

Media Propaganda and Cultural Domestication: A Critical Analysis of the Media's Role in Shaping Consumer Culture

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Abstract:

Propaganda is one of the most influential modern techniques used to produce, shape, and promote contemporary cultures. It relies on several methods, including selecting information, highlighting certain news items while marginalizing others, concealing facts, and replacing reality with illusion. Many thinkers have warned of the danger that media institutions pose to the cultures of peoples. Among them are the philosophers of critical theory, who expressed concern and dissatisfaction with the contemporary culture promoted by the media. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas assigned the media, in all their forms, substantial responsibility for cultural decline. He argued that propaganda has imposed its logic on Western culture and has sought to direct individuals' underlying desires. It has also altered the cultural trajectories of many societies. A close examination of the selection of television and radio programs reveals a clear objective: directing culture in the service of the liberal agenda that finances these media institutions.

Keywords: mass media; culture; critical theory; consumer culture; liberalism.

Introduction

Propaganda (propagande), or publicity, generally refers to a strategy designed to deceive individuals in order to influence their opinions and direct their desires and behavior in the interests of a particular party. It operates at political, economic, and cultural levels. The media are among the instruments most frequently used for this purpose because of their strong influence, which leaves mass audiences vulnerable to manipulation. Many contemporary thinkers have warned about this phenomenon. Critical theorists are among the most prominent. They focused on criticizing the media and the culture it produces. In their view, propaganda has extended its dominance over Western culture by promoting consumer culture at the expense of high culture, under the direction and support of a new imperialism. This raises several questions: What strategies and mechanisms do the media use to shape mass consciousness? How are particular ideas formed and implanted in public consciousness? Who are the actors that control this process?

1. Science, Technology, and the Dominance of Image Culture

French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry (1871-1945) was prophetic when he wrote: "Just as water and gas are now brought into our homes from far away to satisfy our needs ... the day will come when we will be supplied with visual or auditory images that appear or disappear at a simple movement of the hand."¹ Indeed, the image may now be regarded as the paradigmatic form of

¹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, trans. Muhammad Shia (Beirut: Arab Organization for Translation, 1st ed., 2005), p. 397.

postmodernity. Through images and digital devices, we can see bodies torn apart by war and, with the same press of a button, nearly naked performers on satellite television.

This is, above all, the age of the image. Digitization and satellite television broadcasting have expanded both its reach and its use as a vehicle of discourse. This development has led many thinkers to warn of its risks. Among them is the French thinker Régis Debray, whose book *Life and Death of the Image* traces the history of images from prehistoric cave drawings to the present. Debray shows that when everything becomes visible, things lose their value.

In the digital age, individuals live amid a continuous visual flood that has negatively affected their lives and ways of living. The image has also transformed patterns of communication, in which it now plays a central role. Culture itself faces the risks created by contemporary technology. The French thinker Yves Michaud (b. 1944) emphasized this point. He argued that traditional culture is threatened by technologies that have penetrated every aspect of everyday life. Individuals increasingly seek images alone and pay little attention to meaning. These images create an immediate visual impact and momentary emotional response, discouraging the search for truth and sustained reflection on beauty and genuine art. Michaud writes: "Art is no longer viewed only as a fixed material object, such as a painting or sculpture. It has become an experience, an effect, and a sensation expressed in multiple and changing forms."¹ Art, and culture more broadly, is therefore no longer confined to a painting, poem, or novel. It has become a transient sensory experience designed for immediate consumption through screens of various kinds.

2. The Image as an Instrument of Influence and the Construction of Cultural Consciousness

The image has transformed human life. Together with the modern technologies through which it circulates, it poses a serious threat to human intellectual and imaginative capacities. The replacement of books by tablets and smartphones has contributed to a sharp decline in reading and has profoundly changed how we perceive the world. The image now exercises unrivalled symbolic power because its aesthetic appeal captures and holds attention. Yet its reality differs markedly from its appearance. Images market political, economic, and cultural values, particularly those associated with Western imperialism and its global influence.

The image is no longer merely an iconic system with an aesthetic character. It has become a weapon used by imperialism to extend its influence and transmit its ideology. Its power varies according to its form. Moving images carry discourse more effectively than still images. Television, cinema, online videos, and reels therefore pose a greater risk to audiences than newspapers or magazines. A silent image has an ambiguous meaning and remains open to several interpretations. Once a verbal text or voice-over is added, however, its meaning is narrowed. The French philosopher Roland Barthes (1915-1980) explains that adding a linguistic message to an icon, whether in advertising or media imagery, may function as anchorage or relay. Anchorage enables the text to name or fix the image's possible signifieds and thereby guides identification and interpretation.²

Images have become one of the principal means of controlling mass audiences. Political systems employ them systematically because they reach public consciousness more easily than written texts and possess exceptional persuasive power. Media organizations therefore compete to capture, publish, and use images for ideological purposes. "The ideological use and content of this technology

¹ Yves Michaud, *L'art à l'état gazeux: Essai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique* (2003) (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard/Pluriel, 2017), p. 11.

² Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, trans. Haidar Haj Ismail (Beirut: Arab Organization for Translation, 1st ed., 2009), p. 129.

find their clearest example in the role played by television."¹ The influence of images and the media, however, is not limited to politics and economics. It extends to culture. Image culture has replaced word-based culture, while the traditional cultural system built on reading books, magazines, and newspapers has declined because of the image's seemingly magical appeal. "The new media-cultural material—the image—presents itself in an attractive form ... It also abolishes language and creates a language of its own. This is part of its danger: the power of what is presented lies not in what is said, but in what is shown."² The culture of form has thus come to dominate the culture of content.

The danger that images pose to culture and to local cultures lies in the ideology and ideas they contain. The image is now the most widely consumed cultural material and perhaps the most capable of weakening a society's natural cultural immunity. It is used in what is commonly called cultural invasion. The cultural security of peoples has become vulnerable amid the vast expansion of communication technologies. Images transmitted by satellite and other broadcasting systems have displaced the old colonial order, which relied on weapons, large armies, religious missions, and anthropologists.

The maxim "whoever possesses, dominates and controls" was widespread in the past and continues to apply to contemporary societies, although through new methods. Modern political systems now impose their dominance through what is termed "soft ideology." This consists of daily, indeed moment-by-moment, doses transmitted quietly and without spectacle by the media, multimedia platforms, and the internet, unlike the methods used in the past.³ The media have therefore become among the most important instruments for regulating contemporary societies and standardizing them in accordance with the wishes of those in power.

3. The Media and the Promotion of Consumer Culture

Human progress in science and technology has not generally served culture. Critical analysts have demonstrated this through their readings of radio and television programs, cinematic products, and other artistic works. Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) held the media responsible for cultural decline and deterioration. They argued that culture had become a commodity marketed through media institutions that draw individuals into a state of false consciousness by promoting consumer culture. Through advertising, the media publicize inferior culture at the expense of high culture. "The triumph of advertising in the culture industry arises because consumers feel compelled to buy and use particular products."⁴ The media have consequently become central instruments for influencing mass audiences and directing them toward a culture shaped by the imperial system for economic purposes.

Culture no longer performs the oppositional role it once played in relation to the dominant order, as it did under feudalism and even during the Renaissance. The capitalist system has absorbed it, and economic forces of production now manage it. "An analysis of the mechanisms of this culture shows that everything can be manipulated and directed according to the plans of production teams, which

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television and Journalism*, trans. Darwish al-Halouji (Damascus: Dar Kanaan, 1st ed., 2004), p. 23.

² Abd al-Ilah Belqiziz, *The Problematic Cultural Relationship with the West: Research and Discussions of the Intellectual Symposium Organized by the Iraqi Academy of Sciences* (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1st ed., 1997), p. 288.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, previously cited, p. 24.

⁴ Tom Bottomore, *The Frankfurt School*, trans. Saad Hagrass (Beirut: Dar Oya), p. 94.

turn people's desires into raw material in the hands of advertisers."¹ Their sole concern is profit. Through this fabricated culture, corporate owners and business leaders use the media to market artificial cultural goods.

Following their critical analysis of film and television production, radio and television programs, newspapers, and magazines, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued that "members of the working classes have been drawn into consumer culture and immersed in the superficial and vulgar pleasures offered by popular culture. Their minds have also been shaped by the mass media."² The media exert pressure through publicity and advertising that encourage intellectual passivity. Cinema is among the most powerful techniques used to promote capitalist culture. It can influence viewers and direct their behavior, particularly when critical and analytical awareness is absent. In this context, the American thinker Edward Bernays (1891-1995) maintained that cinema is one of the most powerful means of shaping the subconscious of peoples throughout the world. It invades their ideas and controls their opinions. Film culture has undermined established values and has become a major source of standards and tastes, including clothing, language, and even food.

The first generation of critical theory regarded the media as the principal source of cultural decline. By converting cultural production into a profit-oriented commodity, the media deprived art and culture of their critical force. Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) addressed this problem in *One-Dimensional Man*. He argued that Western culture is one-dimensional because it is produced by the capitalist system to preserve existing conditions in Western societies. Propaganda has become a means of domination and control: "The triumph of propaganda in the culture industry consists in consumers feeling compelled to purchase and use products even though they understand their true nature."³ This observation illustrates propaganda's capacity to colonize the imagination. Culture has consequently become an instrument of market ideology, and its social mission has been weakened.

Contemporary cultural consumption is organized according to the plans of a cultural bourgeoisie that seeks to keep other classes culturally subordinate. It is also fully integrated into the capitalist economy. "Adorno noted that cultural products such as books, paintings, and musical performances were not completely subordinated to the capitalist system for profit in the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century, however, the principle of profit had come to dominate cultural production entirely."⁴ Cultural products were thereby converted into market values. Monopoly capitalism achieved its objective of commodifying cultural life. In this modern system, culture serves to satisfy the desires of mass audiences through cultural goods designed primarily for entertainment.

Cultural production in capitalist systems is organized through conformist strategies and practices. It encourages individuals to accept capitalist values, pragmatic ethics, and prevailing social and family arrangements. It also instills obedience to state institutions and compliance with authorities such as the police. Imperial policy has thus used culture as a weapon to preserve its position as the dominant ideology. Hollywood studios, broadcasting corporations, and publishing houses provide

1 Muhammad Nur al-Din Afaya, *Modernity and Communication in Contemporary Critical Philosophy* (Africa East, 1st ed., 1991), p. 39.

2 Arthur Asa Berger, *Cultural Criticism*, trans. Wafaa Ibrahim (Cairo: Supreme Council of Culture, 1st ed., 2003), p. 83.

3 Alan How, *Critical Theory*, trans. Thaer Deeb (Cairo: National Center for Translation, 1st ed., 2010), p. 116.

4 David Inglis and John Hughson, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Culture*, trans. Lama Nasir (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 1st ed., 2013), p. 74.

clear examples. "These vast monopolistic companies employed subtle exploitative and directive methods that led people to accept, and even endorse, a social system that frustrated and suppressed their fundamental interests...."¹ Cultural production consequently acquired a specific task: granting ideological legitimacy to liberal societies and helping them absorb opposition. The German political thinker Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) expressed "concern about the shallowness of American politics because she feared its convergence with the most vulgar commercial spirit."² She called for the protection of public life from the greed and power of monopolistic markets.

4. Mechanisms of Cultural Domestication

The media are among the most active and influential institutions in the cultural sphere because of their considerable persuasive power. They shape and redirect the cultural trajectories of societies. A close examination of how television topics are selected and how programs are presented in studios reveals a clear objective: the production of public opinion in accordance with the interests of the prevailing system. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1929-2026) argued that the press serves the state by enabling those who control government institutions to advance their political, economic, and cultural projects. "The West has entrusted its cultural project to the new audiovisual empires, turning the media institution into the foremost instrument of cultural domination."³

In its attempt to frame public perception, what Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) describes as media imperialism, especially the press, employs a range of modern techniques. Media institutions select topics carefully and reconstruct them in forms that may differ completely from reality. They rename things, circulate false claims through celebrities, conceal what they wish to hide, and highlight what they want audiences to see. Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) writes: "The mass media have neutralized reality. They first reproduced it by generating an image, then masked its absence, and finally substituted a false image of reality, thereby destroying meaning and every relation to the real."⁴ Media institutions also provide audiences with incomplete information and appeal to emotion rather than reason. Bourdieu compared them to special spectacles through which only certain things can be seen. Critical analysis of television programs—their effects, objectives, assumptions, and methods of preparation—leads to a clear conclusion: television and radio channels, magazines, and newspapers serve particular interests and a specific social class seeking to preserve existing conditions.

In many countries, media institutions are subject to multiple monitoring mechanisms and regulatory authorities intended to prevent any possible dissent. Television journalism, in particular, creates the impression that it is founded on freedom of expression and provides opportunities for dialogue, although the opposite may be true. The danger of propaganda lies in its ability to make the ambiguous seem familiar and the familiar seem ambiguous by entering the consciousness of mass audiences. For this reason, it has been incorporated into new forms of governance during peacetime under such labels as shaping public opinion, manufacturing consent, and managing rule through opinion. It has become a means of creating consensus and a major strategy for framing and mobilizing

1 James Gordon Finlayson, Habermas: A Very Short Introduction, trans. Ahmed Muhammad al-Rubi (Cairo: Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, 1st ed., 2015), p. 22.

2 John Ehrenberg, Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea, trans. Ali Hakim Salih and Hassan Nazim (Beirut: Arab Organization for Translation, 1st ed., 2008), p. 402.

3 Abd al-Ilah Belqiziz, previously cited, p. 288.

4 Linda Hutcheon, previously cited, p. 114.

the public. "Older forms of social struggle are no longer capable of confronting the media and financial ferocity produced by the union of new technology and the world of finance."¹

The concept of the public sphere (*L'espace public*) is central to understanding and analyzing the relationship between society and political authority. It refers to spaces where members of society gather, such as cultural clubs, cafés, and universities. More broadly, it includes any setting in which public matters are discussed and public opinion is formed. After an archaeological study of the origins and transformations of this sphere from ancient Greece to the early twentieth century, Jürgen Habermas, a representative of the second generation of critical theory, concluded that political authority uses the media, together with its administrative institutions, to subordinate and discipline the public so that decisions can be implemented. In this process, "publicity began to function as a principle for controlling public opinion and manipulating the public rather than performing its role of critical supervision. Publicity for use thus prevailed over critical publicity."² To consolidate its control over the public sphere and alter its critical function, the modern liberal state deploys political parties, cultural associations, trade unions, publishers, magazines, newspapers, and audiovisual media. These institutions attract and direct public opinion in accordance with the state's economic plans and political orientations. Contemporary political systems thus use the media to monitor individuals and shape their consciousness.

The public sphere should be a setting for open discussion in which individuals enjoy freedom and full autonomy and can participate in forming public opinion. It has now lost much of this role. Habermas attributed "the erosion of the public sphere's autonomy to the commodification of every aspect of modern life. A world of cultural consumption replaced the public sphere ... individuals were bound to the existing system, the possibility of understanding, autonomy, or resistance was undermined, and rational-critical debate was replaced by passive spectatorship."³ Directed propaganda has therefore deprived the public sphere of its critical function. Reality is increasingly defined by media institutions that determine what audiences read and watch and how they interpret it. Education and cultural formation have also become media functions, making the media a central component of the public sphere. As a result, the sphere has lost its role, and public opinion can no longer make its voice and concerns heard.

According to Jürgen Habermas, the media bear a substantial share of responsibility for the decline and deterioration of Western culture. They have become a new political arena serving imperial powers that suppress opposing views through propaganda. Propaganda is a means by which imperial forces control thought and an instrument through which the state implements policy and pursues its objectives.

In *The New Watchdogs*, Serge Halimi (b. 1955), former director of *Le Monde diplomatique*, argues that journalists across different orientations and specializations claim credibility and objectivity and present themselves as independent and neutral. In reality, however, they often function as guardians of dominant political and social systems by preparing public opinion to accept crises and unjust political decisions.

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, previously cited, p. 12.

² Jürgen Habermas, *L'espace public: Archéologie de la publicité comme dimension constitutive de la société bourgeoise*, trans. Marc B. de Launay (Paris: Payot, 1978), p. 186.

³ John Ehrenberg, previously cited, p. 414.

Conclusion

The growing influence of the media, particularly in the cultural sphere, has prompted many voices to warn of its dangers. The Frankfurt School was among the first to integrate cultural questions into its critical project on Western modernity. Its analyses concluded that the media market a manufactured culture intended to dominate other cultures through a process described as "cultural domestication." Critical theorists exposed weaknesses in the cultural systems of capitalist ideology and criticized discourses designed to control mass audiences.

Nevertheless, critical theory is often criticized for the pessimism and bleakness that characterize its philosophers, especially those of the first generation. A closer examination of the culture-industry thesis and the claim that a single corporate apparatus is responsible for cultural production reveals limitations in this argument. Capitalist societies are based on competition among producing companies, which generates diversity and variation in cultural products. Contemporary audiences are presented with many forms of cultural production, and the choice among them ultimately depends on the recipient's or consumer's own will and freedom. The abundance of cultural production is also linked to individual liberty and to the economic system that expresses the competitive spirit of capitalism. It cannot be attributed solely to media propaganda, which has historically been more closely associated with dictatorial and authoritarian systems, such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

Many scholars of the Frankfurt School also argue that critical theorists concentrated on the cultural products of a limited number of institutions, especially Hollywood and the American culture industry, while overlooking cultural works produced elsewhere. With regard to the influence of television, propaganda, and cinema on mass audiences, theorists of human behavior emphasize that individuals bring their own interpretations to any text. Assigning the media an overwhelmingly decisive role in directing individuals may therefore involve a degree of exaggeration.

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