

## Media and Ideology

Most media scholars believe that media texts articulate coherent, if shifting, ways of seeing the world. These texts help to define our world and provide models for appropriate behavior and attitudes. How, for example, do media products depict the “appropriate” roles of men and women, parents and children, or bosses and workers? What defines “success,” and how is it achieved? What qualifies as “criminal activity,” and what are the sources of crime and social disorder? What are the underlying messages in media content, and whose interests do these messages serve? These are, fundamentally, questions about media and ideology.

Most ideological analyses of mass media products focus on the content of the messages—the stories they tell about the past and the present—rather than the “effects” of such stories. In this chapter, then, we focus primarily on media messages. Part Four of this book will turn to the relationship between media messages and their audiences.

### What Is Ideology?

*Ideology* is a decidedly complicated term with different implications depending on the context in which it is used. In everyday language, it can be an insult to charge someone with being “ideological,” since this label suggests rigidity in the face of overwhelming evidence contradicting one’s beliefs. When Marxists speak of “ideology,” they often mean belief systems that help justify the actions of those in power by distorting and misrepresenting reality. When we talk about ideology, then, we need to be careful to specify what we mean by the term.

When scholars examine media products to uncover their “ideology,” they are interested in the underlying images of society they provide. In this context, an ideology is basically a system of meaning that helps define and explain the world and that makes value judgments about that

world. Ideology is related to concepts such as *worldview*, *belief system*, and *values*, but it is broader than those terms. It refers not only to the beliefs held about the world but also to the basic ways in which the world is defined. Ideology, then, is not just about politics; it has a broader and more fundamental connotation.

When we examine the ideology of media, we are not so much interested in the specific activities depicted in a single newspaper, movie, or hit song as in the broader system of meaning of which these depictions are a part. For ideological analysis, the key is the fit between the images and words in a specific media text and ways of thinking about, even defining, social and cultural issues.

As we will explore in the next chapter, media scholars are often interested in assessing how media content compares to the "real world." Scholars are interested in the images of, say, women, or African Americans—and how these images may change over time—because they contribute to the ways we understand the roles of these groups in society. In this case, the question is not whether such media images are "realistic" depictions because analysts of ideology generally perceive the definition of the "real" as, itself, an ideological construction. Which aspects of whose "reality" do we define as the most real? Those that are the most visible? The most common? The most powerful? Instead of assessing the images and making some judgment about levels of realism, ideological analysis asks what these messages tell us about ourselves and our society.

Politicians have long perceived mass media, both news and entertainment forms, as sites for the dissemination of ideology. That is one reason why media are so frequently the subjects of political debate. Indeed, prominent politicians routinely identify mass media as a facilitator, and sometimes a source, of social problems. For example, on the campaign trail in 2000, presidential candidate George W. Bush suggested that "dark dungeons of evil on the Internet" were partly to blame for school violence (Kornblut and Scales, 2000). And after the tragic shootings at Colorado's Columbine High School in 1999, politicians from across the political spectrum focused on violent video games as one of the causes of the violence. Throughout the partisan debate in 1998 over President Clinton's impeachment, Democrats blamed the news media for blowing the scandal out of proportion, and Republicans criticized journalists for vilifying the Independent Counsel. And as the Internet expands, politicians continue to condemn the availability of sexually explicit material online and argue that unregulated speech and imagery on the Internet pose a threat to children's safety and well-being. In addition, in the wake of the April 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, President Clinton identified extremists on talk radio as purveyors of

hatred, implying that these radio hosts were disseminating a worldview that condoned violence. In 1995, then-Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole focused his attention on the entertainment industry, condemning what he identified as the rampant sex, violence, and general antifamily tone of popular television, movies, and music. And former Secretary of Education William Bennett made a media splash in 1995 with his attack on media giant Time Warner for its distribution of "gangsta" rap.

Virtually all forms of mass media—radio, television, movies, music, and the Internet—are standard targets, attacked by politicians from different political perspectives who have little doubt that the media are ideological, selling certain messages and worldviews. Given that these kinds of media criticism are often well received, there is good reason to believe that large numbers of the public also perceive the media as purveyors of ideology—even if they don't use the term. Media sell both products and ideas, both personalities and worldviews; the notion that mass media products and cultural values are fundamentally intertwined has gained broad public acceptance.

### "Dominant Ideology" Versus Cultural Contradictions

Even though mass media texts can be understood in ideological terms, as forms of communication that privilege certain sets of ideas and neglect or undermine others, unambiguous descriptions of media ideology remain problematic. Research on the ideology of media has included a debate between those who argue that media promote the worldview of the powerful—the "dominant ideology"—and those who argue that mass media texts include more contradictory messages, both expressing the "dominant ideology" and at least partially challenging worldviews.

We prefer to think of media texts as sites where cultural contests over meaning are waged rather than as providers of some univocal articulation of ideology. In other words, different ideological perspectives, representing different interests with unequal power, engage in a kind of struggle within media texts. Some ideas will have the advantage—because, for example, they are perceived as popular or build on familiar media images—and others will be barely visible, lurking around the margins of media for discovery by those who look carefully. For those engaged in the promotion of particular ideas, including such diverse groups as politicians, corporate actors, citizen activists, and religious groups, media are among the primary contemporary battlegrounds.

Media, in fact, are at the center of what James Davison Hunter (1991) has called the "culture wars" in contemporary American society, in which fundamental issues of morality are being fought. Hunter stresses the

ways in which media—advertising, news, letters to the editor, and opinion commentary—provide the principal forms of public discourse by which cultural warfare is waged. The morality of abortion, homosexuality, or capital punishment is debated, often in very polarized terms, in the mass media, as cultural conservatives and cultural progressives alike use various media technologies to promote their positions.

But the media are not simply conduits for carrying competing messages; they are more than just the battlefield on which cultural warfare takes place. Much of the substance of the contemporary culture wars is about the acceptability of the images that the mass media disseminate. These struggles over morality and values often focus on the implications of our popular media images and the apparent lessons they teach about society. When Eminem's album *The Marshall Mathers LP*, was nominated for Album of the Year in 2001, controversy raged over the rapper's angry and violent lyrics and his depictions of women, gays, and lesbians. Other prominent examples include the contest over the meaning of religion in films such as *Priest*, which depicted a priest struggling with his sexuality; *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which included dream sequences of Jesus having sex; and the short-lived television program *Nothing Sacred*, which showed a Catholic priest sometimes questioning church doctrine as he addressed issues in his urban parish. Other examples include the controversies surrounding the lives of two female television characters—Murphy Brown's decision to become a single mother and Ellen's coming out as a lesbian; the broadcast by PBS of the documentary *Tongues Untied*, which explored the experience of black gay men; and the battles over the use of "obscene" language in rap and heavy metal music. These media battles often become quite fierce, with some voices calling for outright censorship, others defending free speech, and still others worrying about the consequences of cultural struggles that seem to represent a war of absolutes, with no possibility of compromise.

One of the principal reasons why media images often become so controversial is that they are believed to promote ideas that are objectionable. In short, few critics are concerned about media texts that promote perspectives they support. Ideological analysis, then, often goes hand in hand with political advocacy, as critics use their detection of distorted messages to make their own ideological points. As a result, exploring the ideologies of mass media can be very tricky.

The most sophisticated ideological analysis examines the stories the media tell as well as the potential contradictions within media texts, that is, the places where alternative perspectives might reside or where ideological conflict is built into the text. Ideological analysis, therefore, is not simply reduced to political criticism, whereby the critic loudly

denounces the "bad" ideas in the media. Nor, in our view, is analysis particularly useful if it focuses on the ideology of one specific media text without making links to broader sets of media images. It may be interesting to ruminate over the underlying ideology of a popular movie such as *Forrest Gump*. (Is it a nostalgic valorization of white men in the days before multiculturalism, or a populist story of the feats of an underdog?) However, this inquiry will move from party conversation to serious analysis only if we think more carefully about the patterns of images in media texts, rather than analyzing one film in isolation. At its best, ideological analysis provides a window onto the broader ideological debates going on in society. It allows us to see what kinds of ideas circulate through media texts, how they are constructed, how they change over time, and when they are being challenged.

### Ideology as Normalization

What are the stakes in these battles over the ideology of media? From one standpoint, media texts can be seen as key sites where basic social norms are articulated. The media give us pictures of social interaction and social institutions that, by their sheer repetition on a daily basis, can play important roles in shaping broad social definitions. In essence, the accumulation of media images suggests what is "normal" and what is "deviant." This articulation is accomplished, in large part, by the fact that popular media, particularly television and mass advertising, have a tendency to display a remarkably narrow range of behaviors and lifestyles, marginalizing or neglecting people who are "different" from the mass-mediated norm. When such difference is highlighted by, for example, television talk shows that routinely include people who are otherwise invisible in the mass media—cross-dressers, squatters, or strippers—the media can become part of a spectacle of the bizarre.

Despite the likelihood of their having very different political stances, those who are concerned about media depictions of premarital sex have the same underlying concern as those who criticize the dominating images of the upper-middle-class family. In both cases, the fear is that media images *normalize* specific social relations, making certain ways of behaving seem unexceptional. If media texts can normalize behaviors, they can also set limits on the range of acceptable ideas. The ideological work lies in the *patterns* within media texts. Ideas and attitudes that are routinely included in media become part of the legitimate public debate about issues. Ideas that are excluded from the popular media or appear in the media only to be ridiculed have little legitimacy. They are outside the range of acceptable ideas. The ideological influence of media can be seen in the absences and exclusions just as much as in the content of the messages.

Media professionals generally have little patience with the argument that the media are purveyors of ideology. Instead of seeing media as places where behaviors are normalized and boundaries are created, those in the industry tend to argue that the images they produce and distribute simply reflect the norms and ideas of the public. This is not ideology, but simply a mirror that reflects the basic consensus about how things are. Since, as we saw in Chapter 2, mass media are commercially organized to attract audiences for profit, there is good reason to believe that popularity will be more important to media producers than a commitment to any specific ideology. However, our investigation of the ideology of media does not mean that producers are consciously trying to sell certain ways of thinking and being. Ideology is not only produced by committed ideologues. As we will see, we can find ideology in our everyday lives, in our definition of common sense, and in the construction of a consensus.

### Theoretical Roots of Ideological Analysis

The analysis of ideology can be traced back to the works of Marx and, especially, to twentieth-century European Marxism. The analysis has evolved over time, maintaining some elements of its Marxist origin while developing more complexity and nuance.

#### Early Marxist Origins

For early Marxists, the discussion of ideology was connected to the concept of "false consciousness." Ideology was seen as a powerful mechanism of social control whereby members of the ruling class imposed their worldview, which represented their interests, on members of subordinate classes. In such a system, the subordinate classes who accepted the basic ideology of the ruling class were said to have false consciousness because their worldview served the interests of others. For Marx and early Marxists, social revolution depended on the working class breaking free of the ideas of the ruling class—moving beyond their false consciousness—and developing a "revolutionary" consciousness that represented their material interests as workers. This new way of thinking would then stand in opposition to the ruling ideology, which promoted the economic interests of the capitalist class.

In this context, ideology was understood to involve having ideas that were "false" because they did not match one's objective class interests. One of the ways capitalists ruled industrial society was by imposing on the working class a worldview that served the interests of capitalists yet pretended to describe the experiences of all humankind. Ideology, then,

was about mystification, the masking of interests, and the conflation of the particular and the universal. Moreover, ideology could be understood in straightforward economic-class terms. Capitalists had a class interest in the accumulation of capital through the exploitation of labor. Their ideology, which celebrated individualism and the free market, was a result of their economic interests. Workers had a class interest in fundamentally changing the conditions of their work and restructuring the social relations of production; this could be accomplished by a social revolution. Any system of ideas that did not recognize these economic realities, according to an early school of Marxism, was the result of the ideological power of capitalists. Ideological analysis, from this perspective, meant identifying the ways working people's ideas failed to reflect their class interests; in essence, it was about pointing out how consciousness was "false" and in need of correction.

The critique of ideology has evolved a great deal from its connections to the concept of false consciousness, but it still maintains some of the basic outlines of the early Marxist model. Ideological analysis is still concerned about questions of power and the ways in which systems of meaning—ideologies—are part of the process of wielding power. And ideological analysis continues to focus on the question of domination and the ways certain groups fight to have their specific interests accepted as the general interests of a society. But the contemporary study of ideology is more theoretically sophisticated, paying attention to the ongoing nature of ideological struggles and to how people negotiate with, and even oppose, the ideologies of the powerful. Ideas are not simply "false," and the connection between ideas and economic interest is not necessarily straightforward. In fact, much of the contemporary study of ideology has moved away from a focus on economic-class relations toward a more dynamic conceptualization of the terrain of culture.

#### Hegemony

The key theoretical concept that animates much of the contemporary study of the ideology of media is *hegemony*. Drawn from the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971), an Italian Marxist who wrote in the 1920s and 1930s, the notion of hegemony connects questions of culture, power, and ideology. In short, Gramsci argued that ruling groups can maintain their power through force, consent, or a combination of the two. Ruling by way of force requires the use of institutions such as the military and the police in an effort to physically coerce—or threaten coercion—so that people will remain obedient. There is no shortage of historical examples of societies in which the use of force and the threat of even

more severe forms of coercion have been the principal strategy of ruling. The military dictatorship is the most obvious example.

Gramsci (1971) noted, however, that power can be wielded at the level of culture or ideology, not just through the use of force. In liberal democratic societies such as the United States, force is not the primary means by which the powerful rule. Certainly there are important examples of the use of force—turn-of-the-century efforts to crush the labor movement, the incarceration of members of the Communist Party in the 1950s, the violence directed at the Black Panther Party in the 1960s. But these examples stand out because the use of physical force is not the routine strategy for maintaining social order. Instead, Gramsci's work suggests that power is wielded in a different arena—that of culture, in the realm of everyday life—where people essentially agree to current social arrangements.

Consent, then, is the key to understanding Gramsci's use of hegemony, which is exercised through a kind of "cultural leadership." Consent is something that is won; ruling groups in a society actively seek to have their worldview accepted by all members of society as the universal way of thinking. Institutions such as schools, religion, and the media help the powerful exercise this cultural leadership since they are the sites where we produce and reproduce ways of thinking about society.

Hegemony, though, is not simply about ideological domination, whereby the ideas of one group are imposed on another. Instead, the process is far subtler. Hegemony operates at the level of *common sense* in the assumptions we make about social life and on the terrain of things that we accept as "natural" or "the way things are." After all, what is common sense except for those things we think are so obvious that we need not critically evaluate them? Common sense is the way we describe things that "everybody knows," or at least should know, because such knowledge represents deeply held cultural beliefs. In fact, when we employ the rhetoric of common sense, it is usually to dismiss alternative approaches that go against our basic assumptions about how things work. Gramsci (1971) reminds us that one of the most effective ways of ruling is through the shaping of commonsense assumptions. What we take for granted exists in a realm that is uncontested, where there is neither a need nor room for questioning assumptions (Gamson et al., 1992).

Hegemony theorists remind us that commonsense assumptions, the taken for granted, are social constructions. They imply a particular understanding of the social world, and such visions have consequences. It is common sense, for example, that "you can't fight city hall" or that women are better nurturers than men or that "moderate" positions are more reasonable than "extreme" positions. When people adopt commonsense

assumptions—as they do with a wide range of ideas—they are also accepting a certain set of beliefs, or ideology, about social relations.

A similar dynamic applies to what we think of as "natural." Nature is something that we define in opposition to culture since nature is perceived to be beyond human control. We generally think that the "natural" is not a social construction; nature is more enduring and stable than the creations of human societies. Thus, if social structures and social relationships are defined as natural, they take on a kind of permanency and legitimacy that elevates them to the realm of the uncontested. Think about the social relationships we call "natural" (or "unnatural"). Is it natural that some people are rich and some are poor, that people will not care about politics, or that people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds will prefer to live with their own groups? If these conditions are simply natural, then there is little reason to be concerned about economic inequality, political apathy, or residential segregation because they are not social problems but the natural order of things.

Let's look at some more controversial claims about the natural. One of the principal underpinnings of racist ideology is the belief that one race is naturally superior to others. Sexism rests on the assumption that men and women, by nature, are suited to different and unequal tasks. And contemporary discussions of sexuality are filled with claims about the "natural" status of heterosexual relationships and the "unnatural" status of gay and lesbian relationships. These examples illustrate how claims about nature work in the service of ideology. If such claims are widely accepted—if they are seen as the outcome of nature instead of culture—then there may be legitimate reason for racial inequality, sexual discrimination, and the demonization of gays and lesbians since these relationships are the result of the natural order of things. What we think of as natural and normal, then, is a central part of the terrain of hegemony.

Hegemony, however, is not something that is permanent; it is neither "done" nor unalterable. Gramsci (1971) understood hegemony as a process that was always in the making. To effectively wield power through consent, ideological work through cultural leadership was an ongoing necessity. The terrain of common sense and the natural must be continually reinforced because people's actual experiences will lead them to question dominant ideological assumptions. People are active agents, and modern society is full of contradictions; therefore, hegemony can never be complete or final. Some people will not accept the basic hegemonic worldview, some people may resist it, and changing historical conditions will make certain aspects of hegemonic ideology untenable. Ultimately, Gramsci saw hegemony as a daily struggle about our

underlying conceptions of the world, a struggle always subject to revision and opposition. Rulers, who try to maintain their power by defining the assumptions on which the society rests, work to bring stability and legitimacy and to incorporate potentially opposing forces into the basic ideological framework. In a striking example, images of rebellion from the 1960s have become incorporated into our democratic story and now are used to sell cars and clothing.

Sociologist Stuart Hall, the leading voice of British cultural studies, has provided a sophisticated analysis of how mass media institutions fit into this conception of hegemony. He argues that mass media are one of the principal sites where the cultural leadership, the work of hegemony, is exercised. Media are involved in what Hall calls "the politics of signification," in which the media produce images of the world that give events particular meanings. Media images do not simply reflect the world, they *re-present* it; instead of reproducing the "reality" of the world "out there," the media engage in practices that define reality. As Hall (1982) puts it, "Representation is a very different notion from that of reflection. It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping; not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of *making things mean*" (p. 64).

Media representations are intertwined with questions of power and ideology because the process of giving meaning to events suggests that, potentially, there are multiple definitions of reality. Media have, as Hall (1982) says, "the power to signify events in a particular way." The question, then, is, "What are the patterns by which events are represented?" This is fundamentally a question about ideology because it suggests that media are places where certain ideas are circulated as the truth, effectively marginalizing or dismissing competing truth claims. Many scholars argue that media generally adopt the dominant assumptions and draw on the commonsensical views of the world that everyone knows. As a result, media representations, while not fully closed, have the tendency to reproduce the basic stories and values that are the underpinnings of this hegemony.

Media are, without doubt, not simple agents of the powerful, and, as we will explore further in Chapter 8, the ideas of the powerful are not simply imposed on readers or viewers. Media are cultural sites where the ideas of the powerful are circulated and where they can be contested. As we move from a theoretical discussion of media, ideology, and hegemony to specific cases that illustrate the ideology of mass media products, we will see the complex ways in which media products are a part of larger ideological debates.

## News Media and the Limits of Debate

For decades, Americans have debated the politics of the news media, with criticisms of the news coming with equal vigor from both sides of the political spectrum. The underlying assumption in this debate is that news media are, in fact, ideological; the selection of issues, stories, and sources is inescapably value laden. While media outlets fend off attacks from the political right that they are too liberal and attacks from the left that they are too conservative, journalists find themselves precisely where they want to be: in the middle. This middle ground serves as a haven for reporters, a place that is perceived as being without ideology. After all, if ideological criticism comes from both sides, then the news must not be ideological at all. Attacks from both sides make the center a defensible place.

Since we generally associate ideology with ideas that are perceived to be extreme, those in the middle are viewed not as ideological but as pragmatic. And since ideology is something to be avoided, the journalistic middle ground becomes safe. There is good reason for journalists to want to occupy this territory. It insulates them from criticism and gives the news legitimacy with a wide range of readers and viewers who see themselves as occupying some version of a middle ground.

However, the notion that the news reflects the "consensus" is itself ideological because news does the active work of defining that consensus. Once that consensus is defined, the claim that reporting is a mere reflection of an already existing consensus is blind to the ways such definitions work to solidify it. We might say the same thing about the journalistic center. The news does not so much occupy the middle ground as define what the middle ground is. In the process, news reporting effectively defends the legitimacy of this worldview, which is oriented to the reproduction of current social arrangements. In short, the middle ground is ideological precisely because it is a cultural site where commonsense assumptions are produced, reproduced, and circulated.

## Elites and Insiders

A large body of scholarly literature has explored the ways in which news media produce ideological visions of the nation and the world. One of the principal findings of this research is that news focuses on powerful people and institutions and generally reflects established interests. Whether this makes news "liberal" or "conservative" is another matter; some claim "the establishment" is liberal, while others argue that it is conservative. In either case, our reading of the research literature suggests that news reaffirms the basic social order and the values and assumptions it is based on.