

# AFRICA MEDIA REVIEW

1988 Volume 3 Number 1



- Mass Media and Rational Domination
- Communication Policies in Kenya
- Communication and Cultural Identity
- Philosophy of African Cinema
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### **ABSTRACT**

#### **MASS MEDIA AND RATIONAL DOMINATION:**

##### **A Critical Review of a Dominant Paradigm**

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This examines the 'domination hypothesis' of the critical/conflict theories, vis-a-vis the structural functional perspective. It tries to put the two perspectives side by side and show how they stand up to objective analysis, and/or are related to each other.

It also draws attention to the time-honoured view of many communication scholars that analysis of the power of the mass media should not be predicated on the principle of "all or nothing", that the media are not all-dominating; neither are they all-liberating; that the media can be used for good or for evil, depending on the socio-political, economic and cultural environments in which they operate.

This requires an examination of the relationship between economic and socio-political power structure and mass media utilization as well as the impact of this relationship on the effect of the media on the public.

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## **Mass Media et Domination Rationnelle. Une analyse critique du Paradigme Dominant.**

### **RESUME**

Cet article examine "l'hypothèse de Domination" des théories critiques/conflictuelles vis à vis de la perspective structurelle fonctionnelle. Il essaie de placer côte à côte les deux perspectives et de montrer comment elles résistent à l'analyse objective et où sont liées.

Il attire aussi l'attention sur le point de vue consacré de nombreux chercheurs en communication dont l'analyse du pouvoir et des mass médias ne devrait pas être prises pour le principe de 'tout ou rien', que les médias ne sont pas complètement dominés, ni complètement libérés, que les médias peuvent être utilisés pour le bien ou pour le mal; tout dépend de l'environnement socio-politique, l'économique et culturel dans lequel on les utilise.

Ceci demande un examen de la relation entre la structure du pouvoir économique et socio-politique d'une part et l'utilisation des mass médias d'autre part; et aussi de l'impact de cette relation sur l'effet des médias sur le public.



## **Introduction:**

In one of his recent and poignant comments on the influence of the mass media in society, Littlejohn (1983) reminded the world that we are living in an environment of constant mass communication which we experience hourly and daily. He warned that because we take this environment for granted, we may have lost touch with the reality of its influence. This reminder is regarded as timely because as Hall (1977) has asserted, "the mass media are the most important instruments of twentieth century capitalism for maintaining ideological hegemony in that they provide the framework for perceiving reality".

Even though many, including Mills (1959) would not agree with the last part of Hall's statement, and would replace it with "in that they provide the framework for manipulation by political, economic and academic elites who control the system on industrial production in culture", the reminder still remains significant because it draws attention to the need to be aware always of the reality of the power of the mass media.

The warning calls vividly to mind what Marcuse (1964) had perceived: "Science, by virtue of its own methods and concepts, has projected and promoted a universe in which the domination of nature has remained linked to the domination of man". What is particularly relevant here is Marcuse's extension of that statement. He drew a parallel between Weber's rationalization concept, that is, a long-term process of the transformation of social structures, and rationalization in the Freudian sense, in which the true motive - the perpetuation of objectively obsolete domination - is concealed through the invocation of purposive rational imperatives. This invocation, Marcuse concluded, is possible only because the rationality of science and technology is immanently one of control - the rationality of domination!

What applies to technology in general, applies to the mass media in particular because the media are an important part of the new technological apparatus made possible by scientific research and development. Today, the mass media are seen as omnipresent technology whose impact (potential and/or real) on society has been the subject of many research undertakings and intellectual articles.<sup>2</sup>

## **Theorists and Mass Media Effect:**

Klapper's (1960) conclusion that the mass media serve primarily to reinforce existing attitudes and behaviour was the culmination of the dominance of the Law of Minimal Effects. Reinforcement perspectives of the 1950s, supported the generalization that the general influence of the mass media was re-enforcement of individual predispositions - an effect seen by some as having little import (Katz, 1977; Comstock et al, 1978).

In the last ten years, there has been a revival of the view that the mass media do exert powerful influences on the way people perceive, think about, and ultimately act in their world. Concern with persuasion and attitude change has given way to concern with the powerful influence which the mass media exert on the consciousness and world-view of their audiences (Gerbner & Gross, 1976a; Katz, 1980). Hence cognitive effects are now being conceptualized more broadly extending beyond traditional knowledge indexes to include such outcomes as perception of reality, issue salience, information holding, message discrimination and so forth (Clarke & Kline, 1974; Chaffee, 1977). Such recent works point to the media's ability to cultivate a consciousness that seldom differs from the world-views and expectations of the establishment.<sup>3</sup>

This recent concern with the power of the media to affect belief systems derives from the revival of Conflict theory and social criticism. (Katz (1980) calls what has emerged the theories of "Ideological effects" based on a view that the latent structure of mass media messages distorts (or selectively presents) reality in ways that perpetuate the interests of the existing power structure. These theories see the mass media as hand-maidens of the establishment, arguing that news programming legitimates managerial power (Glasgow Group, 1976); that current affairs programmes advocate parliamentarianism (Hall, 1977); that routine news practices perpetuate existing norms, conventions, and sociopolitical relationships (Tuchman, 1977); that the fundamental message of television drama is the definition of the nature of power - a power that tends to reside in white, middle-class males who operate within the established norms and conventions (Gerbner, et al, 1978, 1979); that the mass media



are allowed the exercise of their power only by the political elite and only when this power leads to the maintenance of the elite culture.<sup>3?</sup>

Noelle-Neumann (1973, 1974) contends that because people avoid social isolation, they tend to voice opinions that support what they perceive to be the dominant opinions and to suppress perceived "unpopular" opinions. This changes the "opinion environment" such that it reinforces the perceived dominance of the majority opinion and creates a 'spiral of silence'. The mass media, especially through agenda-setting and cultivation, play a dominant role in defining this opinion environment; and because of their ubiquity and the repetitiveness of their messages and the relative unanimity among journalists in how they view and report the world (Noelle-Neumann, 1973) limit individual selective perception, hence independent judgement. This opinion environment created by the mass media, inevitably creates a spiral of silence for all but the established opinion (Donald & Bachen, 1981).

Gerber & Gross (1976a,b) assert that television socializes people into standardized roles and behaviours not so much by affecting specific opinions and attitudes as through the 'cultivation' of more basic assumptions about the nature of social reality. The ability of television to do this derives from (a) the uniformity of its message system which acts to maintain and reinforce conventional values and behaviours; (by) the reach and scope of the medium and the non-selective use made of it; and (b) the realism with which it presents its view - a realism that hides the synthetic, selective nature of television drama (Gerbner, et al, 1979).

The critical theorists are therefore concerned with what they have called the "Culture Industry" which manufactures 'mass culture' described as administered, non-spontaneous, reified, phony culture, rather than the real thing (Jay, 1973). Mass culture, which Tar (1977) pointed out, has the power of pacification and stupefaction of the masses, is a prepackaged set of ideas mass-produced and disseminated to the masses by the mass media. It is the work of the ruling elite to which media managers belong. These managers create, process, refine and preside over the circulation of images and information which determine beliefs and attitudes, and ultimately, behaviour. Hence they have been called "mind managers" (Schiller, 1973) who deliberately produce messages

that do not correspond to the realities of social existence. Such messages that cannot comprehend or reject the actual conditions of life, personal or social, are manipulative messages which facilitate the domination of the masses by the elite.

The role of broadcasting in reproducing the power relations and ideological structure of society, says Hall (1972) appears far more central an issue than its incidental kick-backs. The content of political television and the forms within which it is presented serve to relay and reinforce dominant definitions of the situations and to exclude alternatives. The radio is apparently democratic; but in reality, (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1977) it turns all participants into listeners and authoritatively subjects them to broadcast programmes which are all exactly the same - a technological rationale which is the rationale of domination itself. Cohen (1962) succinctly expressed the impact of such mind managing when he pointed out that the mass media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling their audiences what to think about. This is domination of the consciousness.

As far as critical theory is concerned, therefore, the mass media have progressively colonized the cultural and ideological sphere. As social groups and classes live increasingly fragmented and sectionally differentiated lives, the mass media are more and more responsible for:

- (a) Providing the basis on which groups and classes construct an 'image' of the lives, meanings, practices and values of other groups and classes; and
- (b) Providing the images, representations and ideas around which the social totality, composed of all these separate and fragmented pieces, can be coherently grasped as a whole. This is the provision and the selective construction of social knowledge, of social imagery, through which we perceive the 'worlds', the 'lived realities' of others, and imaginarily reconstruct their lives and ours into some intelligible 'world of the whole' (Hall, 1977).

Conflict theory sees the public as big 'don't care don't know and don't bother me' receptacle for the use of communicators who have become very adroit at finding vulnerability in



human need and in the human psyche. As noted by Barmash (1974), after considering all that has happened in the last fifteen to twenty years to push the public into a variety, to ideological corners, to accept political and social realities that are only fantasies when compared to what is really going on, to buy products that it doesn't want and services that it doesn't need, and above all, to act and behave wrongly because of all these false signals, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the public is as malleable as a handful of clay. The socio-political elite is very much aware of this, and it uses the mass media to take advantage.

The primary goal of those in the power structure, say the Conflict theorists, is the preservation of their dominance and the promotion of their own interests independent of *active* public input. The public involvement consists primarily of passive acceptance of the power elite's domination, due mostly to the indoctrinating influence of the mass media. Technology, especially the technology of the mass media, requires propaganda in order to keep people in line, and individuals need it as a source of security.

Generally, therefore, individuals use the mass media not principally as channels of information to help develop critical thinking, but as a means to ensure a climate of general conformity or uniformity, throughout society. "The mechanistic knowledge" that is basic to the development of the televisions, for example, says Hamelink (1987) "wrought a product that is very good at management, cultural domination and 'Madison Avenue Imperialism', but an extremely poor tool for processes of liberation and conscientization".

The media can and do effectively achieve objectives at the will of those who direct, own or control them, or those who use them as channels of messages. The history of the mass media shows clearly enough that such control is regarded as a valued form of property for those seeking political or economic power. The basis for such a view has already been made clear. Control over the mass media offers several important possibilities - attracting and directing attention to people, problems and/or solutions in ways which can favour those with power, and correlatively diverting attention from rival individuals or groups; conferring status and ascribing and confirming legitimacy.



Control over the mass media gives the power elite 'veritable' channels for persuasion and mobilization. More importantly, the mass media are a vehicle for offering psychic rewards and gratifications. And the power elite knows that all the eloquent communication in the world will not achieve their desired influence if the behaviours they induce do not provide some perceived rewards for the consumers.

The Functionalists, not unexpectedly, have focused their discussion on the effects of the mass media on the importance of collective goal achievement. The perspective focuses on the political institution's basic functional requirement of collective goal achievement. The political structure is essential for making basic decisions on behalf of society regarding shared goals and mobilizing support and resources for achieving these goals. The ultimate legitimation for these collective goals is provided by the basic value system to which all members of society are committed and the promotion of which is the function of the mass media through Surveillance (information), Correlation (Interpretation), Transmission of culture (Education, Entertainment and General Service).

The Functionalists' approach to media effect is basically in terms of Audience Behaviour Perspectives (McQuail & Guillevitch, 1974) seen as three different models of communication process. The first of these is the Action/Motivation perspective which allots a dominant role to the receiver and holds that the act of receiving communication is, in principle, a free and meaningful act which essentially defines the event. The second is the Structural/Cultural perspective which sees communication as basically dominated by the source but limited in definition and meaning by the context and rules that govern the communication situation. The third is the Functional perspective which focuses on communication as a systematic interaction - a process of homeostatic adjustment within a larger social system.

The implication here is that there is neither an explicit nor an implicit intention to force a dominant elite ideology on anyone, but to ensure the continuance of the social system, and the achievement of common goals. The mass media are used to inform and educate the masses so as to provide them with the tools (facts and figures) to enable them make intelligent decisions about themselves and about their

society. This is not domination, but enhancement.

Supporting evidence appears to have come from developing countries. The mass media have been known to have played major roles in developing societies in a number of ways that can be placed under four major headings: Economic and Developmental; Social and Anthropological; Political and Historical; and Psychological (Mishra, 1972). Of particular relevance is the economic and developmental sphere. Schramm (1964) spoke of the potential of the mass media to help traditional societies to change into participants in the modern world, because of their ability to report and inform, widen horizons, focus attention on developmental needs, raise aspiration and create an informational climate in which development is stimulated. A number of other studies, among which is Rao (1966) have shown that the mass media do indeed act successfully as agent for true liberation. Their success, of course, is dependent on giving sufficient consideration to factors of cultural predispositions and adaptation. Lerner (1958) has shown the impact of the mass media in urbanization, literacy, political participation as well as their ability to create empathy. And Pye (1963) did show how improvements in communication seemed to have pushed Turkish villagers in the direction of political modernization. This was possible because the mass media can inculcate political awareness and knowledge.

### **Discussion:**

The Functionalists see the mass media, therefore, as instruments for providing the framework for the education and enlightenment of the people socially, economically and politically. The Conflict and Critical theorists see the mass media as instruments for providing the framework for rationalized manipulation and exploitation of the masses - instruments for rational domination.

### **Basic Premise:**

A basic premise in many approaches to the discussion of the role and function of the mass media in society is that these media are the principal instrument of the ruling elite for maintaining ideological control (camouflaging reality,



creating false consciousness and hope and ensuring the creation of mass culture) or for improving ideological education (performing the role of sustaining integration and social solidarity). This premise is based on the "all or nothing" principle; the media are either good or bad. Klapper's (1960) discussion of two classic studies of Radio Serial listeners by Herzog (1944) and Warner & Henry (1948) may help to illustrate this strict interpretative dichotomy.

Even though the two studies agreed on the function the serials served for the audience, they disagreed on the ultimate effect. Harzom blamed the serials for making their listeners less socially aware and less capable of controlling their environment (Critical/Conflict). Warner and Henry commended the serials for helping their devotees to adjust to facts of their lives and their inability to control their environment (Functional). It would appear, therefore, that interpretation or perception of the effects of mass media messages is dependent upon the theoretical perspective and experience brought to bear on the exercise. The ability of the mass media to meet what is perceived as need also affects the perception of effect. (Moemeka 1987; Blumber & Katz (eds) 1974; Davis & Boram, 1981).

The media of mass communication perform the function of providing information to the public and of mediating in the provision of other needs of the public. Therefore, they have consequence for individuals, and society at large. If the information and/or other needs provided are those making for change of the status quo (a situation always questioned by the Critical/Conflict theorists), the media would be seen to function as veritable channels for dynamic change. If these needs provided are those making for quietening of the masses and for containing them within the existing system (a situation upheld by the Critical/Conflict theorists), then the media would be seen to function as factors contributing to system equilibrium (Functionalists stand) and to the capacity of the individual to function "contentedly" within the existing social order (a situation consistently described by the Critical/Conflict theorists). This is primarily because the explanation of behaviour can only be found in the individual's response to his/her perceived needs. Such perceived needs are, of course, either directed at maintaining his/her established behavioural pattern in line with

established norms or at adapting to environmental changes - establishment - supporting or revolutionary.

### **Social Situation**

The assumption of an independent and unmediated effect of the mass media implicit in these opposing linear interpretations and explanations of media effect is playing into the hands of the already discredited hypodermic perspective of mass communication, which erroneously postulated that media messages are received in a uniform way by every member of the mass media audience. It is true that the mass media provide a common stream of messages for their public, and also that these messages cultivate the images of society shared by the audience. It is equally true that these messages provide their audiences with an interpretation of the world in terms of what IS, what is IMPORTANT, what is RIGHT and what is RELATED to what else?. "In this way", noted Gerbner (1967), "the mass media cultivate the audience's images of reality". But the images that are stamped depend very much on the prevailing social environment. Response to media content is generally determined by the combined product of psychological dispositions, sociological factors and environmental conditions (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974:27).

A number of studies have also shown the importance of social situation on the impact of the mass media. Social situation produces tensions and conflicts, leading to pressure for their easement via mass media consumption (Katz & Foulkes, 1962). Social situation provides a field of expectation, of familiarity with certain media materials, which must then be monitored in order to sustain membership of valued social groups (Atkins, 1972). Social situation gives rise to certain values, the affirmation and reinforcement of which is facilitated by the consumption of congruent media materials (Dembo, 1972). Social situation offers improvised real life opportunities to satisfy certain needs, which are then directed to the mass media for complementary, supplementary or substitute servicing (Rosengren & Windahl, 1982). And social situation creates an awareness of problems that demand attention, information about which may be sought in the media (Edelstein, 1973).



Furthermore, members of the mass media audience do not usually experience the mass media as anonymous and isolated individuals but rather, as members of organized social groups and as participants in a social cultural milieu. Even where individuals listen to media contents privately and alone, the confirmation of peer and social groups, and the reinforcement of opinion leaders are usually necessary to ensure acceptance. This means that response to media contents by mass audiences is under a good deal of pressure and guidance from their social environment.

The view that mass media effect depends as much on media content as on socio-cultural, economic and political factors is supported by the Limited Effect model (Klapper, 1960) which states that mass communication ordinarily does not serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audiences effect, but rather acts through a nexus of mediating factors and influences. These mediating factors are such that they typically render mass communication a contributory agent in the process of reinforcing existing conditions or changing them. This Limited Effects model is reinforced by the Dependency theory (Defleuers, 1982) which is based on an integral relationship among Audiences, the Mass Media and the larger Social System. At the centre of this theory is the notion that audiences depend on the media for information to meet needs and attain goals. The degree of dependence on media information varies from audience to audience.

But an audience's dependence increases as the media supply information that is more central to the audience's needs and goals, which are, of course, determined by the social situation. And the effectiveness (or lack of it) of such information is dependent on the realities of the social system. This is probably why Real (1977) has pointed out that mass-mediated culture emerges from the dialectic between three dimensions of the social system:

- (a) the political-economic institutions that establish the parameters for individual choices and for the development of a unified cultural ethos;
- (b) the symbolic forms of human consciousness that organize raw sense data and define the meaning or situations; and

- (c) communication - either mass or interpersonal - that provides the two-way linkage between the institutional base and the sphere of symbolic superstructure.

## **Massification**

Whether the effects of the mass media on audiences are direct or mediated, the fact still remains that such effects are pervasive and powerful. The broad public making significance of the media of mass communication - the ability to create publics, define issues, provide common terms of reference and thus to allocate attention and power - imbues the media with an awe-inspiring power over audiences. This awe-inspiring power of the media has long been recognized by the power elite. This is evident in the way governments in different parts of the world have devised ways to handle the media - either controlling them completely or providing them with guidelines within which they must operate freely but with responsibility.

This intervention found concrete expression in the four philosophies of the Press - Authoritarian, Soviet-Communist, Libertarian and Social Responsibility. Both the Authoritarian and the Soviet-Communist philosophies stand for complete control of the media but from different perspectives; the Libertarian and the Social Responsibility stand for freedom of the press, but with responsibility.

While the Conflict/Critical theorists do not deny the existence of different philosophies, and the fact that the apparently liberal philosophies - Libertarian and Social Responsibility - obtain in the West, they argue that there is a subtle but firm hold on the media under any philosophy by the power structure. This hold enables the power elite to direct the media to propagate the political ideologies of the elite and to maintain the status quo. The effectiveness of modern technology, they argue, stems from their seeming neutrality when in fact they are enslaving.

By hiding behind the seemingly neutral media, the elite are able to manipulate the masses. Because the masses believe in the neutrality of the media - a neutrality which Schiller (1973:11) has called a myth - the manipulation of the power elite is very effective, because when the manipulated believe



things are the way they are naturally and inevitably, manipulation is successful. Manipulation (Freire, 1971:144) is one of the means by which the dominant elites try to conform the masses to their objectives. By using myths which explain, justify and sometimes even glamorize the prevailing conditions of existence, manipulators secure popular support for a social order that is not in the majority's long-term real interest. They suppress individuality by invading and whittling down the individual's inner freedom. The result is what Marcuse (1964) has called "One-Dimensional society", in which individuals lose the ability to think critically and negatively about society. This is dominating society through massification.

### **Legitimation of Ideology**

The theory of mass society sees society as a malleable mass of people in which small groupings, community life and ethnic identity are replaced by society-wide depersonalized relations. This view has led critics of the mass media to express the fear that minds would be pounded and altered by propagandistic forces behind the media. For as Karl Bucher has pointed out:

Despite increasing education and the spread of knowledge the masses would remain incapable of making critical judgements concerning daily press coverage; the masses would follow newspaper leadership blindly. Everything is predigested for the audience; news is mixed with judgements, opinions and feelings ..... a view presented by a few members of the press turns into a common view; a moral opinion into mass morality.  
(Hanno Hardt, 1979)

Bucher's thesis appears to have been strongly supported in Israel during the October 1973 invasion by Syria and Egypt. Even though soldiers and eye-witnesses from the war front told stories of what was happening, between 90% and 100% of Israelis believed the radio and television news broadcasts more than they did "word-of-mouth" accounts (Peled & Katz, 1974)

The same is true of the 1967-70 Nigerian civil war. In spite of the stark realities of hunger, diseases and deaths, and in spite of the daily shrinking of the areas under the control of Biafran soldiers, it was estimated that more than 90% of the ordinary Igbos believed what Radio Biafra said to the contrary - that Federal Government forces were on the run, and that Biafran leaders were suffering to save the masses. On the Federal Government side, the media also successfully managed the "minds" of ordinary Nigerians. It is estimated that about 80% of Nigerians strongly believed news from the mass media even though such news were contrary to what they were seeing around them. In spite of open harassment and arrest of Igbos in Lagos and other places, most people believed that, according to the government through the media (mostly radio), only the Biafran leader was the enemy; that ordinary Nigerians in the East (Igbos) were not targets of attack or harassments.

The same technology - the mass media - was used at cross-purposes, dishing out opposing views, one very strongly believed to be true and the other to be false by adherents of each view. Not only did the mass media control the minds and thinking of the people, they also proved that they are neutral instruments to be used as media managers deem fit. Thus in mass media-oriented society (mass society) the media can conveniently give meaning to events - especially events that appear troublesome for the status quo, by placing them within the context of the dominant ideology. Producers and editors can mask (and in fact, do mask) ideology with professional sub-ideology of objective neutrality and impartiality that is embedded in the procedures of news and programme production and in the format of drama presentation.

The mass media can therefore upset or confirm social consensus; survey the environment or deceive the audiences; promote solidarity or enhance animosity; relieve or exacerbate social tension; correlate a response to a crisis or fragment a community - all depending on which line of action favours the power structure, that is, is in line with the ideology of the elite. Differences in implementation are usually on the level of one elite ideology against another, rather than the elite ideology against the interest of the masses. As a result of this tacit support of the power structure by the mass media, and of the limited information usually at



the disposal of the masses, those in the power structure are able to use the mass media as an instrument for indoctrination and persuasion. They present and justify their actions and decisions to the masses in such a way that these actions and decisions would seem to be consistent with democratic principles.

This subtle but consistent use of the mass media to achieve elite purposes is possible because the majority of the population have very little impact on the power structure. This majority which constitute the fragmented, passive and inarticulate mass society whose members are not organized, does not also have any significant impact on media programme policy or content. In addition, the mass media, by nature, are not amenable to informed dialogue with the public; they are conducive only to one-way flow of information. Thus members of the mass society are virtually nothing more than onlookers in mass media communication.

Moreover, because most members of the mass society have very limited first-hand knowledge of national and social issues - not to mention the very limited nature of informed dialogue with one another on social issues - the operators of the mass media who invariably belong to the ruling elite, are able to manipulate public opinion and attitudes, in the words of Mills (1959), "through simplified presentation of public issues". Manipulation invariably leads to individual passivity - a state of inertia that precludes action. This indeed, is the condition for which the mass media and the system-at-large energetically strive for, because passivity assures the maintenance of the status quo (Schiller, 1973:29). Passivity is self-sustaining, and destroys both individual's and groups' capacity for concerted social action against existing conditions.

Every power structure has an ideology. Because the mass media are part of the social system and because their operators belong to the ruling elite class, they invariably support the ideology of the power structure through justifying the socio-political status quo. The media operate within a regulatory framework established by the government, which deviously protects and reinforces the interests of the capitalist class. Through this way, the political system serves the causes of both the economic and cultural interests of the ruling elite groups who control the mass society and the

working classes, not only by legal and military coercion, but also by ideology, that is, by a definition on reality favourable to the interests of the ruling groups. The propagation of this definition of the situation through the mass media ensure popular consent to the ideology as legitimate.

There is an assumption which is almost axiomatic, that individuals and groups, especially uninformed and underprivileged groups like the working class (the masses) are always attempting to make sense of their situation, and thus are always seeking information. The mass media seize this opportunity to provide information, but generally do so within the context of the ideology of the elite. Thus the information and messages that reach the masses of the people are couched in terms in which they would provide satisfaction within the established order.

### **Mental Production**

The mass media exert tremendous influence in another direction. They are capable of diverting the people's attention and consciousness away from socio-political issues by filling their leisure hours with escapist forms of entertainment, that is, by creating and sustaining mass culture. It is the potential which the media have for creating and utilizing mass culture (which the Critical theorists impliedly call the 'building of a culture industry') that led Lazarsfeld & Merton (1948) to lament: "There is the danger that these technically advanced instruments of mass communication constitute a major avenue for deterioration of aesthetic tastes and popular cultural standards".

This fear is considered by a good many researchers, for example, Berkowitz (1964) and Gerbner (1979) to have been justified in many ways and in all the media - from radio to television; and from newspapers to magazines. Low-taste contents are widely distributed to and attended to by the mass audience, crime dramas, confession magazines, day-time serials and horror films are widely feared to have contributed to lowering of taste, disruption of morals and stimulation towards socially unacceptable conduct. These researchers hold that media portrayals of aggression provoke aggression especially in children, that is, at an age when character formation is strongest.



But other researchers, for example, Feshback (1961) argue that the effects of the media are more likely to be of a cathartic or aggression-release nature. Many experiments have been inconclusive and majority opinion seems inclined to be the cautious conclusion (Klapper, 1969) that direct effects involving disapproved behaviour are rare or likely to occur only where there is a strong disposition in that direction. Such dispositions are, of course, subject to previous experiences and existing social realities, both of which can be easily manipulated by the media - composed of the *technology* and the *professionals* who work the technology.

It is necessary to point out here that as far as the concept of rational domination is concerned, there is basically no difference in the findings of researchers. Whether the media espouse low-taste culture or teach aggression or have cathartic or reinforcement effects, the impact is the same power over the attitudes and behaviours of the masses. Low-taste effect is stupefying; aggressive effect is power-structure sustaining; cathartic effect is pacifying and reinforcement effect is status quo sustaining. From whatever angle one looks at it, the mass media serve as very essential tools for the power elite to maintain its ideology and impose it on society.

Much concern with observed correlational effects of the mass media appears to have diverted attention completely from the other side of the coin of mass culture - the escapist function of low-taste media contents. It is true that some research findings have shown some tentative correlation between low-taste media content and deviance. But it is equally true that such media content involved the underprivileged - the masses - in flights from the reality of their experiences and manipulated position in the social system and creating what Conflict theorists have called 'false consciousness'.

Alienation and deprivation drive people - especially the under-privileged to seek escape in the mass media; but what they get there, according to the Marxists, is mainly negative feedback to their everyday roles. But what the Marxists sees as "negative feedback" is, in fact, the "effective" ingredient - pacification - which keeps the mass society in place, coercing it to interpret the manipulation and exploitation by the power structure as beneficial.

What is called escapist content (Katz & Foulkes, 1962) can restore and maintain informal activity, serve unintended

functions such as heightening social solidarity, serve as a 'cover' for a variety of desirable activities, and generally provide a sanctioned mode of escape from ordinary responsibilities. This produces a consciousness that acquiesces to the status quo, and sometimes, even defends the power structure. This 'mental production' is one of the most effective ways through which the ruling groups develop and promote, with the help of the mass media, an ideology that legitimates their dominant positions.

Factors that contribute to the stability of a social system or a group, are partly structural and partly perceptual. The use of material resources and distribution of rewards in a group if related to the groups' internal structure as well as to the constraints imposed by external social relations or the environment. Group inequities in either their internal or external social relations can be expected to lead to its disequilibrium, to dissatisfaction from the aggrieved, and eventually to conflict and to change. But social stability has its perceptual angle.

A group will remain stable and satisfied as long as sufficient members participate in the group processes and derive satisfaction from them regardless of any objective inequities or inequalities. In so far as most members are not aware that they are deprived, the lack of economic and social equities will not pose a threat to the continued stability and function of the social system.

It is on this elite-sustaining principle that the strategy of the ruling groups is based. Create and extensively publicize material affluence so as to generate widespread satisfaction with the status quo. The success of this strategy is seen in the fact that a large part of the mass society has become passive and lethargic, more eager to support the status quo and ensure its security and continued material affluence than to run the risks of engaging in revolutionary struggle to bring about needed changes in society.

This 'material-affluence' weapon is supported by the domination of the consciousness that has occurred because the entire culture is permeated by the kind of logic and world view intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production and organization. The logic involved is that of technical efficiency or what Weber has called "instrumental rationality". It involves a manipulative and exploitative



approach not only with respect to material objects but also with respect to thought processes and consequently to social relationships.

The media of mass communication have been accused of lowering societal cultural values, increasing rates of delinquency, lulling the masses into political superficiality, suppressing creativity, contributing to general moral deterioration and in general, deciding by their operations the the attitudinal and behavioural patterns of society. At the same time, advocates of the mass media, who are by no means in the minority, have hailed the media for exposing corruption, guarding precious freedom of speech, bringing culture and education to millions, making news and information available to millions, providing harmless daily entertainment for the tired masses of the labour force, and in general ensuring the achievement of 'collective' goals.

Research findings have shown that there is some truth in the claims of both sides. Research has also confirmed the truth of the middle-of-road conclusion that the impact of the media is dependent upon existing predispositions. The implication would appear to be that the power of the mass media to affect social, cultural, economic and political situations is very minimal; the deciding factor is predispositions.

### **Neutrality**

The mass media, as technology are neutral; as a social product, are neutral only in the sense that they do only what they have been employed to do. They can be used to liberate or to dominate, depending on the prevailing ideology. Invariably, in our materialistic world, the prevailing ideology is always the ideology of the ruling elite.

We have already referred to Schiller's (1973) myth of Neutrality, which shows that when people believe that their key social institutions are neutral, the ground is fertile for manipulation. This means that manipulation succeeds best, when evidence of its presence is nonexistent; when the manipulated believe things are the way they are naturally and inevitably. So the claim of neutrality, does not absolve the media from the 'sins' of gatekeeping, agenda-setting and cultivation, all of which tend to mould attitudes and

behaviour that support the ideology of the elite. In fact, the myth of neutrality helps to more forcefully obtain the acquiescence, and support of the masses for maintaining the status quo.

The view that the mass are neutral derives from seeing the media only in terms of technology. Obviously, when viewed this way, it is fair to say that the media are neutral. But the media are not just the technology made possible by scientific advancement. The people who work this technology - the professionals - are also part of the mass media. These professionals are 'live' human beings with traits, frustrations, gaps, weaknesses, desires and aspirations like people in the mass audience. And they belong to the power structure. It is near-impossible for them to be neutral. In fact, they have never been known to be. But they have consistently hidden under the neutral characteristic of the technological part of the mass media.

### **Predispositions**

When the concept, predisposition, is discussed in the media, it is usually with respect to the individual. The aggressive predisposed, will learn more aggression from the media; the non-aggressive will not. This may be true or not. Research has yet to provide conclusive evidence. But if we accept, for the moment, that predisposition is a deciding factor in the impact of the mass media, then a good case is made for the rational domination hypothesis. Predispositions are not only individual but are also societal or situational within society. Existing social conditions are those which favour the power structure and the maintenance of the status quo. Is it any wonder therefore that the mass media are able to direct society along the path which favours social stability in the face of inequality; acquiescence in the face of domination; and wider gaps between the elite and the masses, even in the face of improved living conditions?

One long-standing debate in communication research is concerned with the ability of mass communication campaigns to produce change. Some studies, for example Weiss (1969) found little evidence of change following media campaigns. But other studies (Lerner & Schramm, 1967; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971) have presented very optimistic views of what the mass media can and have done to cause



change. The question, however, is what type of change? and change in whose interest? Is it change directed at liberating the masses from poverty and from the clutches of the power elite, or is it change that merely ameliorates the hardship of the realities of the lives of the common man? Ostensibly, development communication is directed at national development and at improving the socio-cultural and economic conditions of the under-privileged. In reality, it is members of the power elite who eventually gain the most from such development communication activities.

In a foreword to *Tele-Niger: Adapting an Electronic Medium to a Rural African Context* (Silverman, 1966), McAnany remarked that the project widened rather than bridged the gap between the rich and the poor. He pointed out that "no profound changes in the social, economic and political structure of the rural communities concerned" resulted from the project. In many development cases, the gains that accrue to the privileged are out of proportion to their contribution.

Some of the development action taken as a result of media campaigns in developing societies have been enslaving rather than liberating. For example, the Green Revolution in Nigeria merely succeeded in producing a few large-scale mechanized farms, owned by about fifty people out of 100 million Nigerians, and producing enough to serve the cities, thereby making it difficult, through political manoeuvres, for rural farmers with smallholdings, worked the traditional way, to sell their products.

The same trend of the powerful holding the powerless to ransom obtains on the international scene. It is true that the development of new media systems in developing countries through Western aid or based on Western models may create a potential means of promoting developmental goals. However, the overall economic relations between developing and developed countries tend to inhibit such potential use in practice. The export of media contents from developed countries is, on the face of it, seen to promote economic development, but in practice and reality it does not. For example, Wells (1972) points out that in Latin America, the influence of American media contents and of American advertising money generates public identification with consumption values, whereas economic development requires an emphasis on production values.

It is obvious who is dominated in this economic exchange made possible by the media. The growth of division of labour; the weakening of traditional bonds; the growth of rationality and the creation of material affluence have all combined to create a society in which individuals are only loosely bound together. Such a society, made up of a vast mass of segregated, isolated individuals, interdependent in all sorts of specialized ways yet lacking in any central unifying values or purpose, is an easy prey for political manipulation. And since the political structure is fully aware of the potential of the mass media to effect cognitive changes among individuals and to structure their thinking, it uses these media to shape and mould the consciousness of the mass society in ways that ensure political loyalty and social conformity to the requirements of the established system.

Although the mass media are not alone in this task of "indoctrination and persuasion", they are the most important and most powerful. Because they have immediacy characteristics and wide coverage capacity; have the ability to influence other mass persuasion instruments; and can claim professional neutrality, they play a very crucial role in the task of containing the masses of the people satisfactorily within the existing system. Through the mass media new needs are continually being created. These needs ensure that the people will continue to be motivated to perform the kinds of role - responsible employee, loyal citizen etc - necessary for the maintenance of the power structure and of the status quo. In addition, the individual's psychological needs for security, belonging, recognition and love are manipulated and shaped so as to promote the willingness of the masses to conform to the requirements of the system and to support its maintenance.

As a result of the usually successful scheming of the ruling class, the people's willingness to conform inevitably assumes the character of a felt-need. It comes to be seen and felt as a duty. What human nature is seen to be ultimately affects the way human beings behave, not because they must act as they do, but because they believe they are expected to act that way. The behaviour of men is not independent of the theories of human behaviour that men adopt. What we believe (Eisenbert, 1972) of man affects the behaviour of men, for it determines what each expects of the other ..... belief helps shape actuality.



Thus the willingness to conform is seen by the mass society not as the result of careful manipulation and exploitation by the ruling elite and capitalist interests, but as the result of understanding acceptance of the realities of the situation, that is, full appreciation of the socio-political and economic situation, and satisfaction that what obtains is the best for them under the prevailing circumstances.

This is conquest of the consciousness. It is rationalization of domination. And the role of the mass media in creating this false feeling of "understanding acceptance" is substantial. They do confer status on those they want to be seen as "good and considerate"; they can set agenda for public discussion, bring to focus those topics they want to propagate and sustain; they can interpret to justify issues, individuals and information; and they can take stands and persuade. All this they do within the dominating climate dictated by the ruling class.

### **Any Solution?**

In a world that is half capitalistic and half communistic, it is almost impossible to imagine that the domineering influence of the media through the promptings and control of the power elite can be eliminated. As long as social, economic and/or political status continue to determine who is important and who is not; and as long as the media of mass communication continue to be the most versatile and pervasive means of disseminating information and getting views and opinions across to populations scattered over wide areas, so long will the socially, economically and/or politically powerful do everything and anything to control the media and use them to their own advantage.

The ability and opportunity for them to do so successfully is enhanced when media infrastructure and administration are centralized, and therefore distant from the masses. Such centralization breeds an atmosphere of explicit estrangement between media professionals and the majority of their audiences. They become not only physically separated, but more importantly, emotionally distant. The result is that the professionals and the power elite behind them are either unable to appreciate the problems that are local to the audiences or are able to pretend that such problems do not exist or are of no real consequences. They turn their own class

needs and aspirations into the needs and aspirations of the nation/world, and under the shelter of structural functionalism, plead collective goals.

It may not seem academically useful now to waste energy on how to eliminate the dominating influence of the mass media. What seems plausible is how to reduce that influence or rather how to infuse some liberating influences. We think that one way to do this is to base media operations on a strategy that emphasizes relevant content, suitable style of presentation, rapport between media personnel and media audiences, access to media infrastructure, participation in media content planning, production and presentation, and an appropriate mix of modern and local media and modes of communication that are consistent with local conditions.

This would ensure that planning and decision-making are decentralized and that solutions to the problems of the masses are the priority targets of media contents. This strategy is strongly supported by McQuail's (1973:96-98) democratization approach to mass media theory and practice. The Democratic-Participant Media theory advocated calls for the rights of access to the mass media for individual citizens and minority groups, and for the rights of the masses to be served by the mass media according to their own determination of needs. It demands that the organization and content of the media should not be subject to centralized political or state bureaucratic control, but that the media should exist primarily for their mass audiences and not for media organization and professionals or for the benefits solely of their socially, economically and/or politically advantaged clients.

In order, therefore, to provide an opportunity for the mass media to become liberating instruments, these media must be localized, structurally and operationally. Localization makes it possible for media personnel to become familiar with the sociocultural and economic conditions under which the masses live, and for citizens in the mass audience to actively participate in the activities of the media. There are very few opportunities than this to ensure relevance of content materials, and informed utilization of media messages. The media should therefore:



Go to the People  
Love Them  
Work with Them  
Learn from Them  
Start with What They Know  
And Build Upon What They Have!

This is liberation through communication. It is a concrete way to make the mass media *INSTRUMENTS* for *LIBERATION* and *ENHANCEMENT*. The primary purpose of the technology of communication is the transmission of views and values. These views and values, unless deliberately guided, would reflect the political framework within which it is produced, transferred and applied, both at national and international levels (Kleinwachter, 1986). The political framework in the world and in each developing country is one which emphasizes the rights and privileges of the economically and/or politically powerful. This is why the technology of the mass media has been enslaving rather than liberating as far as the populace is concerned.

Science and technology are tools which can promote or hold back human development, depending on the systems, objectives and contexts in which they are applied (Manet, 1986). The trends are determined by basic economic and social structures. They can promote liberation or increase inequality and dependency. What is of immense concern is that while the privileged use the mass media to increase inequality and dependency, they present a picture of democratic liberalization to the under-privileged. It is this camouflage which enhances the rationalization of domination.

#### **Notes:**

1. The concept "Rational" is loosely used here as a synonym for "Defence Mechanism", that is, a process by which one modifies reality to make it more tolerable and acceptable. Components include:

Rationalization	- protection against awareness or reality; providing plausible but untrue reasons or motives as justification for actions and/or decisions;
Repression	- preventing unacceptable ideas or thoughts from entering into the conscious mind; and
Identification	- reacting to other's desires and wishes and aspirations as if they were one's own.

The concept "domination" is used here as defined in Webster's 3rd New International Dictionary (Webster, 1973-74), and as used in scores of books and articles by Herbert I. Schiller from 1955 to 1984; *Communication and Cultural Domination* (1976), *The Mind Managers* (1973) "The Communication Revolution: Who Benefits"(1983), "The Language of Science and the Science of Domination" (1983), "New Modes of Cultural Domination" (1978), etc.

We have used domination here to mean holding superiority or mastery in power or strength and to surpass or overshadow in prominence, recognition and prestige. It involves the exercise of mastery or ruling power; the exercise of preponderant influence as well as compelling political and economic influence.

2. The concern for and study of Effects of Mass Communication have revolved around the four basic reasons given as far back as 1948 by Lazarsfeld and Merton, to wit:

- (a) alarm over the ubiquity of the mass media and their alleged power to manipulate the people;
- (b) fear that the power elite in a society will use the mass media to reinforce the status quo, discourage social criticism and impede beneficial social change;
- (c) belief that mass entertainment lowers esthetic tastes, and standards for popular culture in its efforts to attract and hold the largest possible audiences; and
- (d) belief that mass media entertainment wastes leisure time - time that could be better spent on self-improvement or on other worthy activities.



This is why there have been studies on a number of aspects including Effects of Mass Media of Communication - Lerner (1960), Weiss (1969), Lithiel de Sola Pool (1973) etc.; power without responsibility - Curran & Seaton (1981), Control in the Newsroom: A functional Analysis - Breed (1955); The Manufacture of News - Chen & Young (eds) 1973; Culture, Society and the Media - Gurevitch, et al (1982); Capitalism, Communication and Class Relations - Murdoch & Golding (1977); Power, Class and Media - Westergaard (1977); Media Agenda-Setting and Media Manipulation - Weaver (1981).

3. The subtle refusal to publish critical views in developed countries and the banning or closing down of media institutions not favouring the establishment in developing societies are all examples of how the power structure enforces compliance and the continuation of the status quo. In Kenya (Ngugi wa Thiongo's: 1986) various Kenyan enterprises like the Nairobi Evening News and Weekend Star have flared up for a day, only to disappear the following day for lack of advertisements from the mostly foreign firms in Kenya, for lack of adequate capital, and also because of the severe restraint of a self-imposed censorship for fear of overstepping the boundaries. The only Kenyan-owned enterprises which have survived so far are Hilary Ng'weno's *Weekly Review* and the *Nairobi Times*. The *Weekly Review* has been in print for four years. The content and outlook, however, is entirely another matter.

What happens in Kenya is not an exception; it is the 'rule' in developing societies.

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