



Sociology Central

The Mass Media

2. Ownership and Control: Theories

2. Ownership and Control (2)

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Traditional (Instrumental) Marxism

An individual's economic position in society (their class) influences the way they see and experience the social world. For instrumental Marxists, society is seen in terms of a particular class structure:

Bourgeoisie: Those who own the means of production are the most powerful and influential grouping in any society.

Proletariat: Those who own nothing but their "labour power" - the ability to work for money. This is the least powerful group in Capitalist society.

Cultural institutions, such as the media, are used as a tool (or instrument) to spread ideas favourable to the bourgeoisie throughout society. Writers such as **Milliband** (1973), argue the ruling class has a common economic status (as owners and controllers people who are generally drawn from the same social class) and cultural background, created and reinforced through education (public schools, Oxford and Cambridge Universities etc.), family networks, interlocking directorships (where the same person is a director of numerous different companies), media ownership and so forth.

Owners have ultimate control over a company; they decide, for example, who to employ to run their businesses.

Ownership and Control

Managers only 'control' a business (such as a newspaper) in the sense they oversee its operation. The editor of a newspaper may control things like the stories appearing each day, the hiring and firing of employees and so forth. The owner, however, ultimately controls the political stance of the paper, the type of audience it aims to reach and the like.



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Ownership and control, from this position, is seen as part of the same process, which has two, interconnected, objectives.

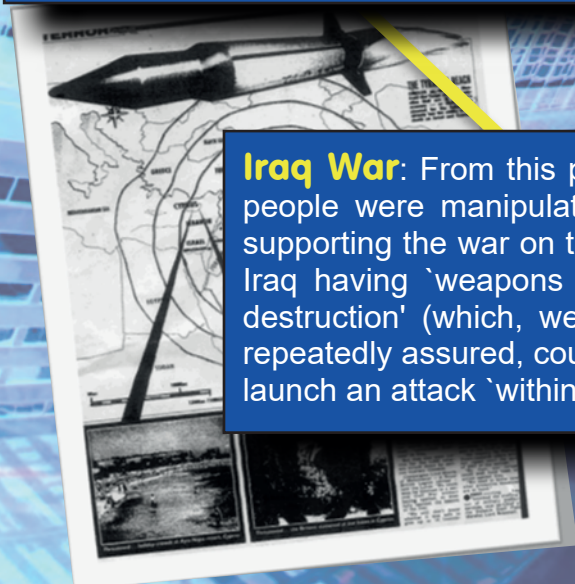
1. Economic: One objective is to make (private) profits.

2. Ideological, in the sense of trying to control how people see the social world. This aspect creates the conditions under which profit is not only created and kept in private hands but is seen as legitimate ('right and proper'). One objective, common to both owners and controllers, is to protect and enhance the interests of a capitalist ruling class and this is achieved through the media.

The media is used as a **tool** (or **instrument** - hence "**Instrumental Marxism**") through which ideas, beliefs and behaviours are manipulated. Ownership and control, therefore, is used to create a picture of the social world beneficial to the interests of the most powerful people in society.

False consciousness: By their ability to control and limit the information people receive, a ruling class is able to control how people think - both directly and indirectly - about the things happening in society.

Iraq War: From this perspective people were manipulated into supporting the war on the basis of Iraq having 'weapons of mass destruction' (which, we were repeatedly assured, could be used to launch an attack 'within 45 minutes').



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Owners try to ensure employees reflect their views

"Murdoch is well known for intervening in editorial policy. He sacked Harold Evans, editor of The Times, after disagreements over policy. Frank Giles, former editor of the Sunday Times, said Murdoch would make a point of dropping into his office just to check on the first copies of the paper. Fred Emery, home editor of the Times in 1982 reported Murdoch as saying 'I give instructions to my editors all round the world, why shouldn't I in London?'"

Section cut from Trowler's book "Investigating the Media" (1991) by the publisher HarperCollins (owned by News Corporation: Prop: Rupert Murdoch)

"Worried that Patten's criticisms of China in his forthcoming book 'East and West The last Governor of Hong Kong' would upset Beijing and thus spoil the strenuous efforts he had been making to reingratiate himself with the Chinese . . . Murdoch, with his current audience of 36 million Chinese viewers and a potential further 240 million in mind, promptly ordered HarperCollins to drop the book".

Terry Boardman: "Patten and Murdoch Quarrel - David and Goliath Again?" (1998)

"Conrad Black [the ex-owner of the Daily Telegraph] is not there anymore, the new owners do not interfere, it is basically down to us in a way it hasn't been for many years' . . . The Barclays [the new owners of The Telegraph], he says, have not laid down a clear political line. 'There are still occasional conversations. I might call about something. Normal, friendly, conversations'.

'Newland Unleashed',
The Guardian: 15/11/04

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Neo (Hegemonic) Marxism

Social class is not a static (unchanging) classification system; rather, it's seen as a **dynamic** system of shifting and changing social relationships.

Conflict, divisions and contradictions occur within a dominant (or ruling) class. A simple example here might be to note how some parts of the bourgeoisie in our society are pro-Europe while others are anti-Europe.

Class associations can involve ethnic and gender dimensions (for example, individuals from some ethnic groups may be economically successful while seeing themselves, culturally, as not belonging to a middle or upper class).

Professionals and intellectuals (the upper middle classes) have significant roles in the class structure. They occupy, according to **Poulantzas** (1975), 'contradictory class positions' neither wholly bourgeois nor wholly proletarian. This, for neo-Marxists, is a significant idea in any explanation of the relationship between media owners and controllers.

Managers enjoy **relative autonomy** (a certain amount of freedom to make decisions). Transnational media companies, for example, are too large and complex to be easily controlled by a single owner/board of owners on a day-to-day basis. They employ people (managers) who can be trusted to:

Hegemony: A concept used to show how both owners and controllers are locked into a mutually beneficial structural relationship

Owners have to make profits this is their guiding principle (since if businesses are unprofitable they may cease to exist).

Controllers (Managers) also see profitability as important, since their jobs, salaries and lifestyles depend on it.

Owners and controllers have a common interest that binds them together, expressed in terms of **core values**. They are likely to share beliefs about the importance of profits, which in turn presupposes a (fundamental) belief in capitalist economic systems. Marginal disagreements may occur between these groups over such things as the most efficient way to make profits, but not over the basic principle of the need for profitability. Although media owners and professionals share a common cause in promoting and preserving certain basic values this doesn't necessarily mean they always agree on the best way to promote and preserve such values.

Reflect their views: Editors who insist on ignoring the policies laid down by their employers are likely to find themselves unemployed, unless they:

Make profits: As long as it's legal (and sometimes if it is not) the key principle is profitability - some modern media owners may not care too much about the activities of their managers as long as the money continues to roll in.

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Pluralism

Social groups **compete** against each other in the economic market place. For example, two types of group are:

Interest groups, an example being a business (such as a publishing company) pursuing some economic or social objective.

Status groups, such as a Trade Union publishing information specific to the members of a particular occupation. One aspect of the Union's role might be to promote and enhance the reputation (**status**) of its membership.



Societies involve groups pursuing their own (sectional) interests and, in so doing, they create:

Explicit competition involving, for example, different newspaper groups competing for readers.

Implicit competition involving political groups promoting different economic, political or cultural views they want reflected in the media. For pluralists, competition is based on the desire for power, which can, for example, be expressed in terms of:

Economic power such as making profits or gaining market share.

Political power such as influencing decisions made by governments.



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Media owners are clearly powerful players in any society since they are in a position to have their views heard. However, Pluralists argue those who control the day-to-day running of the media are also powerful, for a couple of reasons.

To survive, a business must compete successfully in a market place which means consumers influence the behaviour of an organisation: if consumers don't like - or more importantly buy - what's on offer the seller either improves or changes their product or they go out of business.

Modern ('joint-stock') media companies tend to be owned by groups of shareholders rather than by all-powerful individuals. **Burnham** (1943), for example, argued that, where no single shareholder had overall control of a business, this meant directors and managers were the main policy-makers. Thus, the day-to-day running of a business was in the hands of a technocratic managerial elite - people whose job it was to run a business in the best interests of the shareholders. This is a powerful group, according to pluralists, because their job depends on knowing what an audience wants and being able to provide it.

"Current media ownership rules in the UK prevent any one entity acquiring excessive influence in the sector, thereby ensuring plurality of voice and diversity of content".

For **Bernard and McDermott** (2002) the private ownership of the media is significant because it promotes **competition and diversity**.



References

Milliband, Ralph "The State In Capitalist Society", 1973

Poulantzas, Nicos "Classes in Contemporary Capitalism", 1975

Burnham, John "The Managerial Revolution", 1943

Bernard, Alix and McDermott, Patricia "Media Ownership Rules", 2002

A computer mouse is positioned in the upper center of the frame against a solid blue background. A thin, light-colored cord extends from the mouse towards the top left. The bottom of the image features a horizontal, irregular white tear in the blue surface, revealing a white layer underneath. To the left of this tear, a vertical strip of white paper is partially unrolled, creating a cylindrical shape.

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