

THE MEDIA, POLITICS, AND IDEOLOGY: A CRITICAL-ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper uses the four functions of ideology (representation, political contradictions, reification, and hegemony) to undergird my analysis and to discuss them in relation to our current political spectacle and the media's influence on ideology. Since the communication literature is devoid of a critical analysis of the media and politics and the way ideology consumes ordinary citizens in everyday life, this paper extends the political communication literature to include a critical analysis of the media and politics.

Key Words: Ideology, media, critical theory, reified, hegemony, inequality, domination

1. Introduction

The mainstream media is called our cultural elite, cultural icon, and cultural magnate. It is capital-driven, exposes public policy issues, and is politically influenced. It is the guardian of social and political information in that it frames stories that set the tone for the government and politics. It has the ability to influence public opinion, color the public's perception about political parties, and can sway the national agenda. The media is called the Fourth Estate. Or simply put, it serves as the fourth branch of government. As U.S. society grew into a mass public, "ideas became commodities and assimilated to the economics of mass media consumption."¹ The media has pushed America onto the global stage as a global superpower, and serves as a site for race, class, gender, social, and political struggle and contestation. The media, broadcast or print, is our cultural authority and disseminator of information that typically supports the status quo and the ruling corporate elite that own it. However, the media plays a major controlling role in our democratic process with respect to the political agenda. The media also contributes to the "political values of openness and democratic accountability that go by the name of 'transparency.'"² Jack Balkin, a Knight Professor of Constitutional Law and the First Amendment at Yale Law School, writes that the media offers three ways it contributes to the metaphor of transparency.

First, informational transparency contributes to our knowledge about the government and access to government information where citizens can influence government action.³ Second, participatory transparency gives citizens the ability to participate in the political decision making process through "fair representation or direct participation," but fair representation has morphed into an illusion.⁴ Third, accountability transparency gives citizens the ability to hold government officials accountable to public opinion when they violate the trust of an office.⁵ When presidential candidates campaign on the promise that their administration will be transparent to the public, the media as well holds the winning candidate accountable for such transparency. Balkin goes on to write that "people often oppose transparency to secrecy.

However, governments and politicians can manipulate the presentation and revelation of information to achieve the same basic goals as a policy of secrecy and obfuscation."⁶ Whether a president, for example, promises a transparent administration, Balkin suggests that transparency can still be manipulated and obscured by diverting the people's attention and supplementing politics with new realities and political issues. In this way political transparency "can be defeated by what appear to be its own mechanisms: proliferating information, holding political officials accountable, and uncovering things that are secret."⁷ Whether Obama or the current GOP presidential candidates pledge a transparent administration, a true transparent administration may not be possible. Since the communication literature is devoid of any critical analysis of the media and politics, using the four functions of ideology, the purpose of this paper is to extend the political communication literature.

2. Theoretical Considerations

Critical theory was constructed in reaction to the exploitation of the working class, commonly known in Marxian writings as the proletariat or working non-elite of society. The common justification given for studying and applying critical theory is that U.S. politics and the media are intimately tied to individuals and other social phenomena. However, a more substantial justification for using critical theory is its application to personal, political, and media ideologues, ideologues that consciously or unconsciously coerce humans into intellectual and emotional submission to the self-centered interests of politicians, our national polity, and the media, thus creating a contested site for human struggle. To draw on Marx's writings, critical social researchers subscribe to the view that it is not enough to merely observe the world we live in, merely to understand it, but to evaluate the problems in order change them. Marx's writings certainly do not ask us to passively view such problems and accept the worldview of political parties but ask us to put the problems under the theoretical microscope and to analyze the practices behind the problems. By doing so, society members can find ways to emancipate their own thinking about the critical issues they deal with on a daily basis. For this paper, I employ critical theory as an emancipatory theory to move us from idealism to realism in analyzing Obama, the media, and politics for this project.

Critical theory designates several generations of German philosophers (Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Max Horkheimer, to name a few) in the Western European Marxist tradition, where conceptual developments grew out of the work of these social theorists at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main. The Frankfurt School of thought is sometimes referred to as neo-Marxist because of its "development of a comprehensive theoretical framework for the critical analysis of modern societies," especially those societies that are driven by political and economic power.⁸ Critical theorists are concerned about the social construction of reality and how social-psychological (perceptions and beliefs), political-institutional (centers of influence), philosophical-ideological (values and ideas), and rhetorical-ideological (use of language) forces operate to oppress society members, making them believe these forces are operating in their best interest. Since these forces work in conjunction with the social construction of reality, critical theory of resistance and counter-hegemony associated with any emancipatory process and democratic practice is used as a liberatory theory.

Expanding on the understanding of these forces, critical theory seeks to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them⁹ while critical theorists engage the assumed objectified realities of language, knowledge, work, and institutional process in terms of the social relations of dominance and subjugation of members of society.¹⁰ What society believes to be true in common practices and habits are examined in relation to the inequalities of social power that exists in society.¹¹ Critical theorists are particularly sensitive to human suffering and struggle inherent within power relations and are concerned with unveiling the political stakes that anchor cultural practices.¹² Said differently, critical theorists focus on the reason some meaning structures are privileged over others in society, but focus their attention on an array of theoretical and cultural work which exposes ruptures hidden, reified relationships of power and dominance, within a given society's social and political institutions.

Critical theorists' priority is to facilitate enlightenment and self-determination to find meaningful ways for society members to emancipate themselves from oppressive social, political, economic, and legal institutions that seek ways to marginalize the voices of the less powerful members of society. Marginalized members are understood to be those individuals living on the margins of the dominant cultural paths, where they are considered exiled individuals, groups, and knowledges.¹³ These exiled voices are muffled, ignored, and devalued and are only considered when politicians need their votes. After that, these exiled individuals are forced underground and quieted until they are summoned at politicians' beck and call. As applied to political and media institutions, critical theorists seek emancipatory goals for ordinary members of society in an attempt to create intellectual and practical space for individual and collective liberation from ideological substructures.¹⁴ That is, critical theory "may be distinguished from a 'traditional' theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human emancipation for liberatory reasons."¹⁵

With emancipatory goals in mind, critical theorists help us to see the way power and ideology converge in media and political spaces that promote the interests of politicians and the media's ability to suppress the interests of the powerless.

According to organizational communication scholar Dennis Mumby, power is both “a product of organizational and societal activity and the process by which activity becomes institutionally legitimated.”¹⁶ Mumby sees power as the process “through which structure is created, reproduced, and changed.”¹⁷ Given Mumby’s definition of power, society members form interpersonal coalitions where the actions of one member can affect the actions of others. That is, when Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was ridiculed by the power elite for exposing their greed and corruption, social and economic inequality, and high unemployment and the political influence of corporations, they were blamed for their own failures. Republican presidential candidate such as Herman Cain used the media to accuse OWS protesters of being anti-capitalists by extrapolating his own success, as an African American, to the unemployed, but Cain did not fully understand the demonstrations. On the other hand, Obama understood the frustrations of the protesters and said during his October news conference that, “I think it expresses the frustrations the American people feel, that we had the biggest financial crisis since the Great Depression, huge collateral damage all throughout the country, and yet you’re still seeing some of the same folks who acted irresponsibly trying to fight efforts to crack down on the abusive practices that got us into this in the first place.”

From a cultural perspective, the United States is an individualist society that embraces individualism, individual success (success or failure is the sole responsibility of the individual), and individual ideologues. Ideology plays a crucial role in the way presidents and congress make decisions, the way the media communicate political information to persuade or dissuade us, and the way politics constrain and limit our understanding. It functions in four ways. It represents sectional interests as universal. It denies political contradictions that are inherent in political life. It naturalizes the present through reified processes, giving material existence to abstract notions. It engages hegemonic control through the media and in our national politics, creating a consensus regarding the way the world is and “places it in routine practices of everyday life.”¹⁸ Since ideology is communicatively constituted, it produces conditions of patriarchal domination and oppression.¹⁹ The next section is a presentation of the analysis of the four functions of ideology and the ways these ideologies are filtered through the media and politicians to the people.

3. *The Analysis*

The *first function of ideology* is the representation of sectional interests. Oppressive societies, such as the U.S., tend to privilege the political, social, and economic interests of the power elite over ordinary members of society. The average uninformed member of society has accepted the privileged interests of the power elite over their own, which perhaps contributed to the countless Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protests in the U.S. and worldwide. The working and middle classes have come to accept elite members as the political, social, and economic banners of society because the media has contributed to this social construct. The power elite have been heralded for their social capital and political networks and have received more political representation because they use their wealth to fill the coffers of politicians. MSNBC unlike Fox News has exposed the political representation the power elite receive. We have seen more protests over union-busting, voter ID disenfranchisement, and huge tax breaks for the top one percent and corporations in recent history, and the media’s role in exposing the declining incomes of the middle class and massive unemployment as proof that global capitalism does not work. Karl Marx’s critique of commodity production informs us that capitalism produces domination and exploitation of the working and middle classes by the ruling class.²⁰

Commodity production also creates alienation between the wealthy and the working class. The wealthy blame the working class for their own unemployment by shifting the blame away from job outsourcing and greed. Since the media play a critical role in presidential campaigns, conservative candidates often denounce the media as participating in liberal bias. Herman Cain, a 2012 presidential candidate, argues that his messages are marginalized by “the liberal media.” The conservative right typically blames the media of biased representation during presidential elections, specifically MSNBC, but will lavish praise on Fox News for supporting their radical ideas and agendas.²¹ In a capitalistic or consumer societies, Baudrillard concludes that “multiple forms of refusal of social convention, conspicuous consumption, and conformist thought and behavior” of working class people “can be fused in a practice of radical change,” which leads to a sudden disintegration in our government, political, and social institutions, as illustrated by the OWS demonstrations.²² Some media pundits and commentators assumed the OWS demonstrations would fizzle out within a month, but they have yet to abate since starting.

Speaking to the issue of the OWS demonstrations, Fox News, a conservative-right wing network contributes to the social, economic, and political subordination of society members through the use of language in two ways.

Fox's language articulates the worldview of the power elite and serves to legitimate their sectional interests and politics. Marxian thought reminds us that "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class that is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. Hence, among other things, they rule also as thinkers and producers of ideas and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age. Thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of epoch."²³ Given Marx's analysis, the ideology of the ruling elite creates a relationship between the media, ideology, and culture in which the sum of these three phenomena is expressed in cultural, political, and economic representation. The ruling elite with the help of the media are the creators of the culture that constructs a social and political reality that is illusory.

When the media represent the sectional interests of the corporations and the power and political elite, they tend to filter through or cover up the victimization of the voiceless and marginalized. When Obama arrived on the scene, the media's coverage of him clearly illustrated he represented the interest of those who had been *de*-centered from the activities of our national polity. There did not appear to be much filtering of the voice of the working class. Because of Obama's message of change, the media gave in to the voiceless. Beyond this, the media reported how Obama fought for "disability pay for veterans, worked to boost the non-proliferation of deadly weapons, and advocated the use of alternative fuels to cure our national addiction to oil. He has spoken against the indifference of the Bush administration to the poor—and to political competence—in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and he has rallied against genocide in Darfur.

Media representation of the sectional interests of the working and middle classes appeared to have closed the gap between in class relationships between the ruling elite and working class. The working class has demanded media space to have their frustrated voices heard. Habermas informs us that all knowledge reflects the interest of the ruling elite, which is the dominant interest. However, it is the "role of critical theorists to expose the interests behind knowledge and indeed the knowledge which exists behind the interests."²⁴

The *second function of ideology* is contradictions or political contradictions that are inherent in the media and in politics. David Shultz informs us that four imperatives compete for our attention and place "contradictory demands upon the news."²⁵ These imperatives often conflict with each other, serve as functions of the media, and create cultural contradictions. These imperatives, according to Shultz, are: (1) the political role of the media; (2) the democratic functions of the media; (3) the corporate function of the media; and (4) the entertainment function of the media. Given these imperatives, Politicians often use conventional rhetorical strategies to obscure reality, denying the true meaning of freedom, liberty, and equal opportunity for all. Mainstream media, such as Fox News, denies it engages in the slanting of news reporting stories and allows its contributors to present unchecked information without evidence or facts? Fox News, a cable and satellite channel that many observers, political pundits, and academics believe is politically biased fills the living rooms of more than 100 million viewers worldwide. Fox News' trademark slogans say they are "Fair and Balanced," "We Report. You Decide," and "The Most Powerful Name in News." Fox News claims fairness, objectivity, neutrality, and impartiality.

Even though there are several models about how the media work, one model is the "fair and objective" model that asserts that the media should report the events of the day as fairly and objectively as they can and provide the public with an accurate picture of reality. However, Fox News does not appear to fall within the parameters of the "Fair and Objective" model. Instead, Fox News has become a news site for contradiction, racist ideology, and ideological tension and supports right-wing radical politics on most social and racial issues and misrepresents facts to the public. If Fox News is ideologically biased against left-wing politicians, what democratic function does it serve? Edward Herman, a media analyst, argues that democratic media would encourage all groups of people to "understand their neighbors"²⁶ and for them "to participate in social and political life."²⁷ He goes on to argue that when media structures are democratic, such media will be open to neighbors who want to communicate views on problems and their possible national and local resolution.²⁸

This is "where the media structures are democratic, open to individuals' perspectives on social, economic, and political problems and their possible communal resolution."²⁹ Consequently, a democratic media would recognize and encourage all citizens, regardless of race, class, and gender, to express their views and build their own community solidarity with the larger national community. Recognizing and encouraging individual differences around this democratic idea will allow all views to bloom regardless of their financial position and institutional power.³⁰ Herman's statement suggests that Fox News creates tension among politicians and ordinary American citizens by pitting racist ideology against racial equality.

Herman also suggests that Fox News does not encourage diversity and national solidarity. Murray Edelman would suggest that Fox News appears to function as a totalitarian network under the guise of freedom of expression. His work on the politics of misinformation also suggests that Fox's political commentators and network hosts use misinformation to stifle social change.³¹ The very nature of Fox News denies contradictions for rational thought and meaningfully discourse free of deception. The 2012 GOP presidential candidates seem to operate with the notion that their political agendas are exempt from the scrutiny of the media. They say one thing, but their behavior contradicts what they say. For example, when questioned about domestic or foreign policies, Herman Cain demonstrated a lack of knowledge in both of these areas which contradicts what he says he actually knows. When asked by journalists why the long pauses to long to respond whether he agreed with Obama's handling of Libya, Cain actually was not aware of the Libya incident and evidence that contradicted his lack of knowledge. The media's exposure of former Governor Mitt Romney's many contradictory statements on social and economic issues also supports this second function of ideology.

The *third function of ideology* naturalizes the present through reified processes. From a Marxist perspective, reification is discussed in connection with the "nature of social structure and the nature of social consciousness"³² and reduced to a "psychological characteristic of the abstract individual."³³ Said differently, reification has been treated as a mystifying term, where individuals' social consciousness is concealed by existing social relations, which is seen in Marxist thinking as an impediment to critical consciousness, preventing individuals from seeing the way things really are. Reification gives material existence to an abstraction, such as making racism, classism, and feminism into objects that make it easy for a racist or a patriarchal society to deny Americans of color, the working class, and women their basic human rights, their true worth, and their full participation in various social and political institutions. In U.S. society, Americans of color and women have been viewed as abstractions. Now we can observe that the working and middle classes are treated as abstractions.

The conservative right believes that corporations are people, while ordinary American citizens have become an abstraction in the minds of elite politicians who fill their coffers on an unprecedented scale in return for putting national leadership and decision making at the service of the wealthiest member of society.³⁴ As Hamburger and Wallsten writes that "Under [Karl] Rove, for instance, Republicans have pressed for legislation designed to hamstring the trial lawyers and union leaders who have bankrolled the Democratic machine."³⁵ But this is a political contradiction and misinformation. It creates the appearance that Republicans engage in rational democracy, while simultaneously obscuring structural inequality and discourage critical evaluation of political policy. Republicans are defenders of the wealthiest one percent and are bankrolled by them.

To sum, reification creates modes of thought that have ideological consequences, and this reified or false consciousness is by no means inconsequential. More than merely being a "superimposed illusion, these ways of thinking and being in the world serve to sustain categories of thought to which capitalism owes its very existence."³⁶ For Georg Lukàcs and Jean Baudrillard, reification is the process whereby individuals become dominated by the media, where it comes to govern their social and political life.

The *fourth function of ideology* is hegemony or ideological hegemony (used hereafter). In class societies, the ruling class typically maintains control over institutions and people through ideology. The United States relies more on ideology, although a certain degree of force is used through the police,³⁷ as we have observed during the peaceful protests of the students at the University of California at Davis. Hegemony operates through many institutions and mechanisms, and mainstream media reinforces it by emphasizing facts that are consistent with the liberal-conservative spectrum while downplaying facts that might cast down on it.³⁸ We live in a society where all ideas are not treated equally and people are not treated equally because capitalism produces inequality. As a result, individuals are predisposed to accept certain political views, while others may not accept any political view at all. The ideas of the power elite are being told and protected by the media.

Ideological hegemony was first conceptualized by Antonio Gramsci, a devout Italian social Marxist philosopher who was imprisoned by fascists of Mussolini's regime. As a Marxist philosopher, Gramsci subscribed to the "Marxist premise of *historical dialectic*."³⁹ According to this premise, "societies must transform over time from oppressive economic systems to more liberating ones, until society finally reaches the Utopian state of communism."⁴⁰ For Gramsci, this notion would never materialize in the United States because the U.S. illusory democratic system is designed to make things appear normal, natural, and unquestionable. It is normal, natural, and always assumed to believe in the legitimacy of economic classes and the government to protect them.⁴¹

A vast number of American citizens do not view the U.S. political, economic, or its social system as repressive, although they may become dissatisfied with the status quo. At this writing, since the 2010 mid-term elections that gave the GOP a sweeping victory, because of the people's dissatisfaction with the economy, they have come to understand that the 2010 elections was not about job creation. The 112th Republican Congress campaigned on job creation, but as soon as Congressional Republicans, Republican governors, and the intransigent Tea Party assumed office, the American people were served a radical agenda involving culture wars. As a result of the 2010 elections and the rejection of federal stimulus monies by Republican governors, the economy has become more depressed because of GOP obstructionism and a deliberate act to stall an already fragile economy.

All Americans, regardless of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation have come to believe that the American political system is repressive, and they have been protesting against a broken political system, a radical conservative Congress, and an adamant Tea Party in peaceful protests. When the electorate becomes dissatisfied with the Party in power or with individual politicians, they vote them out of office or vote against a referendum or vote for those politicians they believe represent their views and voices, no matter how illusory this representation may be. Therefore, the working class gives its consent to the power elite because it is a natural practice.

The media influence our thought processes with ideological messages. The media is the eyes and ears of the people. It not only provides information but also provides access, context, and insight into situations that affect the people politically. For example, when the newly sworn in right-wing conservative governors of Ohio and Wisconsin rammed their hegemonic union-busting radical legislation through their state senates and general assemblies under the pretext they needed to balance the state budget by limiting collective bargaining rights of public employees, MSNBC specifically, monitored the people's reaction to this radical move, which spurred massive protests among the people in Ohio and Wisconsin. To defeat this draconian legislation, in Ohio, for example, a coalition of Democratic and labor forces collected more than 1.3 million signatures to stall the union-busting law to put it on the ballot.

This radical law, known as Senate Bill 5, was put on the ballot for the people, and the law was defeated. A more plausible reason the governors wanted to limit or take away the collective bargaining rights of public employees was motivated by the political power of defeating the Democratic Party. Unions are known for supporting Democratic candidates, but some have supported Republican candidates, such as the Fraternal Order of Police. Right-wing radical governors and the conservative majority U.S. Congress have tried to eliminate the democratic electorate by passing legislation or ignoring legislation that would help Obama and Democratic Party in the 2012 election. Speaking to the issue of the media's influencing role in politics, Fox News also is viewed as an opinion network, influenced heavily by right-wing political rhetoric, is biased in its reportage of the non-elite members of society. Fox News tends to report subjective, slanted, derogatory, and biased information against Obama, Americans of color, and Democrats. When Fox News host Bill O'Reilly of the O'Reilly Factor interviewed President Obama, O'Reilly asserted a hegemonic stance and interrupted the president over 45 times.⁴²

Ideological hegemony is one way the media transmits hegemony and competing ideologies. Edward Herman suggests that networks such as Fox News undermine democratic media and healthy freedom of expression. Fox News' philosophical-ideological detachment from fair and objective reporting restricts the public's ability to engage in meaningful discussions about race, class, and gender. David Brock documents how in the last several decades

the GOP [has] built a powerful media machine—newspapers and magazines, think tanks, talk radio networks, op-ed columnists, the Fox News Channel, Christian Right broadcasting, book publishers, and high-traffic internet sites—to sell conservatism to the public and discredit its opponents. This unabashedly biased multibillion-dollar communications empire disregards journalistic ethics and universal standards of fairness and accuracy, manufacturing 'news' that is often bought and paid for by a tight network of corporate-backed foundations and old family fortunes.⁴³

By using these techniques, the GOP has reached a "booming right-wing media market that is largely based on bigotry, ignorance, and emotional manipulation."⁴⁴ Instead, this kind of technological networking hinders diverse opinions, minority expression, and community solidarity, based on Herman's arguments of what a democratic media should be.⁴⁵

4. Conclusion

Given today's radical political climate, the media must devote its time and resources monitoring politicians, permeating the halls of power to determine who is doing the people's work, and who is corrupting the process to take away the people's rights.⁴⁶ The media must also monitor that the will of the people is not overtaken by ideology but by general welfare policies that promote their economic, social, and political well-being. Ideology signifies that the authority of social, political, economic, and cultural forces are able to win the voluntary consent of individual citizens because ordinary citizens accept their subject positions for the sake of achieving certain goals. The Preamble to the Constitution begins with the declaration that "We the people" play a major role in establishing the government of the United States and its political landscape to promote the general welfare of the people. The government has a responsibility not only to promote the economic well-being of the power elite but also promote the well-being of its ordinary citizen by protecting their rights. Although this study is conceptual in nature, it is applied to actual conditions of domination.

Notes

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