

# Bridging the Mythical Divide: Political Economy and Cultural Studies Approaches to the Analysis of the Media.

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## DEFINITIONS

**Critical Political Economy** is based upon a concern with the structural inequalities of production and the consequences for representation and access to consumption. By placing issues of economic distribution at its centre, it prioritises the relationship between the economy and forms of democratic politics.

**Cultural Studies** foregrounds the analysis of popular cultural practices over dominant or elite cultural practices. It emphasizes the social agency of individuals and their capacity to resist social determination and dominant cultural agendas.

## Introduction

The process of making sense of the world and taking meaning from the things that surround us is one of the main reasons why people are fascinated with the role of the media in society. This is largely because of the centrality of the symbolic to media content and form – quite literally what do media images mean for the way we interpret and evaluate the world? In other words, how meaning has been thought to be relayed, consensus achieved and change considered possible through the media. How to come to terms with symbolic imaginings and to understand their place in our world draws on a wide range of theory from a range of disciplines that often disagree on the emphasis given in each approach; the balance of power between the producer, the audience and social and

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economic structures; the centrality of the media to social processes and the appropriate means to carry out research. This chapter considers the way meaning has been theorized in relation to the media in two key approaches that have often been pitched one against the other: political economy and cultural studies.

Political economy and cultural studies are considered to be the two main theoretical approaches in media studies and they have enjoyed a relationship of antagonism on several levels. Put crudely, political economy views the media as promoting the dominant ideology of the ruling classes: in spite of their liberating potential, the media of modern mass communication have contributed to the creation of new levels of social stratification – communication classes which in turn engender new forms of domination. The mass media are an obstacle to liberation and overwhelm all other forms of non-mass media.

A cultural studies approach starts with the basic argument that the mass media give us citizens of the media: people who are able to manipulate imagery and information for their own ends, to build their own identities and local politics from the vast array of mediated bits and pieces they have at their disposal. Through this, social and political agency occurs offering the possibility of oppositional political projects emerging. Traditionally political economy has tended to read the state and other superstructural forces from the specific configuration of capital at any one time and insists that this is the starting point of social analysis. Cultural studies reminds political economy that the substance of its work, the analysis of communication, is rooted in the needs, goals, conflicts, failures and accomplishments of ordinary people attempting to make sense of their lives. Cultural studies has recognized the energising potential of multifaceted forms of social agency, each of which brings with it dimensions of subjectivity and consciousness that are vital to political praxis. Often this has been displayed through research that focuses on media consumption (see below), but cultural studies conceptions of power have a tendency to be rooted in individual subjectivities, their identities and collective action rather than as political economy would have it, structured in the institutions of society.

Although the two approaches have often been seen as entirely contrasting with irreconcilable differences (see for example, Garnham, 1995; Grossberg, 1995) this chapter argues that in practice such distinctions can be less clear-cut and there is much to be gained from embracing the differences where they do exist and moving towards a dialogic inter-disciplinarity. In sum, I will argue that debates from both camps are required to inform a thorough analysis of the role of the media in society. In other words, structural inequities must be taken on board, along with cultural complexities of consumption, to resist a simplistic retreat to either.

### **Considering the divide: conflict and continuity**

The apparent conflict between political economy and cultural studies has been rehearsed on several occasions. It is depicted variously as the disagreement over how to theorize power and culture: between scholars who hold on to a Marxian premise of labour/class in socio-relational analysis (political economists) and those who reject this approach (culturalists); as a split between studies of production (political economy) and studies of consumption (cultural studies); as the attempt to study the social totality (political economy) and those who renounce the possibility of ever achieving such grandiose aims; and/or as economic reductionism (all social relations boil down to economic determinants) versus cultural specificity. Each criticism masks work in the field that is inclined to acknowledge and appreciate the necessary continuities between the two.

Kellner (1989) states that the Frankfurt School of the 1930s was the first to incorporate both culture and communications in a critical social theory of mass communications. Much like many media studies departments today, by combining political economy of the media, cultural textual analysis, and audience reception studies the Frankfurt school theorists worked through theories of mass production, commodification, standardization and massification. In the work of Adorno and Horkheimer (1979) we see a political economic analysis based on the industrialization of the mass media into a *culture industry*. Other theorists in the Frankfurt School also looked at the audience and a close consideration of how ideology is carried out through the media and other public institutions (see the work of Benjamin, 1973). There was, of course, much disagreement and debate between them but they existed side by side, each enhancing the critique of the other and between them they provided a systematic approach to the media that included political economy and socio-cultural approaches.

Kellner (1989) maintains that the inter-disciplinary approach of the Frankfurt School integrated political economy and cultural studies within the context of capitalist society and the manner in which culture and communications were produced and the roles they played. However, as critical social theory transformed over time into cultural studies, there was a shift away from some of the foundational pretexts of the first generation of scholars of the Frankfurt School. In short, the idea of the 'culture industries' as ideological and manipulative was questioned (Kellner, 1998), and later rejected as the belief in oppositional cultural practices increased. Similarly, class, which has always been at the core of political economy approaches, became less central to critical studies as other

cultural signifiers, such as race, gender, nationality and audience identities, were brought to the fore. This development led to a movement away from the audience position as constructed by the text, towards the examination of the pleasures of the actual audiences. It was the political move by feminist media theorists to focus on women's pleasure that first prompted conceptions of the audience as active. Combined with the work of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), in particular, that of Stuart Hall, the active audience paradigm came into being.

Stuart Hall's article *Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse*, which was first presented in the early 1970s, provided the impetus for active audience studies. Hall believed that more attention should be paid to the 'practice of interpretative work' in the decoding of televisual signs by audiences and, in particular, how that reception frequently involved the 'active transformation' of meaning. He predicted that such a realisation promised '... a new and exciting phase in so-called audience research, of a quite new kind' (Hall, 1993: 94).

So, as an antidote to a life condemned to ideological slavery came the active audience. Active audience theorists have stressed that audiences are capable of arriving at their own decisions about the meaning of a media text. In other words, meaning does not reside within the text, or at least not exclusively so. Many also stress that texts are 'polysemic', that is, they are capable of more than one interpretation (e.g. Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984). Polysemy refers to the potential for multiple meanings to be taken from one text, thus allowing ambiguity and interpretative freedom. Textual determinism was rejected and ambiguity and interpretative freedom heralded as intrinsic to significatory systems. This marked an unbridgeable divide between political economy and cultural studies that is challenged below.

### **Political economy**

Political economy was developed in the late 1960s through a concern with the increasing role of private businesses in cultural production. Golding and Murdock (2000) made a distinction between traditional political economy and critical political economic approaches to the media by highlighting four key differences:

- Critical political economy sees the economy as interrelated with political, social and cultural life rather than as a separate domain.

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- It is historical, paying close attention to long-term changes in the role of the state, corporations and the media in culture.
- Critical political economy is centrally concerned with the balance between private enterprise and public intervention.
- A critical approach goes beyond technical issues of efficiency to engage with the basic moral questions of justice, equity and the moral good.

In their own words, a **critical** political economy:

... sets out to show how different ways of financing and organising cultural production have traceable consequences for the range of discourses and representations in the public domain and for audiences access to them. (Golding and Murdock, 1991: 15)

Critical political economy is especially interested in the ways that communicative activity is continuously structured by the unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources. Classically, theorists adopting this approach point to the fact that media production has been increasingly commandeered by large corporations and moulded to their interests and strategies. In recent years we have seen a push towards privatization and the declining vitality of publicly-funded cultural institutions. The expansion and growth of commercialization has inevitably pushed smaller-scale operations out of business or into consolidation with larger companies. Newspapers have merged into each other or into other groups in order to stay alive as they try to survive in an ever more competitive market place. General economic conditions will also influence the product of the media industries. The production output of the mass media is concerned both with commodities and creation, the balance is precarious and framed by the general economic context within which production takes place. In periods of economic stringency the criteria of cost effectiveness are likely to be the deciding factor of output, the result being a systematic rejection of the unpopular and unprofitable and a reversion to tried and tested formulae with a proven market. Critical political economists argue that the nature of the mass media cannot be adequately considered apart from more general economic changes, which in turn require a historical perspective which will locate changes in the mass media within the general context of the processes of industrialization.

Part of the debate within critical political economy focuses on issues of ownership and control of the media. Having power in or control over media is argued to impact upon the capacity to determine or influence the contents of the media

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products and meaning carried by them. This has grown out of a strictly Marxist perspective which states that the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control, at the same time, over the means of mental production. The fact that culture is produced and consumed under capitalism is fundamental to understanding inequalities of power, prestige and profit. Early work in the field was concerned to address the extent to which the cultural industries serve the interests of the rich and powerful. Since these early Marxist days, theories have developed so they are no longer structuralist theories of power, which are now thought to be too simplistic in their notions of a direct transmission of the ruling ideology to subordinate groups (as in the likes of Miliband, 1977 and Althusser, 1971). Now the focus is on ideas and concepts which people use to make sense of the world and are to some extent dependent on the media. In other words, the frameworks offered by the media are articulated by the nexus of interests producing them. A critical political economy looks at the intentional action (by owners, editors etc.) and structural constraints (such as resources of time and money), at each level of the production process.

In *Manufacturing Consent*, published in 1994, Herman and Chomsky propose a mass media propaganda model for a modern Western liberal democratic society, in which cultural mechanisms for the maintenance of the status quo are less overt, but not less effective, than in systems such as totalitarian dictatorships.

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of larger society. (Herman and Chomsky, 1994: 1)

Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model is based on media 'filters', through which information must pass before it can reach the public. The first filter, limitation of media ownership, is the result of a process of consolidation that began in the nineteenth century, (Herman and Chomsky, 1994: 2). By 2000, there were ten major players in the global entertainment and media industries: Disney, General Electric, AOL-Time Warner, Sony, News Corporation, Viacom, Vivendi, Bertelsmann, AT&T, and Liberty Media. (McChesney, November 2000) Though not all of these are dedicated media companies, all develop, produce and distribute a plethora of disparate cultural products in many countries through countless corporate entities.

...the dominant media firms are quite large businesses; they are controlled by very wealthy people or by managers who are subject to sharp constraints by owners and other market-profit-oriented forces. (Herman and Chomsky, 1994: 12)

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In free market societies, cultural products are also likely to pass through the advertising filter, which links the entertainment industry with other sectors. Through their public association with media producers, advertisers gain an interest in the company's content:

Advertisers will want, more generally, to avoid programs with serious complexities and disturbing controversies that interfere with the 'buying mood'. (Herman and Chomsky, 1994: 17)

This influence commonly functions pre-emptively: the sensibilities of the advertiser are taken into consideration by the media company prior to the screening of contentious material.

Another focal question for the critical political economy of communications that engages with the moral dimension of this approach is to investigate how changes in the array of forces which exercise control over cultural production and distribution limit or liberate the public sphere (Habermas, 1989). The ethical impulse lying behind the creation of the public sphere, of inventing a space where citizens may meet and discuss as equals, is premised on the desire to establish the conditions for living in a truly democratic society. Critical political economy is concerned to explain how the economic dynamics of production structure public discourse by promoting certain cultural forms over others. Theorists in this approach argue that what is happening is a narrowing of the range of discourses which inhibits a full understanding of the complexities and ambiguities of our social conditions. For example, in the UK it is argued that the increasing privatization and commercialization of public space has led to an abundance of the dominant, cheap transatlantic forms of story-telling which excludes or marginalizes a whole range of discourses.

Hesmondhalgh (2002) emphasizes the important point that not all political economy of the media is the same. Within political economy there are sub-genres. Work by Schiller (1989), Herman and Chomsky (1994) and McChesney et al. (1998) catalogues and documents the growth in wealth and power of the cultural industries and their links with political and business allies. Like the early work in the field, these theorists have been criticized for proposing a very simplistic, top down model of power that assumes the lack of sophistication of a conspiracy theory - those who possess power and wealth will seek, by every means possible, to retain and extend it, most often successfully. This is an equally unsophisticated reading of their work but nonetheless a certain strategic tenacity is stressed.

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Critics of the McChesney, Schiller, and Herman and Chomsky camp foreground complexity, contestation and ambivalence in terms of explaining the cultural industries. Rather than assuming a straightforward and direct relationship between wealth and power, other factors are considered such as the professional ideology of journalism that establishes the codes and conventions of news-making and allows for contradiction within industrial commercial cultural production. The roles and working conditions of cultural workers are taken into account, as are the processes of consumption beyond a simple product exchange relationship.

A distinct lack of emphasis on investigating the audience or the consumer has been signalled as a lack of concern with, or disbelief in, the agency of the individual. A closer reading of political economy refutes this critique. Free market economics argues that the best way of ensuring adequate distribution and production of commodities is through the market. The more people want, the more they will buy and thus the logic of the market will prevail; the necessary and the strong will survive, the unnecessary will die. This sort of consumer sovereignty approach is present in political economy but the critical political economist is more likely to stress the more sophisticated processes of tracking audience choice and interpretation of taste and trends within markets and how this data then impacts upon the media product.

The work by du Gay et al., (1997) on the development of the Sony Walkman as a cultural product reveals that through the monitoring of consumption and market research, the design of the Walkman was modified from a stereo with two headsets to one with a single headset. This illustrates how production and consumption are indelibly connected. The technology was not simply produced as a finished artefact which then had an impact on consumption – consumer activities were crucial to the introduction, modification and subsequent redevelopment and marketing of the product.

In a critical political economy, audience responses to texts are related to their overall location in the economic system. This approach stresses that nobody has access to a complete range of cultural goods without restriction. Political economy tries to explain these constraints by recourse to material, social and cultural barriers. For example, communications and facilities rarely come for free, their access is dependent upon a person's spending power and disposable income is significantly different between different groups in society. For political economists the shift in the provision and distribution of cultural goods from being public services to private commodities signals a substantial change in the opportunity for different groups in the population to have access to them. As



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long as access is associated with cost then those who can gain access will be those with the financial capability – income will determine ones ability to function fully in the public sphere.

Cultural differences are also relevant to readings of media texts. The meanings of mediated imagery are tied to a community and its shared experiences and to the actual ability of individuals to actively interpret it. This ability may depend on many things not least educational and cultural capital, national, local and personal socio-economic realities. Work by Fenton et al. (1998) illustrates that social class and educational achievement are critical determinants of audience responses to news texts. In this analysis the reader can effect the reading process, can resist the 'preferred reading' (i.e. that which appears dominant in the text) up to a point and to that end is an active agent. Yet agency is limited by structure. The danger of a political economic approach is that it paints a picture of a culture industry in which monolithic corporations rule supreme, manipulating consumers and infiltrating our consciousness to the extent that they could almost be considered totalitarian in their aims, reach and impact. The corporate machine dominates all discourse. Any competing discourses that challenge the status quo are either appropriated by the corporate machine for commodification or squeezed out of existence. Escape from the prison-house of the ideology of production becomes nigh impossible.

A critical political economy approach to the media has shifted away from the assumption of such a mechanistic economic determinism but continues to stress that power can be challenged and lessened only by political means. They argue that theories which ignore the structure and locus of representational and definitional power and emphasize instead the individual's message transformational capability, present little threat to the maintenance of the established order. Critical political economists are happy to accept that 'the text is different as produced and as read' (Mosco, 1996: 260) but they also maintain that the producers are, on the whole, motivated by profit and audience share and will do whatever they can to increase their capital. So, despite protestations to the contrary, critical political economy does attempt to take account of audience activity but it does so within a broader context of social and economic structures.

Work such as this challenges the idea that cultural and economic and are separate discrete spheres and indeed that the cultural and economic what? boundaries are antagonistic. Instead it prefers to stress the blurring or fusing of these boundaries – the mutual constitution of economy and culture. Research in this vein is concerned with the cultural dynamics of capitalism and markets as well as questions of representation, identity and meaning.

## Cultural studies

Cultural studies is cross-disciplinary and embraces social theory, cultural analysis and critique in an academic project that draws on the humanities, sociology, social policy, social psychology, politics, anthropology, women's studies and social geography among others. At its core is a concern with a critique of the configuration of culture and society with its sight fixed firmly on social transformation.

British cultural studies situated culture within a theory of social production and reproduction, specifying the ways that cultural forms served either to further social domination or to enable people to resist and struggle against domination. It analyzed society as a hierarchical and antagonistic set of social relations characterized by the oppression of subordinate class, gender, race, ethnic, and national strata. Employing Gramsci's model of hegemony and counterhegemony, it sought to analyze 'hegemonic', or ruling, social and cultural forces of domination and to seek 'counterhegemonic' forces of resistance and struggle. (Kellner, 1989: 28)

The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, now disbanded, was *not* – as many have criticized cultural studies in general as being – ahistorical, particularist, or idealist. Rather its work was more often materialist, analyzing socio-historical conditions and structures of domination and resistance. Kellner (1989) notes that its work could be defined by its attempt to critique the crucial political problems of their age. The early focus on class and ideology derived from their acute sense of the oppressive and systemic effects of class in British society and the struggles of the 1960s against class inequality and oppression. Studies of subcultures in Britain sought out new counter cultures and examples of people acting as agents of social change during a time when it appeared that sectors of the working class were being integrated into the existing system and conservative ideologies. The period of Thatcher's government starting in 1979 and stretching to 1994 raised new issues of conservative populism. The focus on feminism was influenced by the feminist movement, while the turn towards race was motivated by the anti-racist struggles of the day.

In other words, the focus of British cultural studies at any given moment has been determined by the struggles in the contemporary polity. Their studies of ideology, domination and resistance, and the politics of culture, directed cultural studies towards analyzing cultural artifacts, practices, and institutions within existing networks of power and of showing how culture both provided tools and forces of domination and resources for resistance and struggle. This

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was an important political direction that shifted emphasis from the effects of media texts to audience uses of cultural artifacts. This led to a direct focus on audiences and reception, areas that had been neglected in most previous text-based approaches to media.

Feminist researchers in particular reacted against the simplistic conception of the process of mass communication as one of linear transmission from sender to receiver to claim that female audiences play a productive role in constructing textual meanings and pleasures. Women do not simply take in or reject media messages, but use and interpret them according to their own social, cultural and individual circumstances – the audience is involved in making sense of the images they see – the message does not have the total monopoly on meaning. Audiences are seen as actively constructing meaning so that texts which appear on the face of it to be reactionary or patriarchal can be subverted. In the case of Ang (1985) the subversion comes through the pleasures that are gained from it. The world of fantasy is the 'place of excess where the unimaginable can be imagined' (Ang, 1996: 106).

This stimulated further examinations of the role of the active audience in relation to (among others) television programmes (Ang, 1985; Corner et al., 1990), romantic fiction (Radway, 1984) and comics (Barker, 1993). The audience was no longer conceptualized as a collection of passive spectators but as a group of individuals who can see the hidden text of a cultural product for what it is and is not. The corollary of this was that as individuals have the capacity to undermine the intended meaning of texts, they can therefore subvert the relations of power within which they are located (Fenton et al., 1998).

Active audience theorists in media studies have been criticized on several counts, often by political economists, of relativism gone mad – as an interpretative free-for-all in which the audience possesses an unlimited potential to read any meaning at will from a given text. Morley (from within the tradition of cultural studies) has criticised the neglect in most active audience research of 'the economic, political and ideological forces acting on the construction of texts' (1993: 15). By drawing attention away from the media and texts generally as instruments of power, they have been accused of a lack of appreciation of wider political factors and hence of political quietism (Corner, 1991) and ideological desertion. Ang and Hermes, (again a cultural studies theorist) (1991) object to the growth of active audience studies on broadly similar grounds. For them, the problem is that writers who applaud and revel in the ability of audiences to subvert texts, and hence to expropriate power, fail to give due recognition to the immense marginality of that power within a wider context. Therefore, the

celebration of the active audience and of its subversive powers inflates the significance of the moment of audience reception.

Despite the misgivings noted above and now recognized by many within cultural studies, the achievements of cultural studies are plenty. They have argued that ordinary, everyday culture needs to be taken seriously and in doing so it has forced us to refine our notion of the problematic term 'culture'. In this process it has challenged essentialist assumptions of culture as a bounded, fixed thing and encouraged a consideration of culture as a complex space where many different influences combine and conflict (Hesmondhalgh, 2002: 39). Through its focus on the concept of culture and how notions of culture are represented in media texts it has emphasized the exclusion and marginalisation of the less powerful in society. It has also forced cultural theorists to acknowledge their role as researcher and the politics of speaking from a particular subject position.

By bringing to the fore issues of subjectivity, identity, discourse and pleasure in relation to culture, it has obliged us to take account of the nature of mediated discourse and recognize the exclusion of some voices to the preference of others. It has made us appreciate the politics of pleasure in the text and how meanings can be delimited and circulate in society.

### **Holistic approaches to the media**

Recently, there have been studies that accept the benefits of each approach and seek to embrace both in an attempt to account for the social totality of production, content and reception of the media. As a result of a growing awareness of the framing power of texts and an understanding that the text must be viewed in relation to hegemonic culture, more circumscribed accounts of audience activity have emerged that seek a re-acknowledgement of the role of texts and production in a political economic context. These studies suggest that differently located audiences may derive particular interpretations of texts, but that the text itself is rarely subverted. In other words, the essential power of authors to frame audience reception is accepted; audiences do engage in interpretation but that interpretation is subject to the denotative structure of the text. In this manner, ideology remains a crucial reference point. Examples of research which reveal this orientation include Kitzinger's (1993) research on AIDS in the media, Corner et al.'s (1990) study of the representation of the nuclear energy industry and Fenton et al.'s (1998) study of the representation of social science in the media. In these analyses the reader can effect the reading process, can

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resist the 'preferred reading' (i.e. that which appears dominant in the text) up to a point and to that end is an active agent. Yet agency is limited by structure. As Tudor (1995: 104) says, 'the remarkable capacity of human beings to construct diverse meanings and take a variety of pleasures from texts is matched only by the equally remarkable degree to which those meanings and pleasures are common to large numbers of people'.

While we now have a huge amount of research about the audience reception of a host of different types of text, it is difficult to gain an impression of its overall impact and significance. What is really crucial, as Schiller (1989) and Ang and Hermes (1991) suggest, is the overall impact of cultural products. We may find that the conservative underpinnings of a number of episodes of a particular soap opera shown to focus groups is not specifically imbibed by them, but it is the overall interpretative impact of a host of different media and cultural products that is crucial, not any one isolated media or text. Similarly, the themes and issues that are absent in the messages inscribed in texts are as important and potentially more significant than what is actually present. Therefore, inviting audience members to reflect on television programmes or newspaper articles and then deciding whether the inherent texts are polysemic or whether audiences decode in terms of the preferred reading are limited research strategies since the silences in the texts are likely to be marginalized by the researcher's and the audience's emphasis on the text as such and on the use of it by the latter (Fenton et al., 1998).

**Box 1.1 The best of both worlds: using an holistic approach**

An approach that aimed to take account of both political economic and cultural studies concerns was adopted in *Mediating Social Science* (Fenton et al., 1998). In an attempt to make sense of the nature of communication and social agency, the research made strenuous efforts to adopt a holistic approach to the study of the media. In order not to prioritize one particular phase of communication (and by implication the power of one type of agency), a number of potential definers of meaning including social scientists as sources, journalists, funding bodies, public relations departments and the general public as audience were examined. This research included: analysis of the policy environment

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of higher education and the need for social scientists to be seen to be proactive in gaining media coverage; analysis of the journalist–social scientist’s relationship including the professional dynamics of the newsroom; analysis of the news texts themselves; and analysis of audience’s responses to the news items. Key to the latter was the question of how much freedom and autonomy audiences have to undermine the intended meaning of texts and subvert the relations of power within which they are located. This research suggests that the capacity to establish voices (both by news sources and audiences) in opposition to the status quo is restricted and contingent on many factors. Traditional mass media are unlikely to provide a means by which oppositional voices can be relayed to audiences and enhance critical, rational understanding. The researchers analysed responses to newspaper, television and radio news reports of social scientific research to reveal a marked consistency between intended meaning at the point of production and audience understanding and interpretation of the text. This is not to say that audience members passively deferred to the text – on the contrary, they found substantial evidence of independent thought and scepticism. However, the ‘distinctiveness of decoding’ occurred when evaluating the text rather than at the point of interpretation. Resistance to the message did not lead to a renegotiation of it. It was interrogated but not expanded. Two reasons are given for this interpretative closure. The first relates to the genre of the text being analysed. Hard news reporting is governed by a range of mechanistic, narrative conventions that are intended to generate a denotative transparency to inhibit potential readings. For example, it is a genre where prominence and frequency of appearance are reliable indications of significance and signification. Most news-consumers are conversant with the rules of this presentational game and construct their readings according to them. As such, news is a peculiarly ‘closed’ form of actuality coverage whose polysemic potential is circumscribed. There is none of the *interpretative* room to manoeuvre that is such an evident and essential facet of other forms of fictional and factual genres. The second reason for this interpretative closure relates to the nature of the subject matter being reported. For example, one of the news reports under study is about a remote and esoteric issue (false memory), which, although its broader implications resonate with the audience, remains beyond their direct personal and professional experiences. This, it is argued, is a situation where we find the most acceptance of media definitions and the power of the audience is at its most limited. It is also the point at which the social structural factors of educational and cultural capital carry the most interpretative significance (Fenton et al., 1998).

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Holistic approaches to media research establish that interrogating the role of the media in society does not start or stop with the interpretation of it by audiences or the analysis of it as a text. Although audiences are active, their activity is still subject to a number of structural constraints. The media messages matter because they make some interpretations more likely than others. The cultural capital that audiences bring to media texts are not uniform - different people from different social backgrounds will have different social and interpretative tools at their command. By ordering the distribution of cultural tools as well as cultural products, social structure serves as a constraint on the process of making meaning. Cultural consumption is a social act; it is always affected by the social context and the social relations in which it occurs. In other words, audiences may be active producers of meaning but the process takes place in conditions and from commodities that are not of our making. Once the role of production passes to the consumer, as in much alternative media production, the nature of the beast changes but it is still circumscribed in the social structures from which it emerged. It is not suffice merely to celebrate agency/resistance or to detail the structures of power. We must always attend to the dialectical relationship between agency and structure, cultural production and consumption.

The struggle over meaning takes place between the process of production and the act of reception - both of which are determined by their place in a wider social, political, economic and cultural context. Choices made by the audience must be looked at within the social context of their daily life and the content itself must be interpreted according to the social and political circumstances of its production.

**Box 1.2 Understanding *big brother***

A good example of the inter-play between structure and agency, as well as being a modern multimedia phenomenon, is the television program *Big Brother*. Devised by Jon De Mol in the Netherlands and launched in 1999, *Big Brother* has become one of the most successful franchises in television history (Hill and Palmer, 2002). *Big Brother* is a combination of various genres, in particular documentary, game show and soap opera, designed to maximize audiences. It is a live game show where contestants, previously unknown to each other, are

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put in a house for usually nine weeks under constant televisual surveillance and each week nominate a member of the household for eviction. The nominees for eviction are voted on by the viewing public. The winner is the final remaining housemate who receives a cash prize. The format has been imported into several countries and adapted to suit their own national characteristics.

The game function was enhanced by live feeds and continual access via digital television. In the UK the website's live coverage has itself been re-mediated and broadcast every hour on the 'Global Media Interface' giant screen in London's Leicester Square. In Germany there is a *Big Brother* magazine. The multimedia relay often in real time made it a major talking point. In the UK the press (both tabloid and broadsheet) ran front page headline stories on the various characters involved. The program elicited an enormous amount of comment, discussion and evaluation by almost everyone: in the press, on public transport, on social occasions and in households. Extracting one form of media display for critical attention could not capture the extent of the inter-textual experience that *Big Brother* had become. Scannell (2002: 277) explains that this talk was not accidental

but a structural feature of the show's relational totality of involvements ... to consider what it was that elicited such a 'discursive ferment' is to get to the heart of the program's core-structure as an event invented for television. The program invited, indeed demanded, that not only should it be watched on a daily basis but that it should be talked about ... The more you watched the program the more you knew about all the inmates, their personal traits and the way they interacted with each other. Just as in soap opera the more you watched the more expert you became in evaluating character and behaviour as time went by.

This reveals that the text of *Big Brother* is crucial in assessing audiences' relations to it, both in terms of genre and in terms of narrative structure. As Scannell (2002: 273) notes: 'a range of different time spans and horizons were cleverly utilized by the designers of *Big Brother* to build momentum, to create involvement'. Scheduling to fit the context of our own daily lives was also crucial: 'If the pivotal time in the week is Friday evening, as that which is most looked forward to, then using that night as the weekly program-climax meshed perfectly with the time structures of daily life "out there" in the real world' (Scannell, 2002: 273).

*Big Brother* offered the possibility of participation through voting and interactive websites. It had an ever expanding frame of reference prompted by its



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(Continued)

popularity, descriptions of the live exits (when voted-off participants left the house to be welcomed by thousands of cheering and booing fans), the anticipation of audience behaviour (predicting voting strategies) and the developments in the house. This was further augmented by constant references on news programs, chat shows, breakfast television, in the press and on the internet. It offered the possibility of engaging in gossip networks of an extensive nature – allowing the moral evaluations of the character and actions of others. As Hill notes (2002), one of the most compelling reasons for watching *Big Brother* was that everyone else was watching it and talking about it.

*Big Brother* has also been described as symptomatic of a particular social period that introduces what Corner (2002) has called a 'postdocumentary culture': A period in which audience expectations, social affiliation and modes of cognition and affect combine with the objective factors of a multi-channel and intensively commercialised television industry. The funding of documentary is threatened by the commodity status of all programmes in a television marketplace that is radically changed in terms of production and consumption. This cultural turn has been argued to be part of an evolution to a more voyeuristic, narcissistic and carnivalesque society (Mathijs, 2002) demanding that any future documentary project in television will need to reconfigure itself strategically within the new economic and cultural contexts.

The economic context of *Big Brother* was played out in a global media marketplace. Selling a format that can be locally produced is hugely economically successful – it reduces the costs of production and the risks associated with new programming. *Big Brother's* global performance points to a strong and often remarkable market share. During the first series in the Netherlands, up to six million viewers tuned in to watch an intimate moment between two contestants. In Germany the first series was so successful that a second was commissioned immediately followed by a third. Other countries followed: Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, Sweden, UK, America, Australia, Argentina. All, apart from America and Sweden, achieved a huge increase in market share for their respective television companies. In the UK, Channel 4 had the best Friday night ratings in its history. For the first series 677% of the population watched *Big Brother* at least once. More than seven million viewers telephoned Channel 4's hotline to vote for the winner; the website received three million page impressions each day, which made it Europe's top website during the summer of 2000 (Hill, 2002). Put simply, the *Big Brother* format was eminently marketable, cheap and came with the promise of delivering audiences.

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What such an example reveals is that *Big Brother* cannot be understood if we insist on analysing it as a programme on its own. Rather it must be seen as a stage of development in the history of documentary and entertainment; as a televisual event and a website, news source, chat show fodder etc.; as a global product for a mediated world where the driver is profit and market share. We could not hope to understand its place in our world by focusing on either the viewer's enjoyment or the damaging influence of a particular ideology chosen apparently by the producer to be relayed through the text. Both pleasure and ideology are constantly at work when we consume culture and the dilemma of how to understand the tension between them is at the centre of progressive cultural theory. As Corner (2002: 268) says in relation to *Big Brother*:

In assessing it, we should neither simplify nor forget the relationship between its representational system and its commodity functions. By 'performing the real' with such strategic zeal, framing its participants both as game players and as television 'actors', it has helped mark a shift in the nature of television as a medium for documentation. Perhaps it marks a shift, too, in the nature of that broader sphere, a sphere where vectors both of structure and agency combine to produce experience, that John Hartley (1996) has suggestively dubbed 'popular reality'.

Part of the appeal of *Big Brother* is in the tension between engaging with the real (this is what people really do when you watch them 24 hours a day) and the televisual (a mediated unreality); the ordinary and the extraordinary. Not content with creating celebrities the format was exploited further with the extension of the brand to *Celebrity Big Brother*, where all the contestants are minor celebrities. In January 2007 *Celebrity Big Brother* created a public relations storm by inviting into the house a former *Big Brother* contestant turned celebrity Jade Goody, a young, white, working class woman. There ensued a clash between Goody and a Bollywood actor Shilpa Shetty that resulted in the show being criticised as racist. The broadcasting regulator, Ofcom received 46,700 complaints, the most it has ever received with the majority being sent by email. The event created an international furore that was debated in all the major national news outlets and even discussed in the House of Commons during Prime Minister's Question Time. In the public debacle that followed Carphone warehouse, one of the programmes major sponsors, withdrew its £3m sponsorship. To understand the nature, scale and impact of this media event requires an understanding of the race, class and gender politics of the time; the global multi

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media reach of the product; the changing nature of national identity; the commercial imperatives that underpin all changing nature of national identity; the commercial imperatives that underpin all production as well as the role of new technology and the role of the interactive audience. The Jade Goody/Shilpa Sheetty racism row brought into sharp relief the fact that cultural production and cultural consumption are determined by and intricately embedded within social, economic and political contexts.

### **Conclusion**

To talk of one dominant ideology related directly to economic power implies an improbably coherent, controlling, argument-free ruling class that forces the rest of us to go along with its interests. Mass media texts can, however, still be understood in ideological terms, as forms of communication that privilege certain sets of ideas and neglect others. Those who argue that media texts include contradictory messages that at once present the dominant ideology but also undermine it, point to the challenge of newer politics based on gender, ethnicity and sexuality that reveal a society of difference both in terms of identity and interpretation. Cultural studies teach us that difference is ever present albeit incorporated into mainstream culture in a way that is unchallenging rather than radical. It also teaches us that power is not uniform nor is it uniformly applied and accepted. But while inequality and difference is ever more apparent the concept of ideology still has a central role to play in suggesting connections between media and power. The approach of critical political economists insists that we retain a critical edge in our analytical prevarications and provides us with the means to be politically discriminate.

The struggle over meaning takes place between the process of production and the act of reception - both of which are determined by their place in a wider social, political, economic and cultural context and both of which are subject to constraints. Choices made by the audience must be looked at within the social context of their daily life and the content itself must be interpreted according to the social and political circumstances of its production. To focus largely or exclusively on the structure and content of media messages and attempt to read off the impact of these messages cannot possibly interrogate the consequences

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of mediated culture (Thompson, 1990). So, rather than just looking at how the mass media may exert an ideological or hegemonic effect on the behaviour and attitudes of individuals, it is crucial to consider the functioning of the mass media within the larger sociological perspective of culture, social structure and social groups. It would be foolish to ignore that we still live in deeply unequal capitalist societies, driven by profit and competition operating on a global scale. It is also undeniable that we live in a media dominated world with many different ideas and identities in circulation at any one time. We need to understand the former to appreciate the latter. It is vital to appreciate the relation between individual autonomy, freedom and rational action on the one hand and the social construction of identity and behaviour on the other. There may be a struggle between competing discourses but it is far from being a free-for-all. To understand the role of the mass media in society we need to consider it in its social entirety – however difficult that may seem.

### Summary

- Political economy and cultural studies approaches to the media have historically been seen as divergent and antagonistic in the ways in which power and culture is theorized and the appropriate means of researching media, communication and culture.
- Critical political economy seeks to reveal how forms of financing and organizing cultural production has consequences for public discourses and representations and the public's access to them within a broad context of social and economic structures. It begins from the standpoint that we live in deeply unequal capitalist societies, driven by profit and competition operating on a global scale. It tries to show how this impacts upon the constitution of the public imagination.
- Cultural studies puts ordinary, everyday life at the centre of research and foregrounds issues of subjectivity, identity, discourse and pleasure in relation to culture. While acknowledging the broader structural concerns of political economists, cultural studies also points out the many different ideas and identities in circulation at any one time that offer the potential for social and political agency.
- Many studies have recognized that keeping political economy and cultural studies in distinct camps fails to take account of the complexity of communication and culture. By attempting to combine the socio-economic and political concerns of political economy (the macro-context), with the agency and subjectivity of cultural studies (the micro-context), researchers are beginning to address issues of media, culture and society in their social entirety.

## BRIDGING THE MYTHICAL DIVIDE

**GOING FURTHER****On the Frankfurt School:**

Adorno, T. and Horkheimer, M. (1973) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso. (Chapter on 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception'.)

Benjamin, W. (1973) 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, London: Fontana.

**On political economic approaches to media and communications:**

Golding, P. and Murdock, G., (1991) 'Culture, Communications and Political Economy' in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds) *Mass Media and Society*, London: Edward Arnold.

Mosco, V. (1995) *The Political Economy of Communication*. London: Sage.

Schiller, H. (1989) *Culture Inc*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**On cultural studies approaches to media and communications:**

Hall, S. (1980) 'Cultural Studies: two paradigms' in P. Scannell (ed.) *Media, Culture and Society*. Academic Press: London.

McGuigan, J. (1992) 'Populism and Ordinary Culture' in *Cultural Populism*. Routledge: London. pp. 13-44.

Williams, R. (1965) 'The Analysis of Culture' in *The Long Revolution*. Penguin: Harmondsworth. pp. 57-70.

**On the conflict between political economy and cultural studies:**

Ferguson, M. and Golding, P. (eds) (1997) *Cultural Studies in Question*. London: Sage.

Garnham, N. (1995) 'Political economy and cultural studies: Reconciliation or divorce?', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 12: 62-71.

Grossberg, L. (1995) cultural studies vs . political economy: Is anyone else bored with this debate?, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 12: 72-81).

**Holistic approaches to the study of media and communications:**

Du Gay P., Hall, S., Janes, L., MacKay, H. and Negus, K. (1997) 'The Production of the Sony Walkman' in *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. Milton Keynes: The Open University Press.

Fenton, N., Bryman, A. and Deacon, D. with Birmingham, P. (1998) *Mediating Social Science*. London: Sage.

**STUDENT ACTIVITIES 1:1**

- 1 Go back to the work of the Frankfurt School and focus on the critique of the culture industry proposed in the writings of Adorno and Horkheimer.

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Consider the questions:

- What aspects of Adorno and Horkheimer's argument in 'Enlightenment as Mass Deception' could be characterized a political economic analysis and why?
  - Are Adorno and Horkheimer's arguments useful when analyzing cultural production today?
2. In political economy having power in or control over the media implies the capacity to determine or influence the contents of media products and meanings carried by them.

Consider the questions:

- What are the key concepts from the tradition of 'critical political economy' of the mass media? How have these been used as a means of understanding cultural production and media organizations?
  - Why do political economists continue to stress questions of ownership? Is there a link between the ownership of the mass media and the dissemination of messages?
  - What is meant by commodification? How does the process of commodification impact upon cultural producers and their audiences? Is it possible to resist commodification?
3. In cultural studies, being a consumer infers social agency, having the capacity to resist dominant social relations and ultimately change them.

Consider the questions:

- What is the relationship of culture to the economy in these pieces?
  - How is the audience conceived?
  - Where does power reside?
4. The conflict between political economy and cultural studies is longstanding and well documented but may finally be wearing thin.

Consider the questions:

- What are the main points of contention between the two approaches?
  - Have there ever been attempts to overcome this theoretical divide?
  - What are the potential difficulties in combining the best of both theories?
5. This chapter argues that understanding mediation and communication requires a radically contextualized and dialogic inter-disciplinary approach.

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*Task:* Consider the iPod as a cultural product. Try to do a political economic analysis of the iPod. Think about who produces it, how it is produced, who buys it, what legislation is relevant to it, the technological infrastructure it is part of. Now try to do a cultural studies analysis. Think about who uses it and for what purposes, the role it plays in an individual's sense of self and identity formation. Now think about the complex of power relations involved in producing, buying and using something like an iPod. Where does power reside?

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