

Structural and Social Forces Restricting Media News Content in Democracies: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

This essay offers a critical perspective of the news product generated by US media. It is argued that social and structural conditions dictating content are similar to those affecting media artifacts of authoritarian political regimes. Media are seen under both political conditions to be tools of elite interests preoccupied with ideological control of social, political, and economic environments. The contention is that in both democratic and authoritarian political circumstances, the news product is homogenized, offering little by way of divergent perspectives. The consequent information deprivation is linked to an impoverished public discourse that is antithetical to democratic process.

Introduction

This essay argues that a concatenated set of structural and social forces contribute to homogenization of mass media news content, and that the homogenization naturalizes a distorted reality by foregrounding myths and narratives serving elite interests. As the term is used here, content homogenization suggests that events and topics selected for news coverage and the ideological perspectives with which they are infused, provide little in the way of diversity, contribute little to a free marketplace of ideas (Gitlin, 2003, p. 211, 271), and, as a consequence, subvert democratic process. The consequence of homogenization is an impoverished ideological diversity favoring elites and significantly abridging interpretations of reality that can be reasonably assigned and debated by media content consumers (Slater, 2007; Mapes, 2005; Gitlin, 2003, p. 6; Lee and Solomon, 1991; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Postman, 1985; Schudson, 1972, pp. 160-194).

The concern here is with exposing forces producing content homogenization, their provenance in market economies, and the resulting inherent tension with democratic institutions. The contention is that the homogenizing forces are similar in hegemonic effect to those operating upon media artifacts of authoritarian political regimes (McChesney, 2002). They reflect the priorities of the relative few who dominate news production operations, including the very rich, chief executives, the corporate rich, senior members of the military, and the political directorate, all representing a relatively monolithic presence in their acceptance of a common set of values, beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, norms, rules, and behaviors (Mills, 1956; Gans, 1980, p. 206-213).

These are the same castes that comprise a media elite constituted of ownership and senior executives, whose usually unobtrusive machinations as superordinate gatekeepers dictate media content (Schudson, 2005; Gitlin 2003). This helps explain why media in the US are principally business enterprises, why many are increasingly skewed to the political right (Hallin, and Mancini, 2005; Sheen, 2002), why, because of high entry costs, they tend to be the exclusive province of the rich and powerful (Curran, 2005), and why content decisions are the product of profit imperatives.

Beyond gatekeeping, and its influence over both media and public agendas, central homogenizing influences include media consolidation, information subsidies, news sourcing, pack journalism, wire services and syndicates, and advertising.

Agenda Setting

The media agenda (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) is the product of shared ideological commitments of economic elites, including media ownership, and dominate political and social forces, whose influence limits reportorial possibilities. Where, as a consequence, the media agenda emerges as a homogenized news product, it becomes the public agenda, reflecting a hegemonic confluence of external and internal interests typified by the conservative positions of those occupying senior status in the gatekeeping hierarchy, and subscribed to as a matter of both organizational efficacy and self preservation by those functioning in subordinate gatekeeping roles (Tunstall, 2008, pp. 110-111; Gans, 2003, p. 34; Gitlin, 2003; Tuchman, 1978, p. 5). The resulting insular and parochial news product is characterized by a mendacious topical, thematic, and ideological sterility, imposing on consumers a restricted set of perceptual and cognitive filters. The consequent information deprivation produces conditions in which media-influenced social control can be linked to pluralistic ignorance, a spiral of silence, and a desiccated public discourse (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, 1991; Gans, 1980, p. 294).

Any apparent ideological disjunctions in the news product are readily resolved within the context of the larger commitment of gatekeepers to narratives that maintain social, economic, and political stability (Gans, 2003, p. 11; Infante, Rancer, and Womak, 1990, pp. 31, 346, 349-350). Distinctions drawn between conservative and liberal economic policy and democracy as it is practiced in the US rarely, if ever, exceed the confines of a dogmatic dedication to the orthodoxy of capitalist economic systems and democracy American style (Lewis, Chomsky, and Herman, 1997). It is hardly surprising that news is characterized by a pro-business bias (Gans, 2003, p.63-67). Infected by devotion to a conventional wisdom that declines to recognize viewpoints reaching beyond what everyone is assumed to know or believe (Mapes, 2005, p. 273), news serves multiple fundamental functions. It works to justify an existing social structure characterized by inequitable distribution of life chances, extols the probity of the elite, and, where transgressions are too egregious to ignore, offers exculpatory rationalizations.

Media Consolidation

Further ensuring homogenization of news content, profit expectations of ownership, including shareholders, have provided the impetus for media consolidation (Gans, 2003, pp. 22-28; McChesney, 2002, p. 15, 20, Powell, W. 1987, pp. 53-63). Economic influences have resulted in 97 percent of US daily newspapers operating as local monopolies, with almost half owned by a group or chain (Jamieson and Campbell, 2006, p. 169). The trend, perhaps, began with the ascension of the *New York Times* in 1967 to de facto monopoly status (Tunstall, 2008, p. 109), and has accelerated since (Bertrand, 2003). Among the consequences of consolidation is a restrictive influence on the number and diversity of permissible news subjects. News organizations routinely use media channels to press corporate agendas consistent with a pro-business, market economy ideology, diminishing the plurality of perspectives available to the public (Jamieson and Campbell, 2006, pp. 166, 168.169; Gans, 2003, p. 8, 26). Between 1981 and 2000, the number of organizations controlling most of the daily newspaper, motion picture, television, magazine, and book production in the United States shrunk by 50 percent, from 46 to 23 corporations (Bagdikian, 2000).

In addition to ownership, interlocking directorates exert influence over the news product. Members of boards of directors in various industries having substantial political, social, and economic influence, including control over advertising dollars, the sine qua non of media commercial success, can also be found as consorts populating media boards of directors (Sheen, 2002; Lewis, J., Chomsky, N., and Herman E., 1997; Gandy, 1982, p. 201). Effectively, mass

communication in the US is an oligopoly controlled by an oligarchy, with corporations having gained monopolistic control over the mass media product (Chomsky, 2002).

Information Subsidies

The incestuous relationship involving interlocking directorates is reinforced through information subsidies, particularly news releases, generated as public relations products on behalf of government, business, the military, and other superordinate institutions. The fundamental responsibility of public relations practitioners, operating as surrogates for senior gatekeepers, is to make institutions represented look good, using media as conduits to link clientele with the public. Both because it is free and because it is ideologically consonant with priorities of employers, the ersatz news so produced and made available to mass media enterprises for use at no cost is eagerly embraced by the gatekeeping establishment. As a homogenizing influence, it represents conservatively 60 percent of all mediated news material (Gandy, p. 12). The ubiquity of the product is illustrated further by the number of public relations workers engaged in the image-making, maintenance and repair business. It is estimated that there are some 150,000 in the U.S. alone, and as many as 1.5 million globally (Cutlip, Center, and Broom, 2003). By one estimate, some 13,000 work for the U.S. government, spending annually something on the order of \$2.5 billion in their campaign to convince the public, using media channels, that what the government does is both good and well done (Lee, M., and Solomon, N., 1992).

Institutional Spokespersons

Conceptually, public relations is multi-dimensional, operating in a number of guises. Institutional spokespersons fulfill a public relations role, crafting messages that contribute to a pallid, homogenized news product consistent with the need of senior gatekeepers to control the media agenda.

Journalistic convention mandates the appearance of objectivity. The appearance is secured through use, generally unleavened by responsible journalistic skepticism, of quotes or similar sorts of attribution originating with sources who are represented as unbiased experts or disinterested observers (Tunstall, 2008, p. 117; Gitlin, 2003, p. 37; Aufderheide, 2002, p. 13, McChesney, 2002, p. 18). In fact, sources may be more accurately viewed as filters, typically front men - or women - for an institutional entity with a vested interest in ensuring an ideological spin acceptable to those in power (Curran, 2005; Tuchman, 1978, pp. 94-95). Engaging in de facto censorship, these institutionally-anointed spokespersons are assigned the function of controlling the organizational message. They are typically the sole point of contact between media representatives, who tend to adopt the institutional world view dispensed on behalf of the powerful (Tunstall, 2008, 119; Gitlin, 2003, p. 263), and to reproduce for public consumption whatever hopeful, unambiguous rendition of reality the institution is intent upon selling (Schudson, 2005; Gitlin, 2003; Lee and Solomon, 1991; Gans, 1980, pp. 116-145). This difficulty is compounded by several factors. Deadlines often militate against journalistic enterprise in seeking out alternative sources (Gans, 1980, p. 116). So do related costs, indolence, and indifference (Gitlin, 2003, 35; Tunstall, 2008, p. 107). There are expectations that divergent views - and those who expose them - will likely be exorcised, in the first case, from reportage, and, in the second, from the fraternity.

Pack Journalism

To avoid that fate, reporters and low-level editors laboring in subordinate gatekeeping roles, engage in a discourse in which news is consensually defined (Bertrand, 2003, p. 8; Gans, 1980, p. 83; Tuchman, 1978, p. 35, 59, 78). The process and consequences are akin to what Shaw has labeled consensus journalism (Biagi, 2007, p. 246), and what Crouse (1972) has called pack journalism. What is newsworthy and why, as well as the interpretation to be imposed, is a matter of collective determination that produces a largely undifferentiated product, contextualized within the ideological and normative constraints imposed by owners and managers and learned by

journalists (Schudson, 2005; Gitlin, 2003, pp. 98-99). The consensual definition of news precludes the need for exercise of costly initiative in seeking out alternative perspectives. Moreover, some sufficiently revered newspapers, notably the *New York Times*, are institutional contributors to the pack mentality, suggesting through their coverage the paths to be followed by others (Gitlin, 2003, p. 299, 301).

There is thus ensured content conformance with express and implied edicts of ownership and management, with subordinate levels of gatekeepers functioning as intermediaries between the dominate few at the apex of the news production pyramid and the ultimate recipients of the product, the citizen public (Baran, S., and Davis, D., 2003).

Wire Services & Syndicates

Wire services and syndicates contribute also to homogenization (Rantanen and Boyd-Barrett, 2004, p. 35; Gitlin, 2003, pp. 2-3). As a notable example, the Associated Press wields monopolistic influence in the US, and has an extensive international presence (Tunstall, 2008, 116). The AP distributes 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the same content to 1,700 U.S. daily, weekly, and college newspapers; 5,000 radio and television outlets, 1,000 radio network affiliates, 330 international broadcasters, and 8,500 international subscribers in 121 countries, and does so in five languages: English, German, Dutch, French, and Spanish (Associated Press, 2006). Circumstances are similar with Reuters, which bills itself as "among the most read news sources...reaching millions," (Reuters, 2006), and other similar operations [hao://about.reuters.com/invcstors/comin; 612012006](http://about.reuters.com/invcstors/comin;612012006)). Subscription to such services is driven by profit imperatives. It is cheaper for media outlets to thus secure news than it is for them to individually staff bureaus around the globe. The same applies to syndicates, which also sell material for simultaneous dissemination by multiple media outlets (Biagi, 2005, p. 62).

Advertising

Advertising is another significant homogenizing influence. Notable among advertiser requirements is a hospitable news context congruent with elite constructions of reality, and directed to large, predictably sympathetic demographic categories (Schudson, 2005; Sheen, 2002; Gans, 2003, p. 21, 44; Tunstall, 1987; Gitlin, 1980, p. 216). The targeted categories turn out to be middle, upper middle, and upper classes, whose buying power and interests are relatively certain, and whose values, attitudes, and beliefs are, for the most part, ideologically consonant with those of the socially, politically, and economically dominate (Curran, 2005; Gandy, 1982, pp. 178-187; Gans, 1980, p. 61). That congruence is directly reflected in the failure of homogenized media news presentations to offer alternative possible interpretations of what are cast as unambiguous realities, unassailable norms, and settled social rules. The congruence entertains no substantive alternatives to the status quo. There is a virtual total absence of any meaningful discussion of circumstances, problems, and possible solutions associated with needs of marginal populations lacking the economic and political wherewithal to participate effectively in the conduct of democracy or free enterprise institutions (Schiller, 1996). The bias produces a knowledge gap effectively precluding the marginalized, and any who might serve as their surrogates, from engagement in substantive public discourse (Tunstall, 2008, pp. 106-107).

Consequences

The consequences of the relationships sketched here are foundational to a propaganda model of mass media content and intent. Among media functions is the integration of individuals into societies through inculcation of values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with those espoused by elites. The goal is achievable in the economic and political economies of the US only through concerted, propagandistic mass media manipulation consistent with practices of totalitarian regimes, in which news production conventions serve political interests (Paul and Elder, 2006, p. 8, 19; Curran, 2005; McChesney, 2002, p. 17; Chomsky, 2002; Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. 1; Tuchman, 1978, p.83).

The argument advanced by this essay is that the structural and derivative social relationships illustrated produce a news product that is conservative (Gans, 2003, p. 47; Lewis, Chomsky and Herman, 1997), and homogenized, depicting in choice and treatment of events cast as news the ideological commitments of a controlling elite whose continued political and social prosperity is predicated upon economic dominance, and is contingent upon maintaining the status quo (Curran, 2005). The objectives and the consequences of news produced under such conditions are obfusatory. While preferred meanings imposed by mass media are occasionally contested in the public sphere, it is generally conceded that the contest is waged between grossly unequal opponents, and any shifts in a socially constructed reality evanescent (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson, 1992; Ryan, 1991; Hallin, 1987). Potential alternative realities, in particular those reflecting liberal perspectives, are left unilluminated. They are absent from what and how publics think, the things they talk about, (Curran, 2005), and, consequently, cannot influence public behavior. What emerges is a narrowly circumscribed public agenda and discourse that is antithetical to democratic process.

Media content that distorts, obscures, or fails to articulate divergent perspectives and possibilities retards public discourse, and feeds the kind of nihilism that contributes substantially to a social pathology defined symptomatically by apathy and isolation (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sassoon, 1992; Putnam, 2001). It may also contribute ultimately to the unraveling of communal instincts, the degradation of social cohesion, and reactionary, sometimes violent, social protest.

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