

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: MASS DEMOCRACY, BUT ALSO MASS TOTALITARIANISM

Printed newspapers were just the first **harbinger** of the mass media age. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a long list of new communication and transportation technologies—such as the telegraph, the telephone, television, radio, the train, the steamship, and the airplane—**supercharged** the power of mass media.

When **Demosthenes** gave a public speech in Athens around 350 BCE, it was aimed primarily at the limited audience actually present in the **Athenian agora**. When John **Quincy** Adams gave his First Annual Message in 1825, his words spread at the pace of a horse. When Abraham Lincoln gave his **Gettysburg** Address on November 19, 1863, telegraphs, **locomotives**, and steamships conveyed his words much faster throughout the Union and beyond. The very next day *The New York Times* had already reprinted the speech in full,^[52] as had numerous other newspapers from *The Portland Daily Press* in Maine to the **Ottumwa Courier** in Iowa.^[53]

As **befitting** a democracy with strong self-correcting mechanisms in place, the president's speech sparked a lively conversation rather than universal applause. Most newspapers **lauded** it, but some expressed their doubts. *The Chicago Times* wrote on November 20 that “the cheek of every American must **tingle** with shame as he reads the silly, flat and dishwatery utterances” of President Lincoln.^[54] *The Patriot & Union*, a local newspaper in **Harrisburg**, Pennsylvania, also blasted “the silly remarks of the President” and hoped that “the **veil** of **oblivion** shall be dropped over them and that they shall be no more repeated or thought of.”^[55] Though the country was in the midst of a civil war, journalists were free to publicly criticize—and even **ridicule**—the president.

Fast-forward a century, and things really picked up speed. For the first time in history, new technologies allowed masses of people, spread over vast **swaths** of territory, to connect *in real time*. In 1960, about seventy million Americans (39 percent of the total population), **dispersed** over the North

Dictionary

| **TOTALITARIANISM**: absolutism/the principle of complete and unrestricted power in government | **harbinger**: forerunner/something that precedes and indicates the approach of something or someone | **supercharged**: pressurise/increase the pressure on a gas or liquid | **Demosthenes**: Demosthenes/Athenian statesman and orator (circa 385-322 BC) | **Athenian**: Athenian/of or relating to or characteristic of Athens or its inhabitants | **agora**: public_square/a place of assembly for the people in ancient Greece | **Quincy**: Quincy/American patriot who presented the colonists' grievances to the English king (1744-1775) | **Gettysburg**: Gettysburg/a battle of the American Civil War (1863); the defeat of Robert E. Lee's invading Confederate Army was a major victory for the Union | **locomotives**: engine/a wheeled vehicle consisting of a self-propelled engine that is used to draw trains along railway tracks | **Ottumwa**: Ottumwa/a town in southeast Iowa | **Courier**: messenger/a person who carries a message | **befitting**: suit/accord or comport with | **lauded**: proclaim/praise, glorify, or honor | **tingle**: prickle/cause a stinging or tingling sensation | **Harrisburg**: Harrisburg/capital of Pennsylvania; located in southern part of state | **veil**: velum/a membranous covering attached to the immature fruiting body of certain mushrooms | **oblivion**: limbo/the state of being disregarded or forgotten | **ridicule**: blackguard/subject to laughter or ridicule | **swaths**: space/the space created by the swing of a scythe or the cut of a mowing machine | **dispersed**: separate/separate (light) into spectral rays

American continent and beyond, watched the Nixon-Kennedy presidential debates live on television, with millions more listening on the radio.^[56] The only effort viewers and listeners had to make was to press a button while sitting in their homes. Large-scale democracy had now become feasible. Millions of people separated by thousands of kilometers could conduct informed and meaningful public debates about the rapidly evolving issues of the day. By 1960, all adult Americans were **theoretically** eligible to vote, and close to seventy million (about 64 percent of the electorate) actually did so—though millions of Blacks and other **disenfranchised** groups were prevented from voting through various voter-suppression schemes.^[57]

As always, we should **beware** of technological **determinism** and of concluding that the rise of mass media led to the rise of large-scale democracy. Mass media made large-scale democracy possible, rather than inevitable. And it also made possible other types of regimes. In particular, the new information technologies of the modern age opened the door for large-scale **totalitarian** regimes. Like Nixon and Kennedy, **Stalin** and **Khrushchev** could say something over the radio and be heard instantaneously by hundreds of millions of people from **Vladivostok** to Kaliningrad. They could also receive daily reports by phone and telegraph from millions of secret police agents and informers. If a newspaper in **Vladivostok** or Kaliningrad wrote that the supreme leader's latest speech was silly (as happened to Lincoln's **Gettysburg** Address), then everyone involved—from the editor in chief to the **typesetters**—would likely have received a visit from the **KGB**.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF **TOTALITARIANISM**

Totalitarian systems assume their own infallibility, and seek total control over the totality of people's lives. Before the invention of the telegraph, radio, and other modern information technology, large-scale **totalitarian** regimes were impossible. Roman emperors, Abbasid **caliphs**, and **Mongol** khans were often **ruthless autocrats** who believed they were infallible, but they did not have the apparatus necessary to impose **totalitarian** control over large societies. To

Dictionary

| **theoretically**: /in theory; according to the assumed facts | **disenfranchised**: disfranchised/deprived of the rights of citizenship especially the right to vote | **beware**: mind/be on one's guard; be cautious or wary about; be alert to | **determinism**: philosophical doctrine/(philosophy) a philosophical theory holding that all events are inevitable consequences of antecedent sufficient causes; often understood as denying the possibility of free will | **totalitarian**: totalistic/of or relating to the principles of totalitarianism according to which the state regulates every realm of life | **Stalin**: Stalin/Russian leader who succeeded Lenin as head of the Communist Party and created a totalitarian state by purging all opposition (1879-1953) | **Khrushchev**: Khrushchev/Soviet statesman and premier who denounced Stalin (1894-1971) | **Vladivostok**: Vladivostok/a seaport in the Asian part of Russia | **Gettysburg**: Gettysburg/a small town in southern Pennsylvania; site of a national cemetery | **typesetters**: compositor/one who sets written material into type | **KGB**: KGB/formerly the predominant security police organization of Soviet Russia | **TOTALITARIANISM**: absolutism/the principle of complete and unrestricted power in government | **caliphs**: caliph/the civil and religious leader of a Muslim state considered to be a representative of Allah on earth | **Mongol**: Mongolian/a member of the nomadic peoples of Mongolia | **ruthless**: remorseless/without mercy or pity | **autocrats**: despot/a cruel and oppressive dictator

understand this, we should first clarify the difference between **totalitarian** regimes and less extreme **autocratic** regimes. In an **autocratic** network, there are no legal limits on the will of the ruler, but there are nevertheless a lot of technical limits. In a **totalitarian** network, many of these technical limits are absent.^[58]

For example, in **autocratic** regimes like the Roman Empire, the Abbasid Empire, and the **Mongol** Empire, rulers could usually execute any person who **displeased** them, and if some law got in their way, they could ignore or change the law. The emperor **Nero** arranged the murder of his mother, **Agrippina**, and his wife, Octavia, and forced his mentor **Seneca** to commit suicide. **Nero** also executed or exiled some of the most respected and powerful Roman **aristocrats** merely for voicing dissent or telling jokes about him.^[59]

While **autocratic** rulers like **Nero** could execute anyone who did or said something that **displeased** them, they couldn't know what most people in their empire were doing or saying. **Theoretically**, **Nero** could issue an order that any person in the Roman Empire who criticized or insulted the emperor must be severely punished. Yet there were no technical means for implementing such an order. Roman historians like **Tacitus** portray **Nero** as a **bloodthirsty** tyrant who **instigated** an **unprecedented** reign of terror. But this was a very limited type of terror. Although he executed or exiled a number of family members, **aristocrats**, and senators within his orbit, ordinary Romans in the city's **slums** and provincials in distant towns like Jerusalem and Londinium could speak their mind much more freely.^[60]

Modern **totalitarian** regimes like the **Stalinist** U.S.S.R. **instigated** terror on an altogether different scale. **Totalitarianism** is the attempt to control what every person throughout the country is doing and saying every moment of the day, and potentially even what every person is thinking and feeling. **Nero** might have dreamed about such powers, but he lacked the means to realize them. Given the limited tax base of the **agrarian** Roman economy, **Nero** couldn't employ many people in his service. He could place informers at the dinner parties of Roman senators, but he had only about 10,000 imperial

Dictionary

| **totalitarian**: totalistic/of or relating to the principles of totalitarianism according to which the state regulates every realm of life | **autocratic**: dominating/offensively self-assured or given to exercising usually unwarranted power | **Mongol**: Mongolian/a member of the nomadic peoples of Mongolia | **displeased**: /give displeasure to | **Nero**: Nero/Roman Emperor notorious for his monstrous vice and fantastic luxury (was said to have started a fire that destroyed much of Rome in 64) but the Roman Empire remained prosperous during his rule (37-68) | **Agrippina**: Agrippina/wife who poisoned Claudius after her son Nero was declared heir and who was then put to death by Nero | **Seneca**: Seneca/the Iroquoian language spoken by the Seneca | **aristocrats**: patrician/a member of the aristocracy | **Theoretically**: /in theory; according to the assumed facts | **Tacitus**: Tacitus/Roman historian who wrote major works on the history of the Roman Empire (56-120) | **portray**: depict/make a portrait of | **bloodthirsty**: sanguinary/marked by eagerness to resort to violence and bloodshed; ; -G.W.Johnson | **instigated**: inspire/serve as the inciting cause of | **unprecedented**: /having no precedent; novel | **slums**: slum_area/a district of a city marked by poverty and inferior living conditions | **Stalinist**: Stalinist/a follower of Stalin and Stalinism | **Totalitarianism**: absolutism/the principle of complete and unrestricted power in government | **agrarian**: agricultural/relating to rural matters

administrators^[61] and 350,000 soldiers^[62] to control the rest of the empire, and he lacked the technology to communicate with them swiftly.

Nero and his fellow emperors had an even bigger problem ensuring the loyalty of the administrators and soldiers they *did* have on their payroll. No Roman emperor was ever **toppled** by a democratic revolution like the ones that **deposed** Louis XVI, Nicolae Ceaușescu, or Hosni Mubarak. Instead, dozens of emperors were **assassinated** or **deposed** by their own generals, officials, **bodyguards**, or family members.^[63] **Nero** himself was overthrown by a **revolt** of the governor of Hispania, Galba. Six months later Galba was **ousted** by **Otho**, the governor of **Lusitania**. Within three months, **Otho** was **deposed** by Vitellius, commander of the **Rhine** army. Vitellius lasted about eight months before he was defeated and killed by **Vespasian**, commander of the army in **Judaea**. Being killed by a rebellious **subordinate** was the biggest occupational hazard not just for Roman emperors but for almost all premodern **autocrats**.

Emperors, **caliphs**, **shahs**, and kings found it a huge challenge to keep their **subordinates** in check. Rulers consequently focused their attention on controlling the military and the taxation system. Roman emperors had the authority to interfere in the local affairs of any province or city, and they sometimes exercised that authority, but this was usually done in response to a specific petition sent by a local community or official,^[64] rather than as part of some empire-wide **totalitarian** Five-Year Plan. If you were a mule driver in **Pompeii** or a **shepherd** in Roman Britain, **Nero** didn't want to control your daily routines or to police the jokes you told. As long as you paid your taxes and didn't resist the legions, that was good enough for **Nero**.

SPARTA AND QIN

Some scholars claim that despite the technological difficulties there were attempts to establish **totalitarian** regimes in ancient times. The most common example **cited** is **Sparta**. According to this interpretation, **Spartans** were ruled by a **totalitarian** regime that micromanaged every aspect of their lives—from

Dictionary

| **Nero**: Nero/Roman Emperor notorious for his monstrous vice and fantastic luxury (was said to have started a fire that destroyed much of Rome in 64) but the Roman Empire remained prosperous during his rule (37-68) | **toppled**: tumble/cause to topple or tumble by pushing | **deposed**: swear/make a deposition; declare under oath | **assassinated**: denigrate/destroy or damage seriously, as of someone's reputation | **bodyguards**: detachment/a group of men who escort and protect some important person | **revolt**: uprising/organized opposition to authority; a conflict in which one faction tries to wrest control from another | **ousted**: supersede/remove and replace | **Otho**: Otho/French pope from 1088 to 1099 whose sermons called for the First Crusade (1042-1099) | **Lusitania**: Lusitania/ancient region and Roman province on the Iberian Peninsula; corresponds roughly to modern Portugal and parts of Spain | **Rhine**: Rhine/a major European river carrying more traffic than any other river in the world; flows into the North Sea | **Vespasian**: Vespasian/Emperor of Rome and founder of the Flavian dynasty who consolidated Roman rule in Germany and Britain and reformed the army and brought prosperity to the empire; began the construction of the Colosseum (9-79) | **Judaea**: Judaea/the southern part of ancient Palestine succeeding the kingdom of Judah; a Roman province at the time of Christ | **subordinate**: hyponym/a word that is more specific than a given word | **autocrats**: tyrant/a cruel and oppressive dictator | **caliphs**: calif/the civil and religious leader of a Muslim state considered to be a representative of Allah on earth | **shahs**: Shah/title for the former hereditary monarch of Iran | **totalitarian**: totalistic/of or relating to the principles of totalitarianism according to which the state regulates every realm of life | **Pompeii**: Pompeii/ancient city to the southeast of Naples that was buried by a volcanic eruption from Vesuvius | **shepherd**: reverend/a clergyman who watches over a group of people | **SPARTA**: Sparta/an ancient Greek city famous for military prowess; the dominant city of the Peloponnesus prior to the 4th century BC | **cited**: summon/call in an official matter, such as to attend court | **Spartans**: Spartan/a resident of Sparta

whom they married to what they ate. However, while the **Spartan** regime was certainly **draconian**, it actually included several self-correcting mechanisms that prevented power from being **monopolized** by a single person or faction. Political authority was divided between two kings, five ephors (senior magistrates), twenty-eight members of the Gerousia council, and the popular assembly. Important decisions—such as whether to go to war—often involved fierce public debates.

Moreover, irrespective of how we evaluate the nature of **Sparta's** regime, it is clear that the same technological limitations that confined ancient **Athenian** democracy to a single city also limited the scope of the **Spartan** political experiment. After winning the Peloponnesian War, **Sparta** installed military **garrisons** and pro-**Spartan** governments in numerous Greek cities, requiring them to follow its lead in foreign policy and sometimes also pay tribute. But unlike the U.S.S.R. after World War II, **Sparta** after the Peloponnesian War did not try to expand or export its system. **Sparta** couldn't construct an information network big and dense enough to control the lives of ordinary people in every Greek town and village.^[65]

A much more ambitious **totalitarian** project might have been launched by the Qin dynasty in ancient China (221–206 BCE). After defeating all the other Warring States, the Qin ruler Qin Shi Huang controlled a huge empire with tens of millions of subjects, who belonged to numerous different ethnic groups, spoke diverse languages, and were loyal to various local traditions and elites. To **cement** its power, the **victorious** Qin regime tried to **dismantle** any regional powers that might challenge its authority. It **confiscated** the lands and wealth of local **aristocrats** and forced regional elites to move to the imperial capital of Xiangyang, thereby separating them from their power base and monitoring them more easily.

The Qin regime also **embarked** on a **ruthless** campaign of centralization and **homogenization**. It created a new simplified script to be used throughout the empire and standardized coinage, weights, and measurements. It built a road network radiating out of Xiangyang, with standardized rest houses, relay stations, and military checkpoints. People needed written permits in order to

Dictionary

| **Spartan**: severe/unsparing and uncompromising in discipline or judgment; - H.G.Wells | **draconian**: Draconian/of or relating to Draco or his harsh code of laws | **monopolized**: monopolise/have and control fully and exclusively | **Sparta**: Sparta/an ancient Greek city famous for military prowess; the dominant city of the Peloponnesus prior to the 4th century BC | **Athenian**: Athenian/of or relating to or characteristic of Athens or its inhabitants | **garrisons**: troops/the troops who maintain and guard a fortified place | **totalitarian**: /characterized by a government in which the political authority exercises absolute and centralized control; - Arthur M.Schlesinger, Jr. | **cement**: bind/make fast as if with cement | **victorious**: triumphant/experiencing triumph | **dismantle**: level/tear down so as to make flat with the ground | **confiscated**: impound/take temporary possession of as a security, by legal authority | **aristocrats**: patrician/a member of the aristocracy | **embarked**: venture/proceed somewhere despite the risk of possible dangers | **ruthless**: remorseless/without mercy or pity | **homogenization**: homogenisation/the act of making something homogeneous or uniform in composition