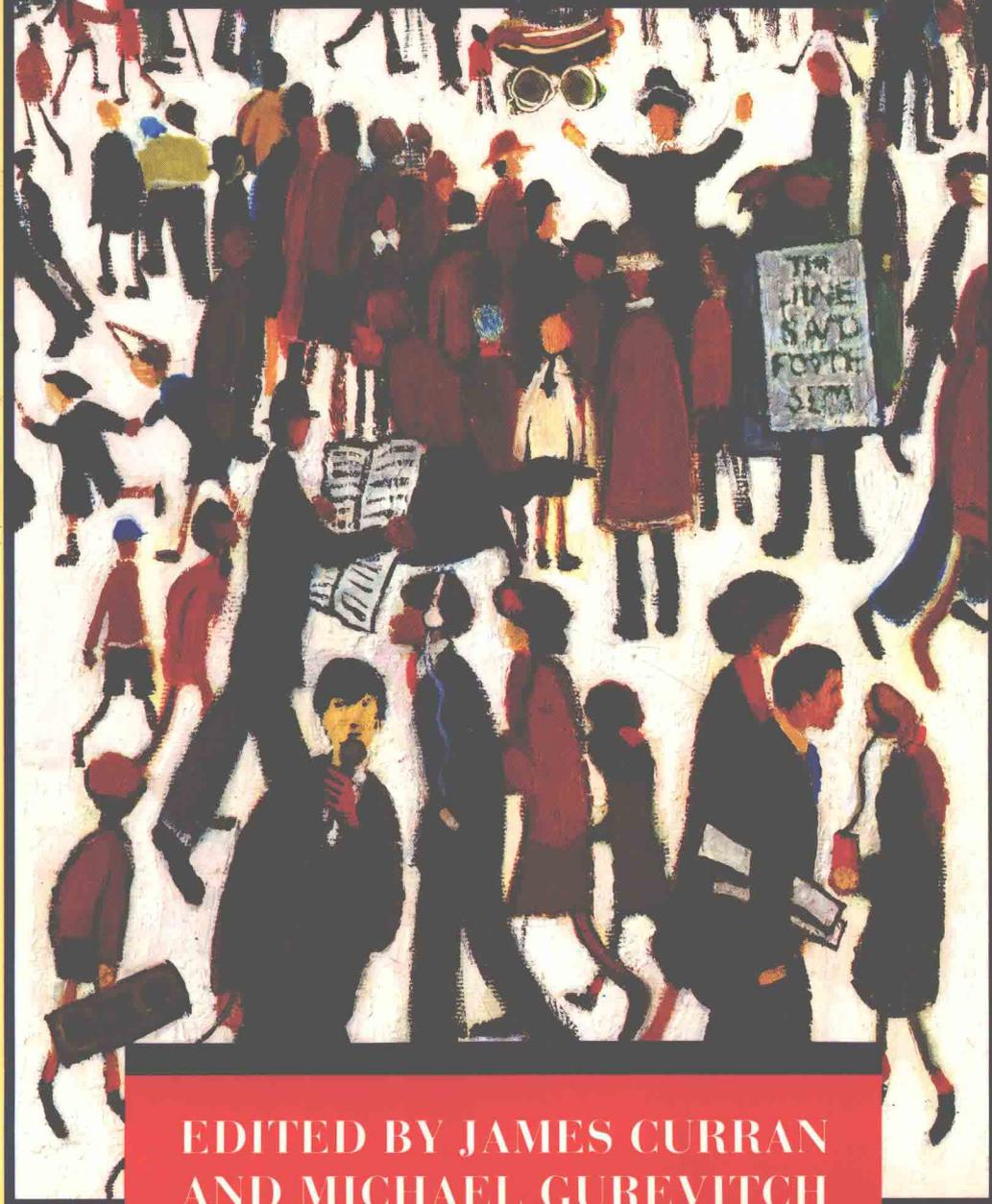


# MASS MEDIA *and* SOCIETY



EDITED BY JAMES CURRAN  
AND MICHAEL GUREVITCH

# **Mass Media and Society**

*Edited by*

**James Curran and Michael Gurevitch**

**Edward Arnold**

A member of the Hodder Headline Group

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# Introduction

Fourteen years have passed since the publication of *Mass Communication and Society* in 1977. That volume was produced and edited expressly for students of The Open University course of that same title. It was designed to offer the students a collection of essays aimed at supplementing other course materials, and the structure of the book therefore followed rather closely the structure of the course.

Like other Open University texts *Mass Communication and Society* was available also to students and academics outside the Open University. Shortly after the publication of the book we were gratified to discover that our collection of readings quickly reached an audience far wider than the one for which it was initially intended. We attributed this to the manner in which the book succeeded, more or less by accident, in identifying and defining the contours of the field at the time.

However, in spite of its longevity (over the years the book was reprinted nine times) we became increasingly aware of the 'creeping obsolescence' of the 1977 volume. We decided, therefore, to put together a revised edition. But as soon as we thought about it in detail, it became clear that a merely 'revised' edition would remain trapped in the models and paradigms of the 1970's and fail to come to terms with the extraordinary transformation of the field that has taken place since then.

This volume follows its predecessor in the sense that it has retained the same organising framework of three sections. It has also some of the same authors (in addition to younger ones who were still at school when its predecessor first appeared). And it is pitched at about the same level as before.

But it also differs from the 'first edition' in a number of ways. It has more overview articles in order to carry the expository load formerly taken by Open University course units. It relies less on reprints; all the essays for this book are written for it, though two appeared in different, earlier guises in journals. It is less parochial in feel (relatively speaking) in that it is not written, as before, almost entirely by British academics. But above all, it is different because it reflects and critically responds to the new revisionism that has developed in mass communications research during the last decade.

A critical review of revisionist scholarship is provided by James Curran (1990) in an essay whose origins go back to earlier discussions concerning the structure of the revised edition of *Mass Communication and Society*. The

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central theme of this essay is that the critical tradition in media research has imploded in response to an internal debate. This has led to an increasing repudiation of the totalising themes of marxism, a reassessment of the relationship of media organisations to the structure of social power, a stress on the audience as an active creator of meanings, and a shift from a political to a popular aesthetic. During the same period, some researchers in the liberal-pluralist tradition have reconsidered their position in response to attacks from radical critics; they have moved, in effect, against the flow of traffic coming the other way. The result is a redefinition of the field in which the traditional dichotomy between neo-marxist and liberal-pluralist perspectives have become less salient and also less sharply defined, while other perspectives – notably, feminism, theories of subjectivity and particularistic versions of pluralism – have gained increased prominence.

The other important shift of the field has been prompted by changes in the media industry, particularly television. The age of channel austerity has been replaced by an era of channel abundance, with the adoption of new TV technologies. The 1980's were also characterised by the dominance of conservative governments in many Western countries, and this led to sweeping changes in the regulatory structures governing television both in Europe and the United States. The upheavals of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989–91 also engulfed its media, prompting a debate about how these should be reorganised and democratised. For all these reasons, a policy oriented discussion of the political and cultural role of the media and of so-called 'technologies of freedom' has assumed an importance that it lacked in the more static period of the mid 1970's.

This book reflects these different changes and trends in mass communication research. But it also comments upon and critically appraises them. This is done not by promoting one particular point of view but by staging a debate, both explicit and implicit, on the basis of which readers can form their own judgement. Thus, the first section provides general accounts of the role of the media in society, including normative liberal, postmodernist, feminist and neo-marxist perspectives by advocates of these different positions. The second section offers alternative views of the formative influences that shape the media, and analysis of recent changes in the media industries. The last section explores the role of the media in the social production of meaning, viewed from different perspectives and methodologies.

Within this formal organisation, there are a number of crisscrossing inter-connections between different parts of the book. Some essays confront the viewpoint of other essays: others, still, complement and support one another. Identifying all these skirmishes and liaisons (some unplanned and unexpected) would be tedious. But it may be helpful nevertheless to point to certain running debates that recur in the book as a whole.

One area of engagement takes the form of a tacit debate about how to conceptualise the wider context in which the media are situated. The holistic framework of neo-marxism that characterised 1970's 'mainstream' critical research, and the totalising themes of radical feminism that characterised another branch of it, were rejected by many radical researchers in the 1980's and early 1990's in favour of a more complex and multi-faceted conspectus of society in which manifold relationships of power are said to be in play in different

situations. This led to the adoption of a number of alternative models of society ranging from revised neo-marxist and socialist feminist perspectives of society through to postmodernism and a particularistic version of pluralism in which society is analytically disaggregated into a series of discrete instances.

The chapters in this book illustrate a variety of models in play. It may be helpful to pick out three chapters, however, since they exemplify strong revisionist currents in the field. The first is what might be described as a 'Foucauldian' analysis by Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi. She traces different stages in the debate about the media and third world: the initial, self confident conception of the media as an agency of modernisation in backward countries; the radical counterblast portraying western media domination of the third world as a form of cultural imperialism that was imposing western values; followed by the pluralist fightback pointing to two-way flows of communication between developed and developing countries, and emphasizing audience autonomy. Her conclusion at the end of this interesting resume is that the media in developing countries have an ambivalent role; they can be both instruments of social control and agencies of emancipation, an expression of global western power and a means by which local identities are revitalised. Underlying this conclusion is a reluctance to accept the nation state as an adequate conceptual category in the analysis of dependency and domination. But it also reflects a complex understanding of power relations in terms of gender, class, ethnicity and centre-periphery cleavages. In effect, indigenous audience responses to western media content are viewed by her as a response to and negotiation of manifold relations of power and multiple identities.

Sreberny-Mohammadi is working out of a radical, class based paradigm. Similar arguments are also emerging out of radical feminist perspective. Liesbet Van Zoonen, for instance, attacks the view that the media project only sexist stereotypes that deny the true nature of women and suborn female audiences into passive acceptance of patriarchy. Instead, she argues, the essentialist conception of femininity underlying this approach should be replaced by a culturalist one; womens' pleasure in the media should be seen not as a process of passive victimisation and indoctrination but as a way in which women actively express something about themselves as women; and the media itself should be viewed as a site of negotiation between conflicting definitions of gender rather than as an unproblematic agency of patriarchy. This argument is carried further by Ien Ang and Joke Hermes who contest the validity of 'women' as a conceptual category for making sense of society, arguing that women have multiple identities with a variety of subjective responses to the media, which convey heterogeneous and contradictory meanings. Particularistic studies, properly contextualised, should replace 'generalised absolutes' and 'easy categorisation' in which feminists claim to know the interests of women and speak on their behalf.

Ang and Hermes's article exemplifies in the context of a feminist debate a wider set of arguments within the radical revisionist tradition. A view of the media as an agency of class domination (or, in its more qualified form, as an agency that tends to privilege representations of the world that sustain the interests of dominant power groups) was challenged partly on the grounds that audience produce their own meanings. The circuit of power is supposedly disconnected at the juncture between media and audience because people

actively make sense of and interpret media content in terms of prior discourse positions. This stress on the 'resourcefulness' and 'productivity' of the audience was reinforced by the argument that meaning is not fixed but is produced through the interaction between text and the socially situated discourses of audiences; that most media texts can be interpreted differently; and that in general media content is more diverse and contradictory than was alleged during the heyday of critical analysis in the 1970's. In effect, an analysis emerging out of critical literary theory and ethnography came very close to a view of the 'obstinate' audience that was a key building block in American pluralist sociology and that served as the ground on which approaches such as 'uses and gratifications' flourished. Yet, ironically, it was precisely this pluralist tradition that the critical analysis of the 1970's was seeking to dethrone.

The extent to which audiences can be said to be active producers of meaning, and the implications this has for understanding the wider relationship of the media to society, are linked issues that form the second key area of engagement in the book. John Fiske provides an eloquent exposition of the view that 'bottom-up' meanings generated by audiences overpower 'top-down' meanings encoded in the media, although he dissociates himself from the extreme postmodernist view that people consume images without consuming their meaning. His position is not that dissimilar to the radical postmodern orientation of Ang and Hermes referred to earlier. Sonia Livingstone's essay also documents the active interpretive role of audiences, and in this sense can be read as supportive of Fiske's core argument.

Other essays attack, however, revisionist perspectives of the audience. The most directly confrontational is Todd Gitlin's essay which argues that celebration of audience autonomy is misconceived in two ways. It overstates the oppositional meaning of sub-cultural expression, and mistakenly equates cultural consumption with political activity. Style contests, in short, are mistakenly identified as the political expression of class war. John Corner attacks as oversimplified studies that emphasize the multiple meanings of media content. He argues that they often fail to distinguish between the relative openness and closure of meaning in specific texts, fail to differentiate between layers of meaning and different genres, and fail to analyse adequately the social context of meaning production. His reservations are echoed in Golding and Murdock's re-presentation of a political economy perspective. Jack McLeod, Gerald Kosicki and Zhongdang Pan's critical review of the empirical literature on media effects – though presented by them as a broadside in another battle – takes on an additional meaning in this context. Its implication is that the conception of the recalcitrant audience that dominated American social science in the 1950's – which recent revisionist thought is gravitating towards – needs to be heavily qualified in the light of evidence suggesting that the media have a selective, variable but important influence.

Another focal point of debate in contemporary media research revolves around the relationship of media organisations to the structure of power in society. Here a number of arguments are in play in what is becoming an increasingly complicated arabesque in which researchers in rival traditions inflect the same arguments and incorporate the same evidence in different ways. Simplifying greatly, neo-marxist researchers tend to stress capitalist state and economic determinations of the media, and the formative influence of the

dominant class culture, while liberal-pluralist researchers tend to see media output as the product of relatively autonomous professionals responding to the social organisation of the media and the widely shared values and concerns of the public.

This battle ground is the third area of engagement in the book. What it indicates, however, is that the range of difference between rival perspectives is narrowing. Although this may partly reflect the personal views of the authors concerned, it is also a reflection of the general trend in this particular area of research. Thus, Peter Golding and Graham Murdock are at pains to distance themselves from simple instrumentalist and structuralist views of marxist political economy, and define 'economic determination' as an initial limitation and constraint on the general environment of communication activity. Schudson and Turow covering respectively news and entertainment organisations from a liberal-pluralist perspective nonetheless incorporate radical political economy arguments as a partially valid element in a broader picture.

There is another cluster of articles which, while relating to the debates above, can be viewed perhaps as a single group. They all discuss the public role of the media at a time of rapid transition and technical change. Denis McQuail maps alternative ways of conceptualising and judging the public performance of the media. James Curran argues that discussion of the democratic role of the media is dominated by old saws that need to be discarded, and suggests ways in which the media's democratic role can be reformulated and realised in practice. This discussion is continued in a sense by Judith Lichtenberg who defends the objective, professional model of journalism but in a form that differs from the way in which it is often interpreted in practice. Michael Gurevitch considers the wider implications of the creation of a 'global news room' and points to the way in which technological change impacts on, and potentially alters, 'older' patterns of power relationships both within the media industries and between the media and governments. And Jay Blumler critically assesses the functioning of the US broadcast system in the context of a large increase in the number of television channels. His analysis is of particular interest not least because American television is regularly held up either as a model of admiration or as a symbol of what to avoid.

In short, this book seeks to generate a debate between more traditional paradigms and new revisionist thinking, and to provide a commentary on some recent changes in the media. Our thanks go to contributors who have sought to define collectively but at some physical distance from one another the changing contours of mass communication research, and who have put up with requests for revisions and amendments. Our thanks go also to Lesley Riddle at Edward Arnold, whom it has been a great pleasure to work with.

## Reference

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