

# Mass Media and Mass Politics

Conservative, Liberal and Marxist Perspectives

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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## Introduction

The role of the mass media (MM) in influencing mass and class behavior has been a central concern among critical writers, especially since the turn of the Twentieth century. Debates and studies on the MM have focused on its political bias, ownership and links to big business, relationships and ties to the state, relative openness and diversity, promotion of wars and corporate interests among other major issues affecting the relations of power, wealth and empire. Of particular interest to writers opposing and supporting the role of the MM is the impact of the MM in influencing mass outlook, opinions and behaviors. Essays, monographs and empirical studies have been published as to the extent of MM influence, the time frame in which it retains control, the 'depth' of loyalty to MM inculcated opinions, and the 'place' in which MM messages have the greatest influence in inducing mass opinion in conformity with ruling class interests.

An understanding of the role and power of the MM in contemporary capitalist society requires us to organize the debate according to three major schools - conservative, liberal and Marxist - before proceeding to a critical analysis and finally presenting notes towards setting alternatives to elite-controlled communications networks.

## Competing Paradigms: Conservative, Liberal and Marxist

There are three paradigms on the role, power and relation of the mass media to mass opinion and action: the conservative, liberal and Marxist.

The Conservative, or 'pluralist' paradigm, propagated largely by US and European social scientists emphasizes the multiple voices, competing networks and outlets and diversity of opinions. The conservative - 'pluralists', contend that even if the ownership of the mass media is concentrated and its message biased in favor of the status quo, the mass media are simply one 'resource', countered by other 'resources' such as 'large numbers' of low income voters. Though conceding the unequal access to the mass media between labor and capital, pro-war regimes and anti-war opposition, they argue the opposition does have some outlets, numerous writers and publicists: Control over the mass media is 'unequal but dispersed'. Moreover, they argue, that with the growth of the internet, there are multiple sources of information, and the mass media monopoly has been severely diluted, in effect 'democratizing' the 'communication system'. The more astute pluralist ideologues cite empirical studies, which show that most individuals' views are shaped by their family, friends and neighbors - face-to-face relations, much more so than the 'impersonal media'. In summary, the conservative argue there is no all powerful mass media power elite, and to the extent that it exists, it is counterbalanced by alternative media, local opinion and its own tolerance of diverse and competing opinions.

## **The Liberal Paradigm of the Mass Media**

The liberal paradigm describes the MM as the key instrument of ruling class domination in a liberal democracy. Beginning with a historical account of the concentration of ownership in the hands of a small number of corporations interlocked with business and the state, the MM is seen as an essential component in the 'system of control' which perpetuates the ruling class and empire-building by its control and indoctrination of mass opinion. The majority are converted into a malleable mass, induced to conformity to the interests and policies of the ruling class, thus preventing change and perpetuating the rule by the corporate elite. For the liberals the top-down control by the mass media explains the 'paradox' of a highly unequal, military-driven empire in the context of a free and democratic political system. The principle role of the academics is to convince other academics to unmask the media, to expose its fabrications, deceptions and hypocrisy, by emphasizing the 'contradictions' between 'our' democratic values and the lies of the powerful. The more radical version of the 'liberal' view of the mass media attributes the high degree of consensus between elite and masses in the United States to the omnipresence and omniscience of the mass media.

## **Marxist Critique**

The Marxist approach to the mass media begins necessarily with a critique of the conservative and liberal perspectives. Against the conservative critique, it points out that 'power' is not a disembodied resource but a relationship in which the owners of wealth and power can multiply and accumulate political and economic assets. The presumption that 'everyone' or all groups can have some influence overlooks the fact that ownership of the means of communication is linked to other powerful economic groups, which wield power over banks, investment, trust funds, and these, in turn, influence political leaders and parties controlling legislation, candidate selection and government spending and agendas: this undermines the foundations and validity of the pluralist paradigm. On all the major events of our time, the mass media loyally echoed the political line of the capitalist state, justifying the invasion of Iraq, the demonizing of Iran and echoing the state line on Iran's nuclear program, Israel's blockade of Palestine and invasion of Lebanon and the bailout of Wall Street. In all the major events, a unified mass media played a leading role in propagating the message of the ruling class, among the masses, with varying degrees of success.

The liberal paradigm of 'mass media determinism' appears to have more credibility as its diagnosis of the structure of power and ownership of the MM corresponds to reality, as does its role in propagandizing the lies of the state on war and the economy. However, when we turn to the liberals' image of MM control over mass opinion and attitudes, the assertions of all-powerful, all-controlling mass media successfully manipulating the public, these assumptions are questionable.

Historically, monopoly-oligopoly control of the mass media has been unsuccessful in shaping mass attitudes and action in a number of important political contexts. This is true even in the United States. For example, despite unanimous MM support for the privatization of the Federal Social Security Program, the huge public bailout of Wall Street, the continuation of the military occupation of Iraq and military escalation in Afghanistan and the current private for profit health system, the great majority of the US public is strongly opposed to the MM line. Despite the fact that the leaders and the majorities of both ruling political parties do not reflect mass opinion, a majority of Americans have consistently backed a national,

universal public health care, the withdrawal of US troops and they have vehemently opposed the Congressional support for Wall Street and the big finance industry. An analysis reveals that the MM are influential in shaping mass opinion in line with ruling class and state policies on foreign policies, particularly the war policy, at the start of a war, aggression or militarist posture before the economic and human costs are brought home to US citizens in their everyday lives. The MM is relatively ineffective when it supports domestic measures, which adversely affect the everyday socio-economic life of the mass of the American people. The MM operate most successfully when they dominate the flow and access of information, as in foreign policy, where they can fabricate, distort and emotionally charge what is heard and seen by the public. In contrast, MM ruling class propaganda is severely weakened by the evidence of empirical experience, which Americans live in relation to their health, pensions, wages and employment. Marxists would argue that particular economic conditions create a class awareness, which counterbalances the power of the MM.

The weakness of the liberal view of the dominance of the mass media is found in its failure to take account of the impact of class contexts, the constraints of economic crises, the costs of war, the impact of downward mobility and the importance of basic social security in measuring or describing the operations of the mass media. Most liberal theory of the mass media is based on a selective view of contexts, issues, time and places to back their theory. For example, mass media and mass conformity 'fits' with the period of an expanding economy, upward social mobility, relative peace or less costly military interventions, particularly with regard to foreign policy issues. The MM's long term backing for capitalism or the 'free market' dominates mass opinion up to the collapse of capitalism: With the crises and breakdown of the financial system and especially the loss by millions of people of their pensions, even some propagandists in the MM realize that position is indefensible. The liberal view of MM omnipotence and dominance of mass opinion is deeply flawed and fails to account for political-economic changes resulting from mass opinion which strongly deviates from MM propaganda.

### **The Marxist Perspective on the Mass Media**

The Marxist perspective relativizes the influence of the MM making its power over the mass contingent on the degree to which the working and allied classes depend exclusively on the MM for information and for defining their political interests and social action. Marxists argue that the MM exercises maximum influence where there is little or no class organization or class struggle (like in the US). In contrast, where there is or was class organization, as in Venezuela or Bolivia, Chile in the 1970's, and Central America in the 1980's, the mass media have a far weaker impact on mass public opinion. Marxists argue that where there is a history and culture of working class, peasant, Indian or other class-based movements and class solidarity the ruling class/state propaganda promoted by the MM has only a weak effect. The masses have a preexistent framework, communication network and local opinion leaders, which filter out messages/propaganda that violate social/class/ethnic/national solidarity.

For example, in Chile during the Presidency of Salvador Allende (1970-73), the vast majority of the print and broadcast media were violently opposed to the Democratic Socialist President-yet President Allende won the election, the left increased its vote in subsequent municipal and congressional elections based on overwhelming support from the workers, poor peasants, Indians and unemployed shanty town residents.

More recently in Venezuela, the vast majority of MM has opposed President Chavez

(1998-2008) in every congressional and municipal election, yet he has won massive electoral victories. In both cases, socio-economic programs (vast increases in health and education, programs, land distribution, upward mobility, progressive income programs, nationalization of basic resources), strong class based organized support and mass mobilizations creating class consciousness undermined the effectiveness of the mass media.

Throughout Latin America during the first decade of the new millennium, powerful popular movements grew in membership and organization despite the intense demonizing by all the major MM. In Brazil, the Landless Rural Workers expanded its membership and support for land occupations despite the criminalization of its activity by the MM. The same was true of the miners, workers, peasant and Indian movements in Bolivia – leading to the overthrow of MM-backed neo-liberal presidents. Similar mass uprisings overthrowing MM-backed Presidents took place in Argentina (2001) and Ecuador (2000 and 2005).

These cases illustrate the contingent and circumstantial conditions, which influence MM dominance of mass opinion. There are several common conditions in all these cases:

1. History, cultural, community and family linkages may create a ‘block’ or ‘filter’ on MM propaganda, especially on socio-economic issues affecting workplace, neighborhood and living standards.

2. Class struggle creates horizontal class bonds, especially in response to state and ruling class repression, declining living standards, concentration of wealth and mass evictions and displacement. Class struggle creates positive responses to messages reinforcing the struggle and a negative rejection to messages from publicly identified media taking the side of the ruling class.

3. Class organizations provide an alternative framework for understanding events, and for defining mass interests in class terms which resonate with their everyday experience and provide information and interpretation that counters the MM. The higher the degree of class organization, the greater class solidarity and struggle the weaker the MM impact on mass opinion. The converse is also true. Whereas in the US, trade unions are run by officials drawing \$300,000 dollars or more a year, who emphasize collaboration with the bosses (and publicly reject class struggle politics) and fail to organize 93% of the private workforce, the MM have an easier time influencing mass opinion.

4. The stronger the alternative class networks of opinion formation, the weaker the influence of the MM. Where social movements develop local cadre, opinion leaders and community rooted activists, the less likely the masses will take their ‘cues’ on events from the formal, distant MM. In many cases the masses selectively tune into the MM for entertainment (sports, soap operas, comedies) while rejecting their news reports and editorials. Multi-generational families living in close proximity, located in homogenous occupational neighborhoods, with strong histories of class-based construction of communities generate class solidarity and social messages which come in conflict with the ruling class messages which promote ‘private initiative’ and ‘successful micro-capitalism’ or the criminalization of collective class action. Both liberal and conservative views of the MM fail to account for the class context of media receptivity and power; the pluralists understate its capacity to dominate in times of weak class organization; the liberals overstate the power of the MM by ignoring the countervailing power of class-based organization, class struggle, culture, history and family traditions and solidarity that link individuals to their class and undermine receptivity to the ruling class message of the MM.

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