

Sociology Factsheet



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The relationship between ownership and the mass media

What is the 'mass media'?

The forms of communication in society that operate on a large-scale.

Examples of mass media sources include newspapers, magazines, television, the internet, radio.



- Items of 'interest' will be manipulated to become so by the owners of the mass media. They will promote certain beliefs and interests to the journalists and editors in order to ensure that they remain the dominant class.
- Public opinion can be easily manipulated by the mass media because the majority of people accept what is portrayed as being factual. Entertainment media acts as a method of distracting people from reality, helping to maintain power.
- There is a direct relationship between ownership and control. This means that the media acts as a way of reinforcing capitalist values.

Neo-Marxist

- Theory developed from Marxist beliefs but differs from traditional Marxist perspective – neo-Marxism is a more up to date version taking into account changes in society that Marxism would not have been able to consider eg. the Internet.
- Majority of managers, editors and journalists are white, middle-class males.
- The media is now less controlled by owners because of the number of different companies and forms of new media, particularly the Internet. Anyone can get their views across in today's society and the Internet has made this possible.
- Capitalism still operates in society today but in a more discreet way.
- The beliefs and interests of the ruling class are still dominated in the media, allowing hegemony.
- Ruling class views are challenged in the media but they are done in such a way that allows people to 'choose' their views. By portraying all views it appears that the mass media are fair but the way in which the views are portrayed allows some to appear less favourable/popular or more ridiculous and therefore people will 'choose' not to believe them, eg. sightings of UFOs. The media will report them but will also then give a logical explanation but how do we know that the logical explanation is right?
- The relationship between ownership and control is now more complicated. Control is more indirect, for example through editors rather than owners, but editors tend to be white, middle class males, therefore the ideas of the ruling class are still portrayed more in the media.

What is meant by 'ownership' and why is it important in sociology?

Our newspapers, television stations, etc. are owned by a small number of large companies.

Who owns the media is important to consider in sociology because it provides a debate about whether what we read, hear and see is what we are being told by a powerful, dominant group, or whether all views in society are shared via the mass media.

Key points:

3 types of media organisation

- 1) Community-based, e.g. hospital radio
- 2) Public/state, e.g. BBC
- 3) Privately owned, e.g. News Corporations

Choice

In recent years, more media outlets and new media types have emerged. This appears to offer more choice but there are arguments in sociology that choice has not really increased because although there are more outlets, the number of companies that own these outlets has decreased.

Theoretical perspectives

Exam Hint:- For your media unit, it is important to remember to include sociological theories in answers to any questions that require you to analyse ownership of the media.

Traditional Marxist

- The mass media is a form of social control in society.
- The ruling class are able to maintain control and power by sending out messages in the mass media that allow domination of the working class.
- Certain ideas and beliefs are portrayed to benefit capitalism. For example, the number of programmes centred on buying property has increased dramatically in the last ten years. It could be argued that programmes such as 'Escape to the Country' and 'Property Ladder' encourage people to want to own a property and therefore invest, which helps capitalism to prosper.



Exam Hint:- Marxist perspectives are important when studying ownership and media. To gain maximum marks in the exam, bring in knowledge not just of Marxism in general but of traditional Marxism, neo-Marxism, etc.

Pluralist

- Critical of Marxist perspectives on the media.
- Marxism exaggerates how powerful the mass media is.
- There are a number of different views in society and groups with different views are in competition with each other to have their views heard.
- Everyone can access the media.
- Larger, more powerful groups are regularly challenged and criticised, often with some success eg. Gok Wan's programme 'Miss Naked Beauty', which challenged the media's usual approach of using airbrushed size 6/8 models in advertising and magazines.
- Minority interest groups are catered for by the media because the media can profit from this.
- It would not make business sense for owners and managers/editors of mass media outlets to ignore the interests of the general public because then people will stop buying the newspaper/watching the television programme, etc.
- People are not naïve. They are aware that not everything they read/hear is completely factual and that the media can be biased.
- Audiences are active rather than passive because they choose what to watch, what to read, which websites to log on to and so on.
- Owners of the media do not have power and control because in order for them to make profits they have to print/broadcast what the public want.
- The media is regulated by the law and most countries have anti-monopoly laws so that one company cannot dominate.

Liberal

- Audiences have the widest choice of media products with private ownership of the mass media.
- If the mass media is mainly owned publicly and regulated by government then too much power is given to the government.
- Privatisation of the mass media means that companies are in competition with each other, which means that audiences are more likely to get what they want.
- Concentration of ownership leads to economic success and more affordability for consumers.
- Liberal approaches are in favour of media deregulation.

Radical

- Mass media organisations have the purpose of providing a service to the public. This may be in the form, for example, of information or entertainment.
- The public depend on the mass media.
- Public media services are regulated to serve the public with impartial information. Privately owned media services are not as regulated and therefore are influenced more by commercialism, leading to a poorer service to the general public.
- The increased concentration of ownership allows a small number of companies to have a dangerously high level of power.

Key terms

Cross-media ownership Ownership of different types of media by the same company eg. TV and radio by the BBC.

False class-consciousness This is where people in the working classes are disillusioned, or brainwashed about their place in society. For example, by watching the likes of EastEnders, people are led to believe that their position in society is actually better than most, which leads them to accept their position and not to aspire to become more powerful.

Hegemony Control of society through generating a working class that does not question the authority and power of the ruling class. The ruling class are not questioned because the dominant ideas are portrayed in the media as those of the whole of society.

Ideology The most dominant ideas, those of the ruling class. The mass media is one of the key ways in which the ideas of the powerful can influence society to believe that the ruling class ideas are right.

Media deregulation The relaxation, or abolishment of laws that limit the concentration of mass media ownership.

Technological convergence Where forms of communication used to be totally separate, many companies have recently started to combine services. This has been allowed because of developments in digital technology. Eg. WAP – mobile and Internet.

Transnational ownership Ownership of the media has become, like many other elements of society, global. Previously, media companies were restricted by national boundaries. The Internet has helped this shift quite dramatically eg. it is possible to listen to British radio stations anywhere in the world that has the Internet, whereas previously this was restricted to those within the transmission area of the UK. If you listen to a local radio station in the car and travel some distance within the UK, the transmission signal will be lost, yet someone in Australia will be able to connect to the Internet and listen to your local station!

Vertical integration Owning the different stages of a production, distribution and consumption.

Key studies

Who has control of the media is important in sociology.

Golding and Murdock (1991)

2 types of control –

Allocative: the owners of media companies manage the financial/business aspects, the task of editing is given to others.

Operational: the owners of media companies make the decisions on both financial/business matters and also on editorial matters.

One of the main trends in media ownership is that small media companies are being bought out by large companies.

Bagdikian, 2000

If the American media companies were separately owned, there would be 25,000. However, five major companies own all of the media business.

The issue of choice is debated in relation to sociology and the mass media.

Peake, 2002

TV channels - 1988: 4, today: 70

Commercial radio stations - 1988: 60, today: 260

Web pages – 1988: 0, today: 1 billion

Typical exam questions

Use your exam board's website as part of your preparation for the exam. All exam boards have a section for students with past papers, model answers, etc.

1. **'Both the selection and presentation of news are ideologically controlled.'**
To what extent do sociological arguments and evidence support this view?

Tips –

This question can be interpreted to mean 'Evaluate Marxist theories on the control and ownership of the mass media'. The question wants you to outline Marxist theories and provide a critique of them.

To gain maximum marks you will need to demonstrate very clear understanding of the variations within Marxist theories, not just an understanding of a general Marxist approach.

You will gain higher marks for bringing in knowledge about the impact that globalisation and new technologies have had on the media.

2. **Outline and assess the view that the content of the news is determined by media professionals.**
3. **Outline and assess the view that the mass media have a direct effect on their audience.**

Tips –

The above two questions both require you to consider Marxist *theories* on the control of the mass media, ie. Traditional and Neo-Marxist. You will need to show that you understand the differences between these two approaches.

Use and explain key terms such as 'ideology' and 'hegemony'.

4. **Outline and assess Marxist explanations of patterns of media control.**

Tips –

With this question it is important to explain the variety of Marxist perspectives with respect to media control.

Remember to evaluate the perspectives that are mentioned in the question, by comparing them to others, and providing a critique.

Exam Hint:- Do not leave revision notes until near the time of the exam or until the end of a unit. You can start making revision notes from the start of your course – at the end of each sub-topic of a unit is a good time to summarise your learning.

Test Yourself

1. Identify the 3 types of media organisation

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2. Identify three key points of the Traditional Marxist perspective

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3. Identify three key points of the Neo-Marxist perspective

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4. Identify three key points of the Pluralist perspective

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5. Identify three key points of the Liberal perspective

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6. Identify three key points of the Radical perspective

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