

Media power and institutional economics

Questions of media power have circulated throughout the previous Parts of this volume, so what follows is a summary and a recapitulation. Which social actors control the media? And what effect does media power have upon audiences? These two questions have stimulated media research from the outset and the answers provided subscribe to three paradigms of power which are virtually canonical in the social sciences. The mass media have been studied as if empowering the elites – *elitism* – the people – *pluralism* – and social institutions, including themselves – *institutionalism*.

The elitist approach conceives of the media as instruments in the hands of the elite groups whose position of power is guaranteed by the effects of the media upon the behaviour and beliefs of the audience. By contrast, the pluralistic paradigm argues that media control is open to competition among different groups that represent the main interests in a society. Thus pluralists tend to speak of minimal media effects and they emphasise the power of the audience to use and make sense of media content. Finally, the institutional paradigm of power sustains the view that the media display their own goals and norms, although linked to other powerful institutions, especially those of the state and the market. Powerful media effects can be detected at the institutional level when media reinforce (and sometimes weaken) the functioning and the legitimacy of other social institutions. These three alternative views of media power inform most research traditions about mass media control and its effects.

Elitism depicts exclusionary control of the media, fortressing the interests of cohesive ruling groups that limit social debate to whatever is most convenient for their advantage (see Mills, 1956). Challengers are either silenced or marginalised by the media as being anti-systemic, extreme and lacking support. In authoritarian states, most media silence or condemn protest. In democratic societies, common interests among the elites' enterprises and the main news organisations often explain why the media sustain the status quo (see Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

Two schools of media effects have assumed the elitist paradigm: much early empirical research into the effects on audiences of media content, and the critics of the ideological hegemony that media build in favour of capitalism. The seminal mass communication research of the 1920s applied the notion of mass society and the principles of behaviourist psychology to the models of the 'hypodermic needle' and 'bullet' theories for immediate media effects. It claimed that the media 'injected' or 'shot' messages into the helpless and atomised audience in order, say, to steer mass consumption and electoral preferences. After being abandoned for a time, the powerful effects thesis was recovered in some quarters during the mid 1970s and 1980s in empirical studies based on cognitive psychology that claimed long-term media effects on the public's belief system. The main thesis was that the media generated a 'pseudo-reality' on which the public was fully dependent to formulate its opinions (see Adoni and Mane, 1984).

The most vigorous theories of the cognitive 'dependency model' at present are the agenda-setting theory, complemented with framing and priming

effects, and the 'spiral of silence'. All of these share with elitism a top-down model. Media agendas are built by elites (experts, journalists and officials) securing the conformity of the audience's perception of public issues. (For reviews of agenda setting and related issues see Protes and McCombs, 1991.) In addition, the mass media suppress debate over certain issues and opinions, and spin the spiral of silence upon ever-receding minority factions (Noelle-Neumann, 1980).

In contrast, many critical scholars addressed the ideological hegemony of the mass media, the main effect of which was to guarantee that the dominant ideology coincided with the ideology of those who held power. Drawing upon Marx, the Frankfurt School and later followers studied how the media 'manufactured' consent in favour of a political status quo and capitalist values. Neo-Marxist theories of hegemony, and social control studies, claim that news organisations veil the class struggle in the interests of those with economic power and marginalise challengers to the social order. Mainstream media infuse this bias into the belief systems of most citizens. The Gramscian version of hegemony was more dynamic, admitting some degree of audience resistance to ideological manipulation. But the outcome was again that the media impeded the working class from gaining consciousness of its oppressed position, building instead a 'false consciousness'. (For an excellent reader of Marxist and neo-Marxist texts, see Mattelart and Siegelau, 1979.)

From an entirely different perspective, *pluralists* maintain that power is the shifting result of resource mobilisation by interest groups in an 'inclusive' and 'relatively open' system (see Dahl, 1961). Thus the media respond to competing interests, diversely and without any necessarily pre-established bias. It is a bottom-up model of media power, contradicting the top-down model of elitism. Pluralistic media content mirrors the values and views of the most influential and representative social groups. Even anti-elite factions could, in this view, mobilise publicity against the status quo by having their activities covered by conventional media.

Two traditions finding weak or minimal media effects support a pluralist view. They are the school of 'uses and gratifications' of the 1970s and the current research into 'active' audiences. While the first maintained that the audience used the media to satisfy certain needs or gratifications, nowadays an increasing number of studies shows the audience interpreting the media in different contexts and building personal and social meanings. The studies of uses and gratifications took a functionalist approach in which the media fulfilled public needs for information, social interaction and entertainment. This thesis was consonant with the dominant idea that reinforcement of the public's preferences was the principal media effect. Current ethnographic work, focused on the so-called 'active' audience, links specific patterns of media consumption to different 'interpretive communities' that are defined by, say, class, gender or race. In this way, media effects may seem to dissolve into multiple 'negotiations of meanings' from the same media content. If the studies of uses and gratifications usually concluded with the sovereignty of media users, much current research tends to picture the 'active' audience as the ultimate interpreter of media communications. Consumers' power to use the media for their gratifications has given way to the power to decode

media messages. (For a critical review of the pluralist schools see Curran, 1990.)

Elitism over-emphasises the power of ruling groups to control the media and their effects, while pluralism over-emphasises the capacity of the audience to use the media and extract specific meanings at its convenience. The modern media, as will be clear from many of the contributions to this volume, are neither elite transmission belts nor unbiased platforms for pluralist representation and meaning building. Considering the media as a contemporary institution (or a set of interlocked institutions) drives our attention towards media organisations and their conventional practices. These media norms and routines result from power inequalities and tend, in turn, to reproduce them. So *institutionalism* is the third and last paradigm of media power. The media institutional 'logics' – formal or informal procedures, routines and norms embedded in media production – are tied to powerful institutions and favour the groups that already count on other institutional resources. Although the media privilege certain interests, they may also provoke unintended consequences. For example, most political leaders have been drawn into self-promotional strategies in order to achieve media impact, often with unpredictable results in relation to their parties' interests. A general effect is that modern parties have lost ground as institutions for political socialisation in favour of the mass media, with their focus on individuals (see Patterson, 1993).

Indeed, the 'mediatisation' or imposition of media logics on other institutions is perhaps the most powerful overall effect (Beniger and Herbst, 1990). The media constitute a key institution of modern societies but often display contradictory institutional logics while pretending to perform as entertainers and enlighteners of the public, watch-dogs of government and of powerful enterprises, all at the same time.

Media power over the audience will depend in turn on the economic and socio-cultural resources of the various groupings that make up 'the public', as well as on certain institutional features of the media. Those with more *cultural capital* are in a better position to demand, to choose and to resist media messages (Morley, 1992). In any case, those sectors of audiences with the highest purchasing power and political influence consume and influence the media with greater gusto (Ettema and Whitney, 1994). On the other hand, the less favoured or subaltern publics may display a 'paradoxical creativity' (Silverstone, 1994), robustly reinterpreting the media in their own contexts despite apparently limited resources for doing so.

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Institutional economics as a framework

In the search for appropriate theories, methodologies and strategies with which to undertake media studies, institutional economics offers a range of analytical frameworks.

Born out of wide-eyed disbelief in the capability of late nineteenth-century mass-producing global capitalism, its appeal stems from two traditions: the critical and the pragmatic. In establishing a critical path for a 'new' econom-

ics of mass market capitalism, institutional economics provides a vehicle for entering into the historical task of critique. Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), the recognised founder of the 'school', was virtually estranged from the entire US academic establishment as a result of his efforts in generating theories of evolutionary capitalism. This did not hinder his substantial contribution to the literature of engaged economic thought.

The tradition which Veblen established has concerned itself with a non-Marxist approach, where idealist and utopian class and philosophical concerns carry less currency than the everyday problems of equity, access and resource allocation. Nevertheless, institutional economics shares with some contemporary liberal-Marxist thought a heterodox approach to the formation and extension of opportunity within contemporary society. Implicit in this approach is the acknowledgement that participation in, and reform of, capitalism is possible. This approach incorporates a deeply held scepticism of key tenets of the theory of the market economy, together with a conceptual and promotional role for established public and emerging institutions of advanced, post-industrial society. This theme was given prominence in the work of Joseph Schumpeter (who was not, however, a recognised institutional economist), in his classic 'mapping' of the evolving shifts in nineteenth-century society in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942).

The pragmatism inherent in this approach incorporates a moral dilemma for the critique – it emboldens practitioners who recognise that the questions raised by contemporary capitalism are always a site for contestation. Furthermore, the institutional economist's pragmatism recognises that the inherent characteristics of contemporary society – its culture – are in a constant 'feedback' relationship with economy. Where economy may appear to triumph in one instance, the emerging institutions and practices of social life challenge and defeat any determinist reading of economy. The best-known advocates of the pragmatic view applied in the public sphere are John Maynard Keynes and John Kenneth Galbraith.

Significant sub-themes of increasing relevance to media studies which have become prominent in contemporary institutional economics include the battle over the corporate economy and neo-classical economics. Both issues mark the debate over the evolutionary nature of corporations within the national and global economy, together with their alliance with government and the regulatory regimes established to maintain business and public interest. Considerable public attention has been directed to the monopolistic nature of media corporations and their ability to deliver programming content which may prejudicially benefit (e.g. in relation to ownership and control issues) the corporations offering those programmes. Institutional economics takes a pragmatic position in recognising the inevitability of this dimension of the corporations, and a critical position in probing the control and content issues.

In many respects, institutional economics carries within its critique the characteristics of a moral science. That is, the positioning of the critique functions as an expression of a quest for moral behaviour in public and social life. The synergistic relationship between a quest for morality within a democratic programme of culture, economy and industrial progress finds its moment in what

Gruchy (1990) refers to as social (or human) provisioning. In this model, the quest to provide agreed upon resources to all members of society is undertaken by acknowledging the recognised failure of the market economy, and the responsibility of government, together with the ability of society to meet the needs of its citizens. Democratic planning in a mixed economy is one extension of this model (Hodgson, 1984). This approach has been attempted by social democratic governments in countries as diverse as Australia, Austria, Sweden and Spain, and more dramatically in South Africa.

A key interpretive manoeuvre of institutional economics has seen a 'culturalist' perspective put as the preferred direction for its critique. The culturalist view values social/cultural activity as the first-order priority of society and recognises that human welfare can only proceed if democratic planning accepts this pre-eminence. Critics of institutional economics would view this as naive and formalistic. Liberal and neo-conservative critics would see it as a reinvented socialism which sought to deny the prominence of economy. Whatever the case, institutional economics provides numerous opportunities for media studies. By working within the acknowledged terrain of corporate developments from a pragmatic perspective, it is possible to participate in the making and management of civil society. The sites for intervention are numerous, but can be gathered around the following nodes: (1) corporate economy, (2) technology, (3) convergence, and (4) cultural policy studies.

Questions can be raised from within the theoretical resources offered in the literature that shine a progressive light on the nature of capitalism and its evolving institutions. That may include detailed analysis of global corporations and their involvement with government. Indeed, evidence suggesting that corporations are becoming supra-national raises many challenging questions about the future of national governments in relation to international conventions and treaties. Recognising that *social provisioning* is the objective of a civilised society, institutional economics offers opportunities for media studies to construct models for intervening in the needs of citizens within the democratic process. The sites for investigation require precise approaches, which an institutional economic framework can enrich.

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An endnote on popular music's leading light

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Sectoral studies of media activity have often failed to build on the constructive interdisciplinary work undertaken in closely related areas. Popular music studies is one such domain. While, for example, film and television studies have flourished, there has been a slower progression in popular music studies. This endnote is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of the issue, for which there may be a number of reasons. Certainly the ubiquity of popular music, coupled with the sheer volume of its production, should, on a quantitative assessment of products manufactured, have prompted more writing on popular music. Alternatively, it may be that other media sectors offer more confined spaces in which to undertake research. One major limitation has been that popular music has had to grapple with interrelated definitions, such as those thrown up by genre questions described by such terms as jazz, folk, pop, rock, and the diffusion of styles and categories following the punk rock explosion of 1976-77.

One consequence of this limitation is that it is only since the early 1990s or so that popular music has been offered as an object for study within the academy. Undoubtedly this reluctance was due in part to the Frankfurt School analysis published by Theodore Adorno (1990), which characterised popular music as an industrialised cultural form, co-opted by the market and thus devoid of its creative 'aura'. The influential work undertaken by Adorno on the cultural industries was both definitive and debilitating. It has more recently been closely researched and analysed through a contemporary perspective (Jameson, 1990).

Adorno's critique of cultural industries was bound up with the historical constraints of the rise of globalisation and new technologies, such as the radio and gramophone. Adorno argued that the liberating experience of live music performance was lost when disseminated through new communication technologies and the emerging social and economic organisation of culture. This produced in him a sense of despair, due to the effectiveness of capitalism in denying popular music its authenticity.

Issues that relate directly to Adorno's analysis of industrialisation and the accompanying commodification of popular music are features of popular music studies (Frith, 1983). They have found a profound analysis in Jacques Attali's theoretical study, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Attali suggests