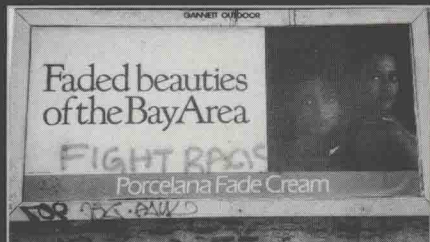


media, communication, culture

A GLOBAL APPROACH



James Lull

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James Lull
San Francisco

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Introduction

Like people, books sometimes take long and curious journeys. This one surely has. I began researching and writing this book in Lund, Sweden in the summer of 1981, although at the time I had absolutely no idea that the work I was doing in Scandinavia would finally resemble what appears in this volume. Influenced by countless books, conversations, and trips to many countries and cultures during the intervening years, I have revised, revised, and revised again what appears in the following pages. In fact, one incarnation or another of this manuscript has been kicking around in my files and on my desk as a kind of personal working document about media, communication, and culture for most of my academic career. The book has grown with the times. The perspective represented in this writing reflects the key epistemological shift in the recent intellectual history of the social sciences – a decisive turn away from logical positivism, its universalist assumptions and pretenses toward theoretical and empirical questions of culture and meaning and the use of qualitative research methodologies. Consequently, much of today's theorizing is far more bold and interesting than what we have seen in previous years. We now more fully recognize in communication and cultural studies what Clifford Geertz saw in the more entrenched social science disciplines in the early 1980s:

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Ten years ago the proposal that cultural phenomena should be treated as significative systems posing expositive questions was a much more alarming one for social scientists – allergic, as they tend to be, to anything literary or inexact – than it is now. In part, it is a result of the growing recognition that the established approach to treating such phenomena, law-and-causes physics, was not producing the triumphs of prediction, control, and testability that had for so long been promised in its name. And, in part, it is a result of intellectual deprovincialization. The broader currents of modern thought have finally begun to impinge upon what has been, and in some quarters still is, a snug and insular enterprise. (1983: 3)

After numerous jaunts to parts of the world that intrigue me most, especially Latin America and the Far East, I recently had an opportunity to spend a year in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where I taught (on a very relaxed schedule!) at the Catholic University and the State University of Rio de Janeiro. With the distinct advantages of interesting friends and colleagues, beautiful weather and beaches, the largest dance floor in South America, and a sustained period to read and concentrate on a wide range of relevant material – much of it written by Latin American scholars – I was able to finally complete several chapters of this book. One can have a unique perspective on culture and communication from a place like Brazil. And the timing was fortunate. While I was there Brazil hosted a controversial world congress on ecology and underwent a dramatic political metamorphosis – the impeachment of the first democratically elected president since the nation's 20-year military rule ended in 1985. In the field of communication, Brazil convened its first worldwide international congress – the biannual general meeting of the International Association for Mass Communication Research (IAMCR).

I set out to accomplish two main objectives with this book. First, by synthesizing a broad and comprehensive array of key themes in media, communication, and culture, I hope to have written a text that can be appreciated and used by scholars across a wide range of academic disciplines. I detest the practice of carving up the academy into jealously guarded intellectual provinces. Privileging certain theoretical traditions, literatures, and empirical domains according to some imagined hierarchy of intrinsic worth or correctness is a violent form of theoretical

decontextualization and the worst variety of academic politics. I play to no disciplinary favorites here. Furthermore, I approach the study of communication and culture with a distinct multicultural and international tone. Many of the examples I use as an empirical foundation for developing my theoretical perspective describe settings and ways of living outside North America, the British Isles, and continental Europe. Theorists outside the northern loop, notably Néstor García Canclini of Mexico and Jesús Martín-Barbero of Colombia, are prominent contributors to the points of view that evolve in the following pages too.

Though I try to be inclusive and comprehensive, the book is also driven by a focused argument that analyzes communication processes and cultural contexts by synthesizing several of what I consider to be the most compelling streams of contemporary social and cultural theory. Along the way, distinctions often made between mass and interpersonal communication, critical and empirical research, microsocial and macrosocial domains, communication studies, cultural studies, and sociology, for example, are discarded for a more integrated approach. We study the media, communication, and culture of capitalist and communist systems, of the First World and the Third, of the rich and the poor, of the mainstream and the margins. I evaluate the role of media in a variety of world political and cultural developments extending from California to China by way of England, Brazil, and elsewhere. My overall intention is to present a well-documented and reasonable perspective that is up-to-date and accessible to a wide spectrum of readers.

To borrow a phrase from Martín-Barbero, I am interested to explore the “communicative nature of culture” (1993: 211). Communication is the conceptual meeting ground where interpersonal relations and technological innovations, political-economic incentives and sociocultural ambitions, light entertainment and serious information, local environments and global influences, form and content, substance and style intersect. I emphasize the influence of communications technology in this book because mass media continue to radically expand the nature of symbolic “co-presence” in the modern era (Thompson, 1994). We focus with a wide-angle lens on the culturally situated interplay between source, symbol, and interpreter in what Dave Morley calls the “postmodern geog-

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raphy of the media" (1992: 1). I argue here that mass media are not unified, monolithic forces that overwhelm isolated, dependent, passive audience members anywhere in the world. But at the same time I try to show why the ideological and cultural power of media institutions should not be underestimated either. In the end, I argue that any assessment of media influence must be understood precisely in terms of the historically situated social and cultural settings and dynamics where mediated, symbolic agendas are created and incorporated into everyday life.

In the first chapter I lay out the substantive contours of the basic subject matter taken up in the book by discussing three fundamental critical constructs: ideology, hegemony, and consciousness. I purposefully establish an overly deterministic view of ideology and hegemony in this chapter which I then challenge throughout the book. In chapter 2 I review social rules, a key element of the theoretical perspective advanced here. We examine how rules connect ideology to sources of social power and authority, including media authority. Culture and cultural power are discussed in chapter 3. This chapter highlights the complex and intriguing idea of "popular culture," and how people draw from their rich, expansive symbolic environments to creatively construct meaningful identities and lifestyles. The "active audience" is the subject of chapter 4 where, against a backdrop of the quantitative research tradition in mass communication, I present a critique and alternative to standard media uses and gratifications theory. In this chapter, I also discuss the importance of the imagination in communication theory. In chapter 5, "Meaning in Motion," I contrast the critical media/cultural imperialism perspective on world communication activity with the more optimistic and current constructivist views. The nature of symbolic interpretation is explored in this chapter, as are arguments making up debates about globalization and the role of modern media in the dynamic formation of new cultural territories. The concluding chapter then interfuses theoretical claims that accumulate in forerunning sections of the book. I rely on Anthony Giddens's structuration theory here to help shape the summary and synthesis. I apply Giddens's critique of structure to media institutions and his notion of social agency to culturally situated audience activity. In this way I further develop the book's defining statement, emphasizing (1)

the dynamic, social nature of media institutions; (2) the open-ended character of symbolic representation; and (3) the culturally situated interpretative and utilitarian activities of media audience members. The book concludes with a positive but cautionary assessment of the tangle of contemporary media, communication, and culture which surrounds all of us.

I

Ideology, Consciousness, Hegemony

The development of critical communication and cultural theory in recent years has brought with it attention to ideology, consciousness, and hegemony. These important concepts are interrelated and overlapping, though each has a unique emphasis and role. The concepts appear in discussions that are made throughout this book. To introduce them, we can say that *ideology* is a system of ideas expressed in communication; *consciousness* is the essence or totality of attitudes, opinions, and sensitivities held by individuals or groups; and *hegemony* is the process through which “dominant” ideology is transmitted, consciousness is formed, and social power is exercised.

Ideology

In the most general and benign sense, ideology is organized thought – complements of values, orientations, and predispositions forming ideational perspectives expressed through technologically mediated and interpersonal communication. Ideologies may or may not be grounded in historically or empirically verifiable fact. They may be tightly or loosely organized. Some ideologies are complex and well integrated; others are fragmented. Some

ideological lessons are temporary; others endure. Some meet strong resistance from audiences; others have immediate and phenomenal success. But the indeterminate character of ideology should not obscure its importance. Organized thought is never innocent. Ideologies are implicated by their origins, their institutional associations, and the purposes to which they are put, though these histories and relationships may never be entirely clear.

Ideology is a fit expression to describe the values and public agenda of nations, religious groups, political candidates and movements, business organizations, schools, labor unions, even professional sporting teams and rock bands. But the term most often refers to the relationship between information and social power in large-scale, political-economic contexts. In this sense, selected ways of thinking are advocated through a variety of channels by those in society who have political and economic power. The ongoing manipulation of public information and imagery constructs a potent *dominant ideology* which helps sustain the material and cultural interests of its creators. Fabricators of dominant ideologies become an "information elite." Their power, or dominance, stems directly from their ability to publicly articulate their preferred systems of ideas. Ideology has force, therefore, when it can be represented and communicated.

The origins of ideology as a critical concept in social theory can be traced to late eighteenth century France (Thompson, 1990). Since then, by one definition or another, ideology has been a central concern of historians, literary critics, philosophers, semioticians, rhetoricians – theorists representing virtually every niche in the humanities and social sciences. European intellectuals in particular have given the concept a sharp critical edge. British social theorists, for example – living in a blatantly class-divided society famous for its kings and queens, princes and princesses, lords and ladies – often define ideology in terms of how information is used by one socioeconomic group (the "ruling class," in Marxist terms) to dominate the rest. Raymond Williams calls ideology "the set of ideas which arises from a given set of *material* interests or, more broadly, from a definite class or group" (1976: 156; italics mine). Stuart Hall (1977) argues that ideology, not just economic authority, shapes and maintains social class divisions in

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the United Kingdom and other capitalist societies. John B. Thompson insists that ideology can only properly be understood as “dominant ideology” wherein symbolic forms are used by those with power to “establish and sustain relations of [asymmetrical social] domination” (1990: 58). The socioeconomic elites are able to saturate society with their preferred ideological agenda because they control the institutions that dispense symbolic forms of communication, including the mass media.

We frequently hear the term “ideology” mentioned in political-economic analyses, not only in academic arguments fashioned by critical theorists, but in journalistic accounts as well. The expressions “capitalist ideology” and “socialist ideology,” for example, can be used synonymously with “capitalism” and “socialism” to refer to the fundamental theoretical principles that underlie the two political-economic-cultural systems. This linguistic interchangeability reveals both the essence and the critical nature of the concepts. Even unreflectively invoking the term “ideology” calls attention to the values and practices of capitalism and socialism as political-economic-cultural schema that are constructed and represented rather than natural and self-evident. It problematizes the systems as sets of values, perspectives, and conforming social practices. This seemingly minor shift of language can facilitate analysis and debate, and that is a main reason why the term “ideology” is a favorite of critical observers and theorists.

Ideology and the mass media

You work your buns off all those years, going up and down the highway, riding those raggedy little airplanes and stuff like that. Then I make a TV commercial with Bo Jackson – all I say is “Bo, you don’t know Diddley” – and all of a sudden I’m back on top again. (Bo Diddley, American blues singer, referring to Bo Jackson, American baseball and football superstar)

Some ideological sets are elevated and amplified by the mass media, given great legitimacy by them, and distributed persuasively, often glamorously, to large audiences. In the process, selected constellations of ideas assume ever-increasing importance, reinforcing their original meanings and extending their social impact. Bo Diddley’s remarks only hint at the ability of the electronic

media to effectively call attention to certain symbols, persons, and ideas. Television has the unparalleled ability to expose, dramatize, and popularize cultural bits and fragments of information. It does so in the routine transmission of entertainment programs, news, and commercials. The bits and fragments then become ideological currency in social exchange. They don't stand alone. Because authorship of television's agenda rests ultimately in the hands of society's political-economic-cultural establishment, the selected information often congeals to form ideological sets that overrepresent the interests of the powerful and underrepresent the interests of others. Television may be the most obvious conveyor of dominant ideology, but all mass media, including less recognized forms such as postage stamps, store windows, automobile bumper stickers, tee-shirts, even museums and restaurant menus, carry messages that serve the interests of some groups and not others. Consider, for instance, the ideological lessons given in these familiar American bumper stickers:

- He Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins.
- I Owe, I Owe, So Off to Work I Go.
- My Other Car is a Porsche.

Image systems

Image . . . is everything. (Tennis professional Andre Agassi in a TV commercial for a Japanese camera manufacturer)

The effective spread of dominant ideologies depends on the strategic use of *image systems*, of which there are two basic types: *ideational* and *mediational* (figure 1.1). Image systems entail articulation of layers of ideological representation and the tactical employment of modern communications technology to distribute the representations, which, when successful, encourage audience acceptance and circulation of the dominant themes.

Ideational image systems

Much like language and other communication codes, ideational image systems – which I will illustrate in more concrete detail

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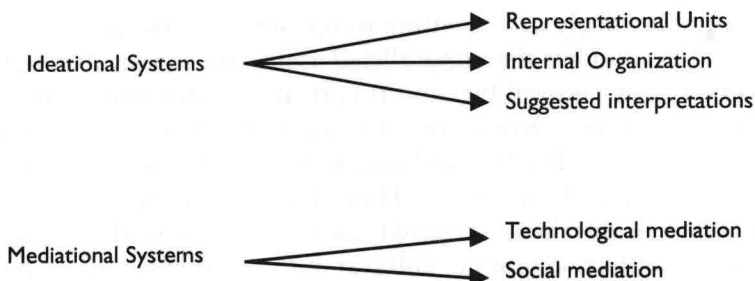


Figure 1.1 Image systems

below – are composed of units of ideational representation (morphemes), with complex internal forms of organization (syntax), that suggest and prefer particular interpretations (semantics). The mass media, especially television, “disseminate and legitimate in a pleasurable fashion, a political vocabulary that favors certain interests and groups over others . . . by giving presence to their codes” (Condit, 1989: 114). But ideology is not only made up of particular symbolic representations, each with its self-serving point of view. Ideology is also transmitted by means of a “grammar of production through which the media universalize a style of life” (Martín-Barbero, 1993: 142).

Advertising, of course, is a symbolic domain that lends itself well to ideological analysis. It’s clear that what commercial advertisers sell are not just products, services, or isolated ideas. They sell multilayered, integrated ideational systems that embrace, interpret, and project interdependent images of products, idealized consumers benefiting from the products, corporations that profit from sale of the products, and, most important, the overarching political-economic-cultural structure – and the values and social activity it embraces – that presumably makes all the consumer activity possible.

Media audience members as potential consumers are encouraged to become involved with commercial products and personalities by imagining contexts – the physical scenes, emotional circumstances, and actual social situations in which they would be able to use the product. These projected *imagined situations* are grounded in an overarching *value structure* with which the con-