



Mass media: pluralist view

The Mass Media as Fourth Estate

The mass media are often attacked by left-wing critics: from within the broadly **Marxist** vein of **critical theory** they are criticized for reproducing the dominant bourgeois culture; from within the 'political economy' vein of research, they are attacked for representing the interests of those who own them (see, for example, **Chomsky's 'propaganda model'**).

Carlyle's definition of the fourth estate

However, from the perspective of those researchers who see the media as situated within the model of a pluralist liberal democracy, the mass media are often seen as fulfilling the vitally important rôle of *fourth estate*, the guardians of democracy, defenders of the public interest.

The term fourth estate is frequently attributed to the nineteenth century historian Carlyle, though he himself seems to have attributed it to Edmund Burke:

Burke said there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important than they all. It is not a figure of speech, or a witty saying; it is a literal fact, Printing, which comes necessarily out of Writing, I say often, is equivalent to Democracy: invent Writing, Democracy is inevitable. Whoever can speak, speaking now to the whole nation, becomes a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making, in all acts of authority. It matters not what rank he has, what revenues or garnitures: the requisite thing is that he have a tongue which others will listen to; this and nothing more is requisite.

Carlyle (1905) pp.349-350

Carlyle here was describing the newly found power of the man of letters, and, by extension, the newspaper reporter. In his account, it seems that the press are a new fourth estate added to the three existing estates (as they were conceived of at the time) running the country: priesthood, aristocracy and commons. Other modern commentators seem to interpret the term fourth estate as meaning the fourth 'power' which checks and counterbalances the three state 'powers' of executive, legislature and judiciary. (For more detail of this notion, click here: [➔](#))

Habermas's public sphere

In recent years increasing attention has been paid by media theorists to the notion of the public sphere as developed by German philosopher **Jürgen Habermas**. Habermas, implacable opponent of **postmodernist** theorizing, argues that in eighteenth century England there was the emergence of a 'public sphere ... which mediates between society and state', in which 'the public organises itself as the bearer of public opinion' (Habermas (1989)).

Simultaneously with the growth of urban culture, where there was the development of a new arena of public life (theatres, museums, opera houses, coffee houses, etc.), there was also the growth of a new infrastructure for social communication (the press, publishing houses,

libraries), together with increased literacy and better transportation. These communication webs allowed discussion of matters which branched out from relatively small groups into affairs of the state and of politics. According to Habermas, these led to increased social intercourse.

Rather differently from Carlyle (above: 'it matters not what rank he has'), Habermas emphasizes that the public sphere *was* class-linked and therefore accessible only to members of the bourgeoisie. As Habermas sees it, any member of the bourgeoisie who had access to the technology (i.e. novels, journals, newspapers etc.) was able to join in popular cultural debate based on a firm faith in the value of reasoned discussion. As Mark Poster succinctly summarizes the idea,

Although the public sphere never included everyone, and by itself did not determine the outcome of all parliamentary actions, it contributed to the spirit of dissent found in a healthy representative democracy.

Poster (1995)

In fact perhaps the most evocative description of that kind of public sphere is to be found in Neil Postman's description of eighteenth century America, a society in which literacy was vastly more widespread and democratized than in the Britain of the time. Postman is also concerned to show how print literacy in itself encourages rational and ordered thinking, participation in contemporary debate and the ability to understand and follow detailed and complex argument. (Postman (1987): 45-64)

Incidentally, the similarity of Habermas's claimed development of a public sphere to the current development of the Internet is striking and probably accounts in part for the renewed interest in his idea, some thirty odd years after it was first aired. (For comment on the Internet as public sphere, see [Internet: general discussion](#)) It has also no doubt come to be seen as an increasingly important question as increasing globalization undermines the power of the nation-state and the legitimacy of national democracies. As our traditional forms of representative, democratic politics apparently decline in relevance, as participation in such politics declines and citizens turn towards identity-based 'single issues', how can we develop a meaningful concept of the public sphere?

Habermas identified a variety of liberal-bourgeois rights which guaranteed the operation of the various spheres and their institutions:

A set of basic rights concerned the sphere of the public engaged in rational-critical debate (freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of press, freedom of assembly and association etc.) and the political function of private people in this public sphere (rights of petition, equality of vote etc.). A second set of basic rights concerned the individual's status as a free human being, grounded in the intimate sphere of the patriarchal conjugal family (personal freedom, inviolability of the home etc.). The third set of basic rights concerned the transactions of the private owners of property in the sphere of civil society (equality before the law, protection of private property etc.). The basic rights guaranteed: the *spheres* of the public realm and of the private (with the intimate sphere at its core); the *institutions* and *instruments* of the public sphere, on the one hand (press, parties), and the foundation of private autonomy (family and property), on the other; finally, the *functions* of the private people, both their political ones as citizens and their economic ones as owners of commodities (and, as 'human beings', those of individual communication, e.g. through inviolability of letters).

This 'bourgeois public sphere' is seen by Habermas, then, as an area of informed, public and reasoned debate, to which the emergence of an independent, market-based press was crucial. It was open to a large number of people, within it various arguments and views were subjected to rational discussion and government policies were systematically submitted to its critical scrutiny.

However, according to Habermas, after the first half of the nineteenth century the situation changed, as the public sphere became dominated by a strong, expanded state and a press which represented organized economic interests. The media, from having been part of the public sphere of reasoned discussion, became part of the process of 're-feudalization' of the public sphere as state, industrial conglomerates and the media undergo a process of fusion. The media became the manipulators of public opinion, conditioning the public into the rôle of passive onlookers and consumers. Similarly to Habermas, Elliott argues that in 1980s Britain technological and economic developments were promoting a

continuation of the shift away from involving people in societies as political citizens of nation states towards involving them as consumption units in a corporate world.

Elliott (1982: 243-244) in Golding and Murdock (1991: 23))

The 'fourth estate', 'guardians of the public sphere' become increasingly converted into industries, wholly oriented towards the profit motive, just another business held by some conglomerate. For Habermas the decline of the public sphere is linked to the triumph of instrumental rationality which he later discusses at length in his *Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas pleads for the revivification of the 'lifeworld' which operates according to principles of communicative rationality, but which has been 'uncoupled' from 'system' which operates according to principles of money and power, reward and punishment. The instrumental rationality of the system invades or 'colonizes' the lifeworld and thereby erodes the public sphere.

McGuigan takes as an example the Thatcherisation of Independent Television in the UK, after which

casualisation, poor pay and overwork all grew apace. Colin Sparks (1994: 151) has likened the resultant labour market to a peasant economy: '[Independents] are the industrial equivalent of small peasants who work themselves and their families to death in order to hold onto the family plot after the realities of the market place have dictated that it would be rational to sell up to a large capitalist farmer and move to the city to find work.'

Is this, then, the 'refeudalization of the public sphere' at the point of production? The robber barons themselves now raid on a much grander scale than in medieval times, organizing neo-feudal relations of production and consumption in the burgeoning information industries across the globe.

McGuigan (1996: 93)

The output of the robber barons' media no longer, in Habermas's view, can be seen as contributing to rational discourse in the public sphere. Rather it serves merely to entertain and turn the potential participants in the public sphere into mere passive consumers. Despite the

radically different views held by Habermas and Baudrillard, the picture Habermas paints is not all that different in essence from Baudrillard's claim in *In the Shadow of Silent Majorities* that people simply don't care about 'the issues'. Baudrillard's *silent passivities* would equate, in Habermas's terms to a failure to take part in rational-critical debate (Baudrillard, though, seems to see them as having a kind of potential for a sort of resistance - the masses resist by demanding more of the same rubbish (though I may have misunderstood)). Habermas's *re-feudalization* is Baudrillard's *simulation* of debate by TV politicians. It would seem fairly clear that Habermas's portrayal of the re-feudalization of the public sphere is influenced by Adorno's and Horkheimer's portrayal of the operation and effects of the 'culture industries' (see the [separate section](#)) and equally clear that he would not take quite the same view today. Apart from the thesis of the public sphere overstating and idealizing the free debate of the eighteenth century, it also overstates the 'dumbing-down' thesis of modern media effects, assuming that the content of certain media products necessarily engenders passivity and **false consciousness**. Certainly, modern politicians attempt to manage the media agenda, certainly they rely on their spin doctors to present the right image, but in the eighteenth century they bribed voters and got them drunk on election day. The increasing mediatization of modern culture has been accompanied by increasing democratization, so media exposure cuts both ways. At the same time as it increases the potential influence of political leaders

it should also be emphasized that this situation greatly increases the visibility of political leaders, and limits the extent to which they can control the conditions of reception of messages and the ways in which these messages are interpreted by recipients. Hence the development of mass communication has not only created new stages for the carefully managed presentation of leaders and their views; it has also given these leaders a new visibility and vulnerability before audiences which are more extensive and endowed with information and more power (however intermittently expressed) than ever before.

Thompson (1990 :115)

The media as watchdog

It probably doesn't matter a great deal what Carlyle originally meant; similarly, it's probably of no great importance that Habermas has been criticized for idealizing the supposed period of informed public debate (for example, there were certainly class, gender and race imbalances in any public sphere that might have existed; it is also pertinent to ask whose public sphere is it and in whose interest does it operate?). What is important is that both writers paint a powerful picture of the media participating in the maintenance of the public sphere as a kind of neutral zone in which people organize and debate collectively and rationally for the benefit of the common good and contributing to the development of democratic debate.

Thus, the term 'fourth estate' is used today to refer to the mass media as a powerful watchdog in liberal democracy, revealing abuses of state authority and defending the democratic rights of citizens.

Media independence from the state - the free market

Not surprisingly, since this view of the media's fourth estate function is rooted within the

pluralist liberal democracy model, it is commonly accompanied by an assumption that the media, in order to act as fourth estate, must be independent of the state. In other words, the watchdog function can only be fulfilled by a free market organization of the media. It is assumed that, if the watchdog is subject to state regulation, then it will become the state's poodle.

This argument has been used to legitimate the increasing deregulation of American and British broadcasting over the last decade or so. The regulation of broadcasting (even in the USA) was originally tolerated because the relatively limited number of frequencies available meant that franchises had necessarily to be limited. Therefore, since some had to be excluded from obtaining a franchise (a restriction which did not apply to anyone wishing to launch a press title), there was a requirement in both countries of some measure of public service broadcasting (more especially in the UK), which to an extent would cater for the interests of those excluded from a franchise. However, the development of cable and satellite TV has meant that in the USA people can choose from more TV stations than newspapers and in Great Britain from at least as many. The deregulation of broadcasting, from this point of view, therefore becomes a legitimate goal, since, it can be argued, that will ensure broadcasting's independence of the state.

Whilst in Britain the deregulation of the media has continued apace, a move justified in part by the desirability of reducing the interference of the 'nanny-state', this has not been accompanied by any significant liberalization of the Official Secrets Act. Despite New Labour's professed intentions of introducing a Freedom of Information Act, nothing has yet been passed into law and the proposals so far made for such an Act could hardly be recognized as promoting freedom of information. At present (mid-2001) it remains unclear what will be the effect of the European Convention on Human Rights, now part of UK law. Article 10 of the Convention prescribes a basic right to freedom of expression, which should be restricted only for pressing reasons of the public interest.

Media concern with rational debate?

However, whilst one can certainly find the media revealing abuses of state power - for example, the repeated exposures of 'sleaze' in parliament, especially within the ranks of the current (April 1997) Conservative majority in the UK parliament, we need to bear in mind that the prime function of most media organs today is to provide the public with entertainment. That naturally tends to negate any supposed fourth estate function, since there is not even much coverage of state practices in the first place, let alone any rational debate and criticism of them. As mentioned above, it is always pertinent to ask whose fourth estate is this and in whose interest does it operate? If we consider the current revelations of 'sleaze' on the part of Conservative MPs in *The Sun*, it could be argued that *The Sun* is performing a public service by making public the greed and sexual indiscretions of MPs, matters whose revelation is in the public interest. However, it should be borne in mind that these attacks on Conservative misdemeanours are within the context of *The Sun's* switch of allegiance from the Conservatives to New Labour. *The Sun* is owned by Rupert Murdoch. In preparation for the 1997 election victory, Tony Blair, leader of New Labour was careful to court Rupert Murdoch, whose support

he believes he needs in the election. One way of gaining Murdoch support is to propose more lenient legislation than the Conservatives on cross-media ownership, which is indeed the position New Labour has adopted.

During the early months of 1998, US media organizations have repeatedly had to issue apologies for misreporting. *The New Republic* discovered that certain articles by one of its most favoured young reporters were fabrications; the *Boston Globe's* Patricia Smith resigned after admitting to inventing characters in four 1998 columns; *Time* magazine at the time of writing (July 1998) is investigating what it suspects is untrue reporting in its columns and on *CNN* regarding claims of US troops using nerve gas against other US troops in South-East Asia. A *New York Times* editor ascribed this current surge in misreporting to 'a massively increased sensitivity to all things financial'. This is in part due to the operation of the global free market as we see it operating in other spheres too: mergers into huge corporations, with the usual attendant reductions in staff and staff training in order to maximize shareholders' dividends, shareholders who are to a great extent composed of retirement funds and insurance companies who will soon shift their stock elsewhere if they can get a higher return. In part it is probably also due to the increased competition arising from the use of new technologies. Photos are transmitted digitally, stories are e-mailed from across the globe, and perhaps more importantly scoops are announced on Web sites by freelancers running their own fairly small and cheap set-ups; 'freebooters' might be a more accurate term as some of them don't seem overly scrupulous about checking their facts. In such circumstances, the conventional media can be easily scooped by a small Web organization. As a signal of the shift from hard to soft news, Neil Hickey of the [Columbia Journalism Review](#) examined the cover stories of *Time* and *Newsweek* in 1987 and 1997. In 1987, *Time* had eleven covers relating to foreign news; in 1997, only one. Domestic hard news covers reduced from twelve to nine. In other words, the overall total for straight news dropped from around 45% in 1987 to 20% in 1997. Obsession with ratings, says Hickey, is 'at an all-time high' in TV newsrooms, where, until recently, ratings were largely an irrelevance, the emphasis being on news coverage. The broadcasters and the press editors respond to criticism by saying that the US public are currently not concerned with hard news as the economy is prospering and are not concerned with foreign news since the collapse of the USSR. In giving the public soft news, the media are merely giving the public what they want. To some that may sound like the way a democracy should function, but, in response to this argument Hickey quotes the former President of NBC News, Reuven Frank:

This business of giving people what they want is a dope-pusher's argument. News is something people don't know they're interested in until they hear about it. The job of a journalist is to take what's important and make it interesting.

in *Sell The Front Page!* by Neil Hickey, extracted by *The Guardian*, July 11, 1998, with permission from [Columbia Journalism Review](#)

Media independence from their owners?

Another factor which needs to be borne in mind is the increasing concentration of media ownership and the merger of media organizations with non-media corporations. It could be argued that, with the declining rôle of national state governments and the increasing power of transnational corporations, the media watchdog should pay more attention to abuses by global

capitalist institutions than by the state. And here, of course, is the rub. The supporters of the free, deregulated media market argue vociferously that media institutions must be independent of the state otherwise they will be in some way beholden to it. The argument runs, for example, that such media will think twice before criticizing the government of the day for fear of losing subsidies or of provoking restrictive legislation. So newspaper editors in Britain have campaigned against the introduction of any kind of right to privacy. Pressure for such legislation has mounted as the press have become increasingly intrusive in their coverage of royalty, celebrities and MPs. The British press point to the example of France, where there is an established right to privacy and where, as a result - or so they claim - the press is the government's lapdog. (It is ironic, perhaps, that Diana Princess of Wales was killed in a car crash allegedly caused by pursuing press photographers in Paris) (For further comments on the right to privacy, see the section on the [Press Complaints Commission](#). Note that the European Convention on Human Rights was incorporated into British law via the Human Rights Act in 2000. Currently, early 2001, Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones are about to sue for invasion of privacy, relying on the provisions of that Act. There has never before been a right to privacy in British law, so it remains to be seen how the courts interpret the Act, especially as it may conflict, particularly where the media are concerned, with the Act's guarantee of freedom of expression.) Similarly, Rupert Murdoch, owner of [News Corp.](#), for instance, claimed that the price paid by British broadcasters for their privileges was their freedom. From this argument, though, it surely follows logically that those media which are owned by major corporations must be beholden to those corporations, a corollary which Mr Murdoch chooses to overlook.

The following issues are discussed in other sections of the Infobase:

- possible effects of deregulation of broadcasting: [Blumler](#)
- supposed advantages of public ownership: [public service](#)
- ideal rôle of the press in a democracy: the [Royal Commission on the Press](#)
- some of the possible influences newspaper owners may have had: [newspaper ownership](#)

But it is not an open and shut case. Supporters of the free market's independence of the state should bear in mind, for example, Thames Television's defiance of the Thatcher government in the [Death on the Rock affair](#). On the other hand, those who argue that the free market must necessarily lead to protection of the owners' interests should bear in mind [Donald Trelford's defiance of Tiny Rowlands](#).

The question needs to be asked, though, to what extent the free press is at all free. When Carlyle advanced his notion of the fourth estate, he said that for anyone to become 'a power, a branch of government' in the nation 'the requisite thing is that he have a tongue which others will listen to; this and nothing more is requisite'. Carlyle is speaking here of the Habermasian public sphere in which a range of relatively small partisan presses present their views, which are taken up in discussion, fed back into, and commented on in, those presses in open and rational debate.

As Habermas sees it, early capitalism was compelled to resist the state, hence the drive for a free press, open discussion of state affairs and the demand for political reform and greater representation. However, as capitalism gathered impetus, it moved from calls for reform of the

state to the take-over of the state. Once the capitalist state was in being with the corporate financing of lobbyists and government think tanks, MPs' directorships, the injection of business funds into parties' election campaigns and so on, the media's rôle underwent a significant change, in Habermas's view: where they had once been providers of information and argument to the neutral public sphere, they became manufacturers and manipulators of public opinion. The public sphere became a fake. This view seems certainly to be shared by **Noam Chomsky**, who comments that:

What is being reported blandly on the front pages would elicit ridicule and horror in a society with a genuinely free and democratic intellectual culture.

Chomsky (1996 : 91)

and that:

The intellectual level of prevailing discourse is beneath contempt, and the moral level grotesque.

Chomsky (1996 : 92)

Thirty years after Habermas first sketched his gloomy vision of the collapse of the public sphere, the media have progressed ever further towards concentration of ownership, ever further towards monopoly capitalism. Murdoch's News Corp, for example owns around 60% of metropolitan daily circulation in Australia, Fox TV, Twentieth Century Fox, a controlling interest in BSkyB, Star TV (the SE Asian satellite channels), Times Newspapers, The Sun newspaper as well as magazine and book publishers including Harper Collins and Triangle. The enormous wealth and global reach of such media organizations is unprecedented, with the result that the free play of market forces hardly allows a level playing field.

Does it necessarily follow that, because ownership is concentrated, because media conglomerates and the state share common interests, the media are powerful shapers of public opinion? It is a widely held view that that does follow - for example after the 1992 General Election, won by the Conservatives after confident predictions of a Labour victory, the Sun newspaper proclaimed triumphantly in a banner headline: 'It's the Sun wot won it!'; Lord McAlpine, Conservative Party treasurer, thanked the Conservative press for securing the victory; Neil Kinnock, the Labour leader, blamed the Conservative press for Labour's defeat. There is plenty of evidence from the reception studies of the '**new audience research**', though, that there is no such simple linkage between the views expressed by the media and people's political (or other) choices. Reception studies show that readers do readily develop oppositional readings of media texts. That is clear from the simple fact that somewhere around 40% of the Sun's readership - a fairly constant figure - are not Conservative voters.

A revival of the public sphere?

A recent study by the Harwood Group, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America* (sorry, I don't have a reference) revealed widespread dissatisfaction with news coverage. The factors we have discussed above (concentration on soundbites, focus on personalities in

politics, sensationalism etc.) led people to feel that the newsmakers' agenda was not theirs.

It has been suggested that TV talk shows have to some extent supplanted the news media in addressing people's genuine concerns. One only needs to take a quick look at some talk shows to see that the distorted infotainment which is presented there would hardly satisfy Habermas's criteria. I don't suppose that we would want to see the Ricki Lake or Jerry Springer shows as model democratic forums, with their barely articulate guests, their pop psychologists and their stacked audiences baying for blood. And yet..... in the USA there has been an interesting development over the past few years, namely the use of Web-based message forums devoted to these talk shows. On these message forums the debates which were aired on the show continue to be discussed. They are not moderated as far as I know, so the content is not always as reasoned as Habermas might like to see in his public sphere, nor, to the best of my knowledge, is there any evidence that the producers take any notice of what is discussed. However, they look to me as if they offer potential for open and productive debate, especially as Web TV is just around the corner. Watch this space....

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