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Censorship without a censor: On the functioning of mass media in capitalism



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Trust in the established media is continually declining. Many people feel that their concerns or perspectives are no longer adequately addressed by news coverage. This is not surprising from a materialist perspective, even if the media are referred to as the "fourth estate" within the state. After all, the state, too, is ultimately only a power that appears to stand above society, but in fact ensures the suppression of class struggle in the interests of the ruling class. Thus, the media do not exist apart from and independently of the economic system, but are largely integrated into the capitalist economy as profit-oriented, privately owned companies. As such, they not only play a participatory role in capitalism, but also fulfill a system-sustaining function through their influence as public sources of information. This was already the criticism of Michael Parenti (in "Inventing Reality" and "Make-Believe Media," among others) as well as Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (in "Manufacturing Consent") in the late 1980s:

"The mass media serve as a system for transmitting messages and symbols to the general population. Their function is to entertain, amuse, and inform—but also to inculcate in individuals values, beliefs, and behavior patterns that align them with the institutional structures of society. In a world of concentrated wealth and significant class antagonisms, fulfilling this function requires systematic propaganda."¹

Nothing has changed to this day.

Material conditions

"Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own it," AJ Liebling once wrote in *the New Yorker*. Karl Marx also recognized that whoever controls the material means of production also controls intellectual production. Over decades, the once diverse media landscape with independent local newspapers has transformed through expropriation, displacement, and concentration into a monopolistic structure in which a few corporations dominate the market. In the US, just five large companies – Comcast, Disney, News Corp., AT&T, and National Amusements – are responsible for the absolute majority of all media publications.² In Germany, the five largest publishers (Bauer, Funke, Burda, Gruner and Jahr, and Klambt) largely dominated the publishing landscape in 2022, with a combined market share of almost two-thirds and a share of more than 80 percent of all regular publications – despite the existence of public media.³

Private management therefore dominates most media companies. Within these companies, they exercise their power directly or through supervisory boards that determine budgeting, personnel issues, and dismissals. These media companies therefore do not operate according to democratic principles, but in the interests of the capital owners. The boundaries between media and business are blurring: Increasing ownership concentration, high executive salaries, political conformity, anti-union sentiment, and the pursuit of profit characterize the industry. The primary goal of most media companies is necessarily profit maximization. The pressure to market media as easily and as widely as possible further restricts content. In particular, the dependence on advertising partners, who represent a central source of income, leads to an additional connection with the interests of the rest of the corporate sector, since advertising space is only paid for where the other content also corresponds to the interests of the advertising company.

Occasional dissenting opinions cannot be entirely avoided, however, and even large media outlets such as the *New York Times* and *BBC* occasionally engage in investigative journalism. However, research into abuse of power, wage disparities, the centralization of private property, and crimes committed by one's own government is rarely covered by the

mainstream press and must instead be conducted by small publishers and independent, poorly funded publications. For example, the US military's war crimes in Iraq were first made public by Wikileaks before the established media gradually—and quite reluctantly—joined the reporting. Meanwhile, such small platforms can hardly compete with the large monopolies in the free market and are forced to take similar paths to them. Otherwise, they continually struggle for survival, as they struggle to find sponsors or advertising partners. Marx, too, once again stated: "The first freedom of the press consists in not being a business."⁴

Private and state censorship

Investment giants such as Blackrock, Vanguard, and State Street hold significant stakes in the largest publicly traded companies—including energy companies, banks, various insurance and pharmaceutical companies, and retail chains, as well as Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Alphabet Inc. (Google). At the same time, however, they control shares in Comcast, Disney, News Corp., and AT&T, further intertwining economic and media interests.⁵ Jeff Bezos' purchase of the *Washington Post* in 2013 offers another example: Once known for investigative reporting on the Watergate scandal and the "Pentagon Papers," the newspaper subsequently attracted attention with headlines such as: "The smartest way to make the rich pay is not a wealth tax" and "The billionaire's space race benefits the rest of us. Really." Elon Musk, with his takeover of Twitter, the rebranding to X, and the now extensively documented influence exerted there, proves that social media is also affected by this trend. The influence of the owners on the content of reporting can therefore mean concrete censorship that is at least as thorough as that exercised by the state.

Nevertheless, in addition to the private sector, the civil state also regularly exerts pressure on the media. For reasons of efficiency, journalists are often dependent on official sources, which gives governments, police, and businesses more space and credibility than protesters or victims of social injustice. The publications of state agencies are therefore often disseminated without being examined for bias or bias. This reproduces the appearance of their independence. Through its dependence on these publications, as well as on broadcasting licenses and distribution rights, the state exercises regulatory power. Herman and Chomsky refer to these and other disciplinary measures of all kinds as "flak," which can be translated as "counterfire." "Flak" can take the form of threats and withdrawal of support, but can also occur through overwhelming coverage by other media outlets, discrediting, or the direct use of force. The years-long manhunt for Julian Assange, who was only able to escape after pleading guilty, is a striking example of how domestic intelligence agencies and authorities

like the FBI are willing to resort to open repression to suppress "dangerous" reporting. The successful production of "flak" is costly and dependent on power, which is why its use is primarily reserved for existing powers, thus further strengthening their position.

The argument presented above demonstrates that decisive control over modern media no longer necessarily rests solely with the state. The role of the private property class must also be critically examined to understand influence and censorship: "In summary, our 'free and independent media' are in fact vast business conglomerates that control a large part of the communications space. In the hands of a few wealthy interest groups, the mass media are ultimately class media."⁶

Ideological consequences

The combination of private ownership, profit-making, and the exercise of power has inevitable consequences for journalists. Therefore, it must be emphasized that while there are cases of active control or collusion, the models of Herman, Chomsky, and Parenti do not describe an orchestrated plan by elite puppet masters. Rather, they examine how power relations are established organically through structural processes: "The model describes a system in which the media serve the elite—but through complex, model-embedded processes that include mechanisms and policies through which the powerful protect their interests naturally and without overt conspiracy."⁷

Especially since the once diverse workers' press was displaced by capitalist market laws, journalists often write without direct reference to the working population, whose perspective is thus neglected. Even those who maintain a critical or even class-conscious perspective are not free from unconscious ideological influence. The pressure to conform to editorial expectations and professional security considerations leads to a form of self-censorship to avoid problems and repression. In this way, actual, direct censorship becomes unnecessary in most cases, as it is already preempted by its mere anticipation. At the same time, censorship is not perceived as such, as it only initially, or not at all, occurs through the exercise of power and influence by higher authorities. In the spirit of "He who does not move, does not feel his shackles," the following applies: "They are only conditionally independent actors, free to report what they please, as long as their superiors like what they report."⁸

In addition to individual influence and restraint, a collective dynamic also shapes reporting. Group mechanisms, economic dependencies, and internal media hierarchies create content inertia. Constrained by "flak," reporters are encouraged to report within an existing narrative because the research directed accordingly is easier to conduct and articles that reflect a

current trend sell better. Conversely, those who write against the mainstream risk marginalization. This creates a clear direction for the majority of publications without the need to openly control a larger group. The true extent of the restriction is therefore not apparent.

This systemic distortion leads to an ideological normality in which capitalist realities are not questioned but presented as having no alternative. What might be harmful to the interests of monopolies is viewed as harmful to society as a whole. Criticism of existing class rule is portrayed as a critique of all social orders and an invitation to chaos. Revolutionary and even reformist developments are delegitimized by economic disaster narratives, while the interests of corporations are equated with the good of society. Such "anti-communism" is not merely a defensive response to ideas critical of capitalism, but rather a conscious and aggressively pursued strategy to discredit movements that challenge existing power relations. Ultimately, this orientation accepts disastrous consequences: "As long as the triumph of communism is considered the worst possible scenario, support for fascism abroad can be justified as the lesser evil."⁹

The media's ideological orientation follows subtle but effective methods: On the one hand, the selection and limitation of topics represent a sometimes conscious, but often completely internalized orientation. The omission of certain facts and perspectives significantly influences public discourse. While tabloid news about aristocratic families or football stars dominates, certain topics remain largely taboo – above all class power and class struggle. This selective reporting is not accidental; rather, it deliberately ensures that central contradictions of capitalism, such as crises of overproduction, falling profit rates, and the resulting instability, recession, and unemployment, are barely addressed. Even in times of capitalist crises, analyses remain superficial – usually presented by supposed experts who themselves adopt the perspective of capital and bourgeois economics. For example, the high inflation of recent years has repeatedly been explained with the myth of a supposed "wage-price spiral," without addressing the simultaneous, sometimes sharply increased profits of large corporations.

Perspectives and placements

When problematic issues cannot be ignored, they can be mitigated through "black sheep" analysis: This involves reporting on them in such a limited context that the causes are ultimately explained by the faulty actions of individual figures—the prominent "black sheep"—thus losing the crucial systemic perspective. Individual cases of corruption or

environmental crimes are viewed in isolation, rendering capitalism not a contradictory system but fundamentally intact—with occasional glitches.

Even more subtle is framing, which operates less through outright lies than through deliberate emphasis, embellishment, word choice, or allusion. In this way, the topics being discussed are embedded in ideological constructs that take the perspective of the ruling order. This often means that in general reporting, grievances are downplayed rather than highlighted. Despite their reputation for sensationalism, the media also pursue the goal of depoliticizing social inequality and societal problems and transforming opposition to them into indifference.

Finally, by determining the visibility of the topics themselves through placement, this effect can be further amplified. Many actually relevant news stories disappear into the margins or are broadcast at inconvenient times, while others dominate the front pages and talk shows for weeks – and thus public perception.

The omnipresent advertising bombardment also plays an important ideological role. By presenting the purchase of ever-new goods as a solution to individual and societal problems, it fosters the illusion that freedom and happiness can be achieved through consumption. In doing so, the capitalist economic system is affirmed without questioning its contradictions—exploitation, environmental destruction, social inequality. Advertising for consumer goods is thus simultaneously advertising the entire capitalist system, with the claim that this system can provide not only goods but also a good life for all.

Propaganda, which in early social democracy still had positive connotations alongside agitation, has, since fascism at the latest, functioned as a serious accusation, one that can be sufficient to discredit any reporting. The term is morally charged and often difficult to grasp. From a purely mechanical perspective, propaganda is systematically planned mass communication that shapes and consolidates beliefs from a position of power through symbol-based manipulation. It addresses broad target groups, simplifies complex content, and deliberately relies on emotional influence to conceal weaknesses in arguments. Through the use of slogans, enemy images, and repeated messages, it influences collective attitudes and perceptions. In doing so, propaganda always serves to maintain or expand power, thus taking place against the backdrop of a monopoly of power. It is not only necessary to enable large-scale campaigns, but also permits – if necessary – the open suppression of alternative perspectives.

Propaganda of Capital

The material and idealistic examination of capitalist media reveals clear overlaps with this definition: The capitalist media system functions as systematic mass communication in the

interests of the propertied class and the state. This communication relies on symbol-based influence, which supports the status quo through emotionalization, distortion, and the deliberate dissemination of untruths. Thus, the capitalist media landscape does not aim for the most objectively argumentative persuasion possible, but rather relies on an overwhelming, manipulative effect through the sum of its means. Critical, progressive, and external positions are muted, and dissenting positions are limited in their reach or suppressed entirely.

The market-based "freedom" of the press and state oversight bodies help ensure compliance with the propaganda function. The continued existence of modern propaganda is not ensured by absolute rule, but rather by the apparent disintegration of rule and the transfer of responsibility to various government apparatuses, institutions, and large corporations. In fact, these all contribute to the preservation of the same interests.

A well-founded media critique is therefore not an end in itself, but an act of self-defense. However, engaging with and arguing against capitalist propaganda alone is not enough – it also requires resistance to the material structures that make it possible in the first place. The fight for a more just society is therefore inextricably linked to the fight against capitalist hegemony in media and culture.

Notes:

1 Edward S Herman; Noam Chomsky: *Manufacturing Consent. The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, New York 1988, p. 1

2 See Alan MacLeod: *Propaganda in the Information Age: Still Manufacturing Consent*, London, 2019, p. 1

3 See *Media Perspectives* , 6/2022, p. 323

4 Debates on Freedom of the Press. In: *Marx-Engels-Werke (MEW)*, Vol. 1, p. 71

5 See Lucian Bebchuk; Scott Hirst: [The specter of the giant three](#). In: *Boston University Law Review* 99 (2019), p. 2

6 Michael Parenti: *Make Believe Media. The Politics of Entertainment*, New York 1992, p. 184

7 Edward S. Herman: [The Propaganda Model: a retrospective](#) . In: *Journalism Studies* 1 (2000), No. 1, p. 108.

8 Michael Parenti: *Inventing Reality. The Politics of Mass Media*. New York 1993, p. 40

9 Herman/Chomsky (note 1), p. 29