

# JACQUES ELLUL AND THE POWER OF THE MEDIA

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Amidst the large literature on media ethics, few authors have combined important contributions to the wider sociological study of the media with significant Christian theological reflection on communication and the contemporary world. One who has succeeded in this dual task is the French Reformed thinker Jacques Ellul. His many published works span the years 1946 to his death in 1994 and are divided into two forms of writing, broadly sociological and theological. Following a brief outline of the key elements in Ellul's work on the media,<sup>1</sup> this paper builds on them by taking up Ellul's double focus and examining the power of the media in our society. This is done first in a sociological study of the role of the media and then, more briefly, by exploring the potential value of interpreting the media theologically through the biblical imagery of the principalities and powers.

## *Introduction to Ellul and the Media*

Ellul's own thinking on the media is found mainly in his sociological studies, which, shaped by his sympathy with Marx's method and his role in the 1930s personalist movement, seek to understand and critique the contemporary world.<sup>2</sup> Three central themes will be built on in what follows.

*First*, a crucial but often overlooked element of Ellul's sociological studies is his repeated insistence on the radical novelty of the modern

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller account of Ellul's life and work see my obituary article in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 9, no. 1 (1996), 140–153.

<sup>2</sup> As so often, the seeds of much subsequent writing are found in Ellul's second published book (1948 in France) — *The Presence of the Kingdom* (reprint Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989) — especially the penultimate chapter, 'The Problem of Communication'.

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world and the qualitative changes that have occurred in social phenomena compared to previous centuries.

*Second*, Ellul often refers not to 'the media' but to 'MMC' — mass means of communication. This fuller designation shows we are dealing with *means*, and for Ellul, means are part of *la technique*, which he often defines as 'the totality of means'. His analysis of the media therefore needs to be set in the context of his wider studies of our technological society. One of his key insights is that we cannot think about the media abstracted from the broader context of our society's fascination with, and devotion to, technology, and its commitment to overcome limitations through technical dominance of the world.

*Third*, Ellul emphasises that a necessary condition for Technique's dominance and the power of the media is the creation of a de-personalised mass society. This important fact can be lost by referring simply to 'the media' rather than 'the mass media'.

One major discontinuity between this paper and Ellul's writing relates to his controversial and rather confusing terminology. He consistently refers to forms of mass communication as 'propaganda'. For Ellul this word is much more wide-ranging than its common polemical use and encompasses much more than the products of the mass media.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, because of its limited and negative connotations, the term 'propaganda' will be avoided here.

In Ellul's theological studies, the counterpart to his sociological analysis is found in his conception of 'the powers'.<sup>4</sup> Ellul sees the powers present wherever any human works cease to be relative, secular works under human control. The language of the powers is therefore applicable whenever human works become autonomous, absolute or sacred, taking on a power or authority over human beings which is inexplicable in purely rational terms. Ellul also relates the work of the powers to such 'demonic' characteristics in human life as accusation, falsehood and division.<sup>5</sup> Although Technique and the state are often described as powers by Ellul, little attention has been paid to how this approach may apply to the media.

One final comment is necessary about Ellul's work. Undergirding both his Reformed theology and his personalist sociology is a passionate belief in the *primacy of the word* and the *importance of interpersonal communication*. This is most explicit in one of his few books which does not fall clearly into either strand of his writing — *The Humiliation of the Word* — where he also presents a strong critique of

<sup>3</sup> This is clear from the contents of his study *Propaganda* (New York: Knopf, 1965), whose original French title is actually in the plural — *Propagandes* (reprint Paris: Economica, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> On the powers in Ellul see Marva Dawn's work summarised in *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul That Set the Stage* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 23–27.

<sup>5</sup> Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), ch. IX.

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the image and its dominance in our world, not least through the mass media.<sup>6</sup>

### *Sociology — The Power of the Media in Society*

In order to understand the power of the media today it is necessary to recognise that, prior to the dawn and dissemination of mass means of communication, the world most individual humans were able to communicate with, to know and to act upon was relatively small due to the existence of strict limits. Four of these are of particular importance.

The *first* great limit was that of space. As embodied creatures in a vast world, most people could only know about and interact with people within a relatively small geographical area. The *second* great and related limit was that of time: communication processes were slow, discovering information could be time-consuming and over time memories faded or were distorted. The *third* limit was that the means of partially overcoming these two limits was through inter-personal communication and thus, *fourthly*, the pool of shared knowledge remained relatively small and was always uncertain.

Despite various technological innovations which have enabled us to push back the limits of space and time — transport systems, phones, e-mail, etc. — these limits remain significant in much of our lives. The mass media, however, produces not simply a quantitative change in our ability to transcend such limits but a qualitative one.<sup>7</sup> We have overcome the limits of space and time on an enormous scale and, more significantly, have developed effective forms of communication which are not inter-personal and potentially reach a global audience. As a result, our 'personal world' has expanded way beyond previous natural limitations. There has been created a 'media world', the world of news and current affairs, the world of stars and personalities, the world we participate in and are given to know by means of the press, television and radio. The way we know and the form in which we participate in this 'media world' is quite different from our knowing and relating to the inter-personal 'real world' we share with families, neighbours and work colleagues. These two different forms of relating and knowing cannot, however, be divorced from one another, for ultimately we are whole people living in one world. Although other descriptions could be offered, Ellul's analysis suggests that in terms of *how we relate to the world*, we must recognise the *power of the media to distract and disengage us*, and that in terms of *how we know the world* the power of the media is its *power to inform*.

<sup>6</sup> Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> This application of Engels' law is central to Ellul's account of Technique, *The Technological Society* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), p. 62.

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In relation to the media's power to distract and disengage there are obvious targets of criticism, such as *Hello!* magazine, chat shows and TV soaps, which could be said to have become the new opium of the people. In response it could be argued that these are not simply distractions, as they seek to engage with real people in the 'real world'. Thus there is, for example, great controversy when 'guests' on daytime TV chat shows prove to be actors. This, however, fails to recognise the deeper sense in which the media world distracts and disengages us. This derives not from the media's surface *content* but its *structure and form* and is particularly significant in relation to television, which Ellul studies in *The Technological Bluff*.<sup>8</sup>

Drawing on the French situationist thinker Guy Debord, who greatly influenced him,<sup>9</sup> and making observations recently portrayed in the Hollywood film *The Truman Show*, Ellul argues that the media transforms the whole way we view reality. It changes life into a show and leads us to mistake the shadows on the screen for reality.<sup>10</sup> Confused about reality, we are then led by the media to take as most real and most significant that which we are given by the media. We are thus disengaged from our personal world and engage instead with the mediated world. Ellul comments,

Enable the inhabitants of a large complex to televise programs that their neighbours can see, not special programs, but scenes from everyday life, and immediately people who are completely indifferent to their neighbours will become passionately interested in what appears on the screen. Interest is aroused only when something is on television. If something has been filmed and is put on the screen, then it is important and interesting. What counts is not what is seen spontaneously, but what we are given to see.<sup>11</sup>

Even 'real-life' media presentations thus have the power to distract us from true engagement with the world. But, even more serious, this new way of relating is continued in our daily lives and interpersonal relations:

In these conditions there is naturally no reason for human relations to be formed . . . What I see on the street has the same reality as what I see on the screen. When I meet a beggar or one of the unemployed, I look at this person in the same superficial and disembodied way as I do at the living skeletons in the Third World that television shows me from time to time. We have here an extreme detachment from reality. The living world is confused with the televised world . . .<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), especially pp. 332–339.

<sup>9</sup> Debord's work is available at <http://www.nothingness.org/SI/debord>.

<sup>10</sup> *The Technological Bluff*, op. cit., p. 334.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

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This analysis may be subject to the critique that it is too limited and unbalanced. Rather than disengaging much of the media, it could be argued, it actually seeks to engage us in new and important ways by providing access to and facilitating engagement with the world through providing information. It is indisputable that without the media widespread engagement in modern democratic political life and social debate — including much ethical debate — would be almost impossible. This second great power of the media — its power to inform us — is, however, inherently ambivalent.<sup>13</sup> As with the media's power to distract, there are obvious and immediate dangers relating to its *content* — *what* we learn from it.

*Inaccuracy* or *misinformation* in communication is now much more serious. As Ellul noted back in *Presence of the Kingdom*, for modern man

a fact becomes true when he has read an account of it in the paper, and he measures its importance by the size of the headlines! . . . An untrue fact is printed in a newspaper with a circulation of a million: a thousand people know the fact is false, but nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand believe it to be true. Thus the fact becomes true . . .<sup>14</sup>

So, as a result of the reporting — even by the BBC — of Glen Hoddle's resignation, probably most people in this country now think that re-incarnation and karma are evangelical Christian orthodoxy!

*Distortion* or *disinformation* in media presentations is a further problem. In our world of spin doctors and news management, much of Ellul's critique of the media, propaganda and modern politics in *The Political Illusion* seems not extreme but remarkably prescient.<sup>15</sup>

These two dangers apply to all forms of communication, and their seriousness in relation to the media is really a quantitative one — more people can now be misinformed or deceived. The deeper concern about the media's power to inform derives again from the qualitative changes in communication and patterns of knowledge which are brought about by the mass media. They are summed up in the term 'soundbite', illustrating that the media's power to inform us faces *limits inherent in the structure of the mass media and its forms of communication*.

Even as we have transcended the traditional limits to communication, there are new, severe but less obvious limits which we now face in gaining knowledge of our world. Such structural limits are serious not only in relation to our political life but also for public ethical discourse and debate. They take many forms, but two brief examples relating to ethical discussions illustrate different aspects of this difficulty.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35–76, on ambivalence as a characteristic of all technical progress.

<sup>14</sup> *Presence of the Kingdom*, op. cit., pp. 82–83.

<sup>15</sup> Ellul, *The Political Illusion* (New York: Knopf, 1967).

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During the public debate about experimentation on human embryos, lobbying groups knew it was vital to win over the media and to present one's case in a media-friendly way. In his account, Professor Robert Winston highlights as significant a press conference by the editor of *Nature* and the support of the press and TV reporters for their work.<sup>16</sup> In addition, being able to display that two pregnancies were safe from fetal abnormality as a result of his embryo research was of crucial importance. Here was a media-friendly good-news story. It vividly and simply showed the public that the technique worked, was safe, brought happiness and eliminated suffering. In our technological society, that answered many of the popular objections and worries about this procedure. As Winston says,

Our two families courageously gave repeated interviews which were powerful ammunition in support of the research . . . Thanks for the widespread public and Parliamentary support for this work really should go to our patients . . . had [they] not been prepared to be very open about their family problem and tell the press exactly what had happened to them and their children, things might have been different.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, for those who believed the moral status of the embryo was the central ethical question, this was sleight of hand. But presenting such an abstract, non-visual ethical case convincingly in the media is very hard. The 'solution' SPUC came up with was to send all MPs a life-size plastic model of a twenty-week fetus the night before a main debate! Although meeting all the conditions for producing media excitement, this was so excessive and so far removed from the main subject under debate that it backfired and helped those in favour of research win the day.

My aim here is not to discuss the merits of each side. Nor is it simply to suggest that the media's power to inform was used to advocate a particular ethical view. The more serious point is that here is an ethical debate in which *how* the media communicates made it very difficult for a particular view to be articulated and so for a balanced and informative contribution to public deliberation to be made through the media.

That debate is now past. One of the current ethical debates which excites media attention is the Church's struggles with homosexuality. It would be interesting to ask if the media's structure again facilitates the presentation of some views and handicaps others. The main factor here, however, is that the media's interest is focused not on the *substance* of the debate but on its *style* and that this style is itself shaped by the media. The media's interest lies in giving a voice to more extreme forms of the debate and informing the public of the

<sup>16</sup> Robert Winston, *Making Babies: A Personal View of IVF* (London: BBC, 1996), p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110–114.

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responses of opposing lobbying groups to each other's actions and media statements. Thus the whole discussion appears driven by polemic and polarisation.<sup>18</sup> Even more serious, attempts to bypass these difficulties are simply ignored by the media, as illustrated by the (lack of) press reaction to the St Andrew's Day Statement.<sup>19</sup>

These two case studies illustrate that in matters of real substance the way the media operates creates severe limits: it is often incapable of facilitating serious, balanced public debate on complex issues, and at its worst it can be destructive of any such attempts, reducing everything to bitter disputation. Perhaps the main reason for these problems lies in the fact that by transcending the limits of personal communication in order to address the mass, the media exalts blunt speaking and images and often destroys the listening and personal engagement necessary for true ethical discernment, dialogue and debate.

The final danger in the media's power to inform relates to the confusion between the media world and real world noted earlier. Because the 'media world' and its information is so real and pervasive we easily forget it offers a very limited and distorted representation of reality. Many people believe the Church is obsessed with homosexuality because, if they are informed by the media, that is what they hear most often about the Church, and so *that* — even if they are regular churchgoers and should know better — is what they believe.

More seriously, because the media seems to be all-pervasive, we easily slip into the belief that if we are not being informed about something then it is either not happening or is not significant. As Ellul put it — almost in a soundbite — 'An event is not news unless television carries it . . . When television stops dealing with a question, the question no longer exists'.<sup>20</sup>

### *Theology — The Media as One of the Powers*

This sociological analysis of the media's power to disengage and inform has shown how the media is now a powerful influence, shaping humans in terms of their modes of being and knowing as agents in the world. Such conclusions give good grounds for sketching a more theological account of the media in terms of the

<sup>18</sup> The Chukwuma-Kirker clash at Lambeth perhaps illustrates this best, but see also Elizabeth Stuart's comments: 'It is a welcome and unusual opportunity for Christians from different standpoints and backgrounds to engage in measured dialogue. Often the only place that we meet is in radio studios or in front of cameras, pitted against one another for someone else's sport and entertainment'; in Tim Bradshaw (ed.), *The Way Forward? Homosexuality and the Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> See the comments of Tim Bradshaw at *ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

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powers. Although their emphases and accounts differ in detail, Ellul, William Stringfellow and Walter Wink have all argued that the biblical language of 'principalities and powers' refers to human works and institutions as they come to dominate men and women and exert a spiritual influence over them.<sup>21</sup> If this model is followed it is possible to compare and contrast three ways in which the media functions as a power over us in the world with how God works in the world.

The mass media often appears most God-like in its power to overcome and transcend the normal limits of time and space. In relation to time, its power to inform combines with the storage capabilities of modern computer technology to create an aura of omniscience. Whereas humans often forget what they and others have said and done, once the media knows something it is no longer subject to the vagaries of time and human memory. Words spoken in the past can be recovered and replayed *ad infinitum*. Images captured of particular occasions can be regurgitated at the press of a button. The effect of this power on human beings cannot be ignored. One's past is, once in the public media realm, inevitably one's persona in the present and in the future. Repentance and reformation are thus made almost impossible in the media world.

Furthermore, in the inter-personal world, most of our faults and failings are unknown or known to relatively few. They are, of course, all known to God, but God promises, 'I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more' (Jer. 31:34), thus liberating us from bondage to our past. Now, in the media world, people's faults and failings can be made known to millions and, unlike God, the media rarely suffers from amnesia as far as people's wickedness and sins are concerned. The one power the media — like other powers — seems incapable of exercising is the power to forgive and forget (except, of course, in relation to itself!).

A similar characteristic is found in relation to space, where the media can appear omnipresent. All past societies have seen the need to establish private and personal space, free from detailed public discussion and scrutiny. The media, however, has sought to transcend such limits; and then, faced with complaints about press invasion of privacy, there is appeal to the alleged public interest and the repetition of shibboleths concerning freedom of speech and the right to information. As a result, the media retains enormous power to investigate and divulge whatever it wishes for public information, titillation and judgment.

<sup>21</sup> See Ellul, *Sources and Trajectories*, pp. 23–27; idem, *The Subversion of Christianity*. Wink's works are *Naming the Powers*, *Unmasking the Powers*, and *Engaging the Powers*. Some of Stringfellow's writings on the subject can be found in Bill Wylie Kellermann (ed.), *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 187–292.



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In contrast to divine revelation, such media revelations often have great destructive power for human beings and society because, as Rowan Williams has written,

Since the Fall, concealment is necessary and good in the sense that there is plenty in human thought, feeling, and experience that should not be part of shared discourse. We are alienated, divided and corrupted; but to bring this into speech (and to assume we thereby tell a better or fuller truth) is to collude with sin.<sup>22</sup>

These two features of the media as a spiritual power then combine with its *power of public judgment*. It sometimes seems that our society, having lost belief in a full and final eschatological divine judgment, is no longer able to accept that human judgment is properly limited in scope. Instead therefore of awaiting the day when, in Jesus' words, 'there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known' (Matt. 10:26), we are constantly tempted to attempt to realise that day through the media. But the media exercises its judgment over human beings in the most hellish way because, lacking the power to forgive and forget, the media is unable to use its power in order to judge mercifully.<sup>23</sup>

These features of the media — to investigate, scrutinise and hold people and institutions accountable — can, of course, be used for good in challenging and countering abuses of power. This raises the important question of whether the media as one of the powers must be seen in wholly negative terms and simply opposed by Christians. Ellul's work certainly can give this impression, as he does not speak of the redemption of the powers but insists they are always rebellious and never positive.<sup>24</sup> He would certainly have been highly sceptical about (perhaps even hostile to) the possibility of implementing the strong 'redemptive' vision of media power witnessed to by the inscription in the entrance hall of Broadcasting House —

To Almighty God, This shrine of the arts, music and literature is dedicated by the first Governors in the year of our Lord 1931, John Reith being Director General. It is their prayer that good seed sown will produce a good harvest, that everything offensive to decency and hostile to peace will be expelled, and that the nation will incline its ear to those things which are lovely, pure and of good report and thus pursue the path of wisdom and virtue.

Nevertheless, his own example shows that, despite this weakness in his theology, he does not simply advocate withdrawal from and hostility towards the media. For most of his life he contributed to the

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1998), p. 156.

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the best illustrative example here would be press treatment of Myra Hindley and attempts to gain her release.

<sup>24</sup> Ellul, *Sans feu ni lieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 20.

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French Reformed paper *Reforme* and in his later years published a regular column in his regional newspaper, *Sud-Ouest*. Here we see the implementation of his own dictum: he thought globally about the dangers inherent in the mass media while acting locally in order to try to counter these.<sup>25</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The work of Jacques Ellul offers a fruitful basis for further reflection on the media and media ethics. In writing as he did, he sought to make people aware of radically new and dangerous tendencies within the modern world and the power of the media over our lives. This has here been further explored in relation to both our ways of being in relationship and our form of knowing about the world. By reference to the principalities and powers he was also eager to remind Christians that it is the 'demonic' characteristics in human behaviour which so easily become magnified and take control of our institutions. This often led him to overstatement and ran the danger of appearing to entail either resigned passivity or withdrawal from the world. That, however, was never his intention. His goal was rather to encourage his readers in social and spiritual discernment and so enable them to develop, in their own context, patterns of constructive resistance to all that threatened the human person and the precious gift of genuine, truthful, inter-personal communication.

<sup>25</sup> This is a recurring pattern in Ellul's life, e.g. his decision to live and teach in Bordeaux rather than Paris, his seeking small publishers for his books and his opposition to state-sponsored 'development' of his Aquitaine region through organising local action groups.