shouts back at Dan Rather. To resist requires the very power of the will that television has undermined.

Television is a primitive form of mind control compared with the possibilities offered by computerized journalism. Of

course, the Internet offers boundless opportunities for hatching the best kind of conspiracies. Use it, if you can, as you would use any instrument of communication—a waxed tablet or a bullhorn or an overhead projector, but never allow yourself to get sucked into the illusion of empowerment.

There may be strength in numbers, but it is not your strength, and there can be no community with people whose lives you do not share. It is not morally healthy to fill your head with alien experiences. Schizophrenics who hear voices in their heads would give anything for a moment of silence. There are tens of millions of people on the Internet, but, for all the useful knowledge they can give you, their name might just as well be Legion. Books take days and weeks to master and digest. Quicker access to more and more information may help the reporter in preparing his story, but it also makes him less critical about the torrent of facts, more gullible about the sources.

There are more voices babbling in Hell than there will ever be online, and the sum total of their wisdom would fit comfortably on the head of a pin, with room enough left over for several choirs of angels. Your mother must have told you, "Don't talk to strangers." Don't listen to them either, especially if they are journalists.

Seville 1492-1994

by Gloria Whelan

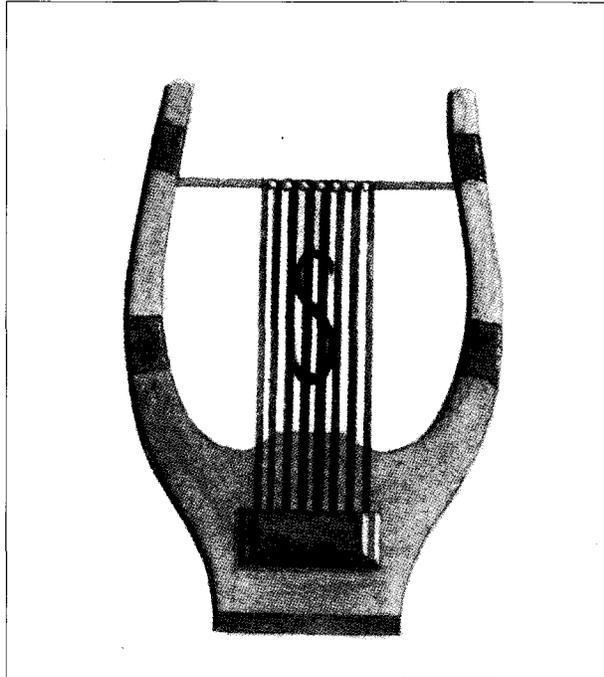
In the park of Maria Luisa
newspapers lie unfurled,
the world bartered
for Andalusian light,
for the thick scent
of orange blossoms.

Let the Moors raise their towers of gold,
grow gardens that froth
with white roses,
Ferdinand and Isabella
will march south
to drown them
in their perfumed bath.

The Matter of Money

Media Empires and the Shaping of Democracy

by Philip Jenkins



Anna Kozłowska

Over the last year, the doings of the media have occupied center stage in the media themselves, an obsession that seems harmless if somewhat incestuous. There has been a tournament atmosphere surrounding the issue of whether the damsels CBS or ABC would fall to one or another suitor, and a sense of awe at the financial buccaneering that has produced some of the largest takeovers in history. After all, where's the harm? Unlike (say) the O.J. Simpson case, this is a bloodless form of jousting in which the defeated lose nothing save honor, and perhaps the odd billion in cash or stocks. Nor is this type of media concentration historically new. Complaints about the excessive power of publishers and media barons date back to the earliest days of the popular press, and received a huge stimulus from the tumor-like growth of the Hearst chain from the turn of the century: *Citizen Kane* is the classic memorial to the megalomaniac publisher who wanted to be king, or at least to be loved. What, if anything, is different about the current trends that have made colossi out of multimedia concerns like Disney and Time-Warner?

Several major differences can be cited. In earlier years, news outlets could be easily distinguished from publishing or entertainment vehicles with which they might be loosely connected through common holding companies. Today, however, the

“press” broadly defined is bound up with the same information technology that dominates an elaborate and booming entertainment industry. Concern about blatant partisanship in news or political coverage therefore gives way to subtler worries about pervasive social biases and the homogenization of culture. In addition, these concerns apply on the global scale, anywhere in fact that can be reached by the satellites transmitting the films or television programs manufactured in the United States. Finally, there is a critical difference in the concept of control and regulation. In the days of Hearst, it was feasible to imagine a government taking the relatively simple steps required to suppress the worst excesses of financial banditry and editorial irresponsibility, but this can scarcely be done when the forms of bias and influence are so relatively inconspicuous, if nonetheless potent.

In 1938, George Seldes' classic book *The Lords of the Press* performed a hostile dissection of the American news media, a polemic that can still be read with immense profit. I cannot offhand think of a modern survey of this depth and insight, possibly because any recent parallel would certainly run the risk of libel suits: and who would publish it? As Seldes remarks, “The press publishes the news, true or false or halfway, about everything in the world except itself.” The veteran leftist exposed the political and antilabor biases of the newspapers and their affiliated radio stations, their visceral hostility to New Deal reforms and anything vaguely “pink.” He portrayed the

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