

# THE MASS MEDIA TODAY: DISCOURSES OF DOMINATION OR DIVERSITY?

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## The Global Context

The global socio-political and economic changes after the demise of state communism and the self-proclaimed victory of capitalism around 1990 are unthinkable without concomitant ideological changes. Dominant political and media discourse, and hence also public opinion, have undergone sometimes dramatic transformations (Collins 1993; Hollander 1992; Minogue 1993). It is the aim of this paper to examine some of these ideological changes and the role of the mass media in these developments.

Although neo-liberal discourse may now be prevailing, it also exhibits conflicts and contradictions. Talk about the “free market” — at least among those who profit most from it — in Beijing, Moscow, and Warsaw may be jubilant, we, at the same time, witness more pessimistic, if not cynical, text and talk accompanying the destruction of the welfare state in Western Europe and North America and increasing poverty in much of Africa and Latin-America. In light of the horrific events in Bosnia and Rwanda, and after the failure to impose peace in Somalia, anxiety and scepticism, also among the media and the public at large, have become widespread. The optimistic rhetoric of a New World Order after the Cold War, thus, seems to be a cover for deep-seated doubts about how to manage current world problems (Chomsky 1992, 1994).

While the deeper causes of these various political events in the South and the East also affect the North, we are also facing an increasing ethnocentrism and racism in Europe and North America, both transforming themselves into fortresses against the Southern poor who are clamouring at their gates. Wild capitalism thus combines with wild ethnicism and racism in a frightening mixture of policies and social practices that result in keeping many people, or even whole countries and continents, down and out (Castles and Miller 1993; Solomos and Wrench 1993).

Instead of the predicted end of history, or the end of ideology, we, on the contrary, observe a monumental social and political lapsus, a return to more primitive historical and ideological times.

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War lords side with the lords of the market, and “ethnic cleansing” with immigration restrictions. That is, the “uncivilised” and the more “civilised” forms of the new feudalism and the new slavery go hand in hand. The main difference with several centuries ago is that the slaves that come to work for their lords in the North-West now take care of their own transport, and are more than willing to work. This is what is called progress.

## The Role of the Media

The question I would like to address here is, what is the role of the media in this complex contemporary framework of social, economic and cultural forces? Markets, politics, policies, exploitation, and marginalization all need an ideological basis. Such ideologies require production and reproduction through public text and talk, which — in our modern times — are largely generated or mediated by the mass media (Fowler 1991; Golding 1992; Hall 1982).

The fortresses of Europe and North America, under construction now at the northern shores of the Rio Grande and the Mediterranean, are not merely socio-economic palaces of the rich, but also mansions of the mind, that is, ideological constructs. The fundamental question is, whether the mass media are among the architects of their construction or the designers of their destruction? Are the media in the North largely part of the forces of domination, or do they rather contribute to real democracy, that is, to ethnic, cultural, social, economic and political diversity and equality? Or do we find the (usual) pattern of contradictions, placing some media on the bad side of domination, some others at the good side of resistance, and some somewhere in the middle?

Examining the evidence, the facts do not seem to give much reason for optimism. To be sure, where ethnic conflict and racism are concerned, most mainstream media will reject extremism, violence, and blatant discrimination and exclusion. They, thereby, follow the official ideology of tolerance and equality propagated by national constitutions and the chartas of the United Nations and other international organisations.

But locally and in actual practice, the role of the media is less positive. It has frequently been documented that ethnicism and racism are exacerbated by at least some of the media, as well as by the political and social elites that control them or have preferential access to them (van Dijk 1991, 1993).

We have witnessed the role of television and much of the press in the rise of nationalism in Serbia (Meeuwis 1993). Radio was used to incite ethnic hatred in Rwanda. Similar observations may be made for the role of the media in ethnic conflicts in South Asia as well as in several parts of the former Soviet Union (for a discussion of their role in formerly communist countries and China, see Sparks 1994).

Sometimes more subtly, but hardly less effectively, the Western press co-produced the refugee scare initiated by politicians (Okojie 1992; van Dijk 1988). Research keeps showing how most of the Western media were and are still engaged in the reproduction of stereotypes and prejudices against the **Others** in or from the South (Hartmann and Husband 1974; Jager and Link 1993; van Dijk 1991). Under the constitutional protection of free speech, and ideologically supported by the

conservative “revolution,” popular radio programs in the USA spread the hate messages of the extreme right directed against minorities, immigrants and women (*Internet* 1995).

The political consequences are unmistakable. Thus, the media helped create the consensus which politicians thankfully interpreted as the popular “resentment” they needed to democratically legitimate the increasingly harsh immigration restrictions in Europe and North America or the marginalization of minorities (Castles and Miller 1993).

More generally and globally, the same prevalent prejudices produced or supported in the media are being used to create the collective states of mind that pitch **Us** in the “modern” and “democratic” West, against **Them**, who, after the demise of communism, are mostly associated with the well-known orientalist schema of a primitive, dictatorial, violent, and terrorist Islam, Arabs, or “fundamentalism” (Said 1979; 1981).

The dominant metaphorical discourse of Western politics and media similarly identify the Southern poor threatening foreign invaders or terrifying waves that would engulf us all. The German slogan “Das Boot ist voll,” or the French nationalist cry “Les français d’abord” is no longer heard only among the radical racist right, but has become increasingly acceptable also among the more respectable parties (Solomos and Wrench 1993). Various versions may be read not only in gory tabloids, but also, more subtly, in the elite press.

The neo-liberal, no-nonsense onslaught on the welfare state is, thus, accompanied by a similarly cynical reaction against minorities and migrants presumably being “spoiling to death.” These groups should finally begin to understand that they not only have rights but also duties in their new homelands, as leading politicians have repeatedly made clear. Though violently denied, racism has reached the top, both in politics and the media. Or rather, as the history of racism shows, it has always (also) been at the top, and in this respect continuity prevails (Lauren 1988; van Dijk 1993).

The social facts confirm this ideological situation, and are at the same time legitimated by it: Unemployment among minorities is two to four times higher than among majorities. Yet, corporate managers use the same social and cultural prejudices to justify their discrimination and to blame the **Others** for their own exclusion.

Such corporate discrimination and exclusion, apart from the misery it causes among minorities, cost billions of dollars in unemployment benefits, welfare checks, and concomitant expenses. Yet, the media generally ignore this as a major problem: what “our people” do wrong is not a newsworthy story. Rather they find the main topics of their news, programs, and movies in the real or alleged crimes of a handful of black or foreign inner city youths, or in the always enticing ethnically biased stories about drugs, riots, and cultural deviance, as research on reporting repeatedly shows.

What is true for the derogation and marginalization of the **Others here**, also applies to the parallel stories about the **Others there**, in the South (East, Middle East). With notable exceptions, this is still the dominant media discourse about crime, violence, terrorism, ethnic conflicts, fundamentalism and other forms of “uncivilised backwardness” in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and large parts of Asia.

It has often been observed that after the demise of communism, the West needed

another enemy. The also otherwise controversial head of NATO, Willie Claes, overtly identified this enemy as Muslim fundamentalism threatening the Southern flank of NATO's stronghold, a statement he later unpersuasively denied.

He was not the first: countless editorials and op-ed articles in the Western press had prepared the ideological and rhetorical terrain that made such assertions plausible, if not very tactful, in official discourse. The cultural elites had their Rushdie affair, their veils, and the freedom of speech to publicly worry about in their attack against cultural **Others**. The political and military elites phrase their panic in terms of terrorism, aggression, and fundamentalist threats in a new domino theory, according to which, after Iran and Sudan, probably Algeria, and maybe Egypt and the rest of the Maghreb would fall into the hands of the "new enemy."

The end of ideology? On the contrary. Only, as long as they are overlooked, ignored or denied, ideologies are most devastating, while identified with rationalism, common-sense, and the taken-for-granted. After all, all sensible people are against violence, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and fundamentalism. But it is thereby conveniently ignored that the deeper causes of such "evils" of the contemporary world are obscured or denied by the same ideologies that have given rise to them.

Again, such ideological developments are not limited to the political, cultural and social elites, and the cheerleaders that garner their broad popular support. These processes in the manufacture of public consent, public discourse, and public opinion, are unthinkable without the active role of the media. Hence, our first impression of this role of the media in the general social and political situation seems to suggest that the media have sided with the powerful. Increasing evidence is being provided that they, thus, contributed to the production and reproduction of the Northern, Western, white, and neo-liberal dominance of economic markets, political hegemony, social marginalization, and cultural mentalities (Chomsky 1992; Herman 1992; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Lee and Solomon 1990; O'Hefferman 1991).

The media did so by providing the dominant news values, headlines, stories, op-ed articles, topics, metaphors, and descriptions that could be used as the basis for the legitimisation and naturalisation of ethnic and social inequality, both locally and globally. They did so by focusing on spectacular topics (true, no longer only coups and earthquakes, but now also drugs, the Mafia and violent ethnic conflict), while ignoring or excluding other relevant stories — especially those that look bad for us:

- poverty in rich countries and its causes;
- everyday racism, especially also among the elites;
- cultural ethnocentrism;
- the position of women in **our** societies (and not only in Muslim society);
- the consequences of imbalances in world trade; and
- the legacies of colonialism and ongoing forms of neo-colonialism.

The list is as familiar as it is incomplete, and so are the media reactions. They consider suggestions about these missing stories as false or irrelevant, as unjustified accusations, as leftist stereotypes, if not as easy excuses of the **Others** failing to take care of their own problems.

In sum, in present global conflicts, and in ongoing and increasingly harsh forms of inequality, mainstream western media are far from innocent or impartial. On the

contrary, they are an inherent part of the problems. Let us, therefore, examine this thesis in somewhat more detail.

## Theoretical Framework

The question about the "role" of the mass media in the (re)production of dominant or alternative ideologies hinges on a conceptual framework in which such general notions as "effects," "influence," and "power" have been widely debated (Bryant and Zillmann 1986). The more the media were found to be powerful, the less independence was attributed to the audience, and vice versa, the more the public was assumed to be autonomous in its media usage, the less powerful the media were thought to be. This is not merely a trivial consequence of the logic of power, but an empirical question about the ways media discourse affects cognition and action in a given situation (Harris 1989). Inconclusive research evidence in this case not only depends on a deficient methodology, but also on inadequate theorising. Let us, therefore, briefly focus on some theoretical aspects of media discourse processing before we return to our main thesis about the ideological role of the media in the world today.

**Media power and mind control.** Summarising a vast theoretical literature on power (see e.g., Lukes 1986), we shall define media power first of all in terms of the social power of groups and institutions. Besides the coercive power of the military, the police, or men raping women and molesting children, social power is usually defined as the **control** of actions, or access to scarce resources of one, dominated group, by (members of) a dominant group. Control of action usually implies loss of some freedom. "Freedom of the press" should, therefore, also be understood as "power of the press."

Given the role of intentions, purposes, and goals in the definition of action, however, action control presupposes **mind control**. This is the essence of persuasive social power, and typical of the power of the media and of other types of public discourse. The traditional study of media "effects," thus, needs to be reformulated in terms of cognitive processes and representations. A socially oriented cognitive science provides insight into these structures and strategies of cognition, and hence offers a foundation for a new understanding of the persuasive power of the media (Graber 1984; Gunter 1987; Harris 1989; van Dijk 1988).

The crucial concept involved in an adequate socio-cognitive theory of mind control is that of a **mental** model (Johnson-Lair 1983; van Dijk and Kintsch 1983; van Oostendorp and Zwaan 1994). A model is a representation (in the episodic part of long term memory) of an experience, that is, of an event observed, participated in, or read/heard about by a social actor. As such, models represent contextual interpretations and evaluations of such events, which are by definition unique and personal. What is sometimes vaguely called a "preferred reading" should thus be made explicit in terms of the precise structures of "preferred models" resulting from specific discourse structures in specific communicative contexts. Discursive strategies of credibility (detailed descriptions, quotes, eye-witness reports, figures, or authoritative sources) are employed to manage the construction (and acceptance) of such preferred models.

However, understanding events or discourses about events is not merely an

individual process. It also needs the integration of relevant beliefs of **socially shared** knowledge and attitudes in the model. Models are, therefore, the crucial interface between the specific and the general, between the personal and the social. The influence of media discourse thus consists, first of all, in the control of the models of media users. This allows and explains the personal (and sometimes dissident) readings of media discourse.

Through generalisation and abstraction, however, such models at the same time may be the basis for the indirect control of social knowledge and attitudes shared by many or most group members. Besides personal conversations, the media precisely have the function to socially “normalise” personal models (“Everybody knows/thinks that...”).

Clusters of related attitudes may finally be organised by an **ideological framework**, consisting of the basic evaluative propositions defining the various symbolic or material interests of a group. Once developed, such ideologies allow group members to develop their own attitudes and models about new social issues and events (van Dijk 1995). In this way, personal mind control becomes social mind control and ideological hegemony.

For instance, discursively describing acts of resistance by black inner city youths as a “race riot” of a violent “mob,” may lead to similarly biased models. If no alternative or resistant interpretations are available, such models may, in turn, create or confirm prejudicial attitudes about “black crime” among the audience, which, in turn, may be organised by a racist ideology.

From this very succinct summary of a theory of media power — defined in terms of the control of mental models and shared social cognitions — it may be concluded that the involved processes are exceedingly complex. Thus, we have not discussed the precise internal structures of models, knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies. Nor have we spelled out how models influence discourse and other social interaction. The route between discourse and social attitudes and ideologies (or vice versa) is long and winding: there are many intervening (and sometimes contrary) variables. Earlier personal experiences (old models) or alternative attitudes and ideologies may lead to the non-acceptance of preferred models. In general, though, if models are consistent with the knowledge and the ideologically based attitudes and interests of group members, they tend to be accepted, especially, if the source is also credible.

Media influence, and hence power, is therefore usually indirect and rarely total. However, where preferred models and social representations can be (partly) controlled, the social consequences are considerable, since these cognitions will control much future interpretation as well as action. Examples of the influence of prejudices and racist ideologies on immigration and employment policies have been discussed above.

**Managing the media: Access.** The power of media discourse is not merely defined in terms of the control of mental models and social representations that are its **consequences**, but also need to be formulated in terms of its **conditions**: Who, indeed, controls media discourse itself? One important dimension of such control is **access**: Which groups have more or less access to the media, and what are the consequences of such access for media discourse?

The patterns of access to public discourse are generally an interesting criterion of social power, that is, a scarce social resource that serves as a basis for symbolic power (van Dijk 1995). Ordinary people usually have active access only to everyday conversations with family members, friends or colleagues, and only passive access to the media: Except for an occasional letter to the editor, or as news topics (e.g., as victims or perpetrators of crimes), they are unable to shape media discourse.

The **elites**, on the other hand, may precisely be defined by their control of text and talk: They are literally the groups that have most to “say” in various social situations and institutions. They are the ones that have preferential and active access to public discourse, in general, and to that of the media, in particular. Daily news gathering routines of beat reporters as well as actual news production multiply favourably the access of elites (Tuchman 1978). Elites serve as reliable sources (e.g., through press conferences or press agents), they are the preferred actors of news reports and TV programs, and the ones who are typically quoted. That is, through media discourse, they are also the groups that potentially have most influence on public opinions, models, and ideologies (Altheide 1985; Altschull 1984; Paletz and Entman 1981; Lichter, Rothman and Lichter 1990).

It follows that the role and power of the media should be defined both, in terms of the mind control of the public at large (including the elites), and in terms of the management of the very conditions of this influence: who controls media discourse, how is access managed, and what are the relations between media elites and other power groups? We may again apply the same proposition from the logic of action: Are the media relatively passive or more independent and autonomous, relative to other elite groups, and how does such a relation of power and dominance show in social cognitions and discourses of journalists?

If we examine the relevant empirical research, the evidence seems to suggest, at least for most Western media, a relationship of mutual dependence. That is, media elites need other elites as sources, actors, and topics, whereas other elites, and especially political elites, need the media as a means to exercise or legitimate their power. Whereas other elites, such as leading politicians, corporate managers, or scholars, provide the crucial conditions and constraints on the manufacture of news, advertising, and programs, media elites largely control actual media discourse and partly the social representations that are its consequence. That is — as we have seen above — the measure of media freedom is also a measure of their power.

Moreover, given similar interests and ideologies (and their usual variation) among media and other elites, the media do not use their power to fundamentally challenge other elites. Rather, dominant ideologies and their variations are **jointly produced** by the elites, but media elites have the special role and persuasive power to control ideological **reproduction** among the population at large. Below, we shall focus on this dimension of media power, but, at the same time, take into account the socio-economic context of such power in the form of the conditions and constraints of other elites, groups, and institutions on the production of media discourse. Unfortunately, although we have some general insights into the psychological and sociological processes, theory and research on the control of media discourse and the social mind as constitutive elements in the reproduction of power and ideologies are still in their infancy.

## Ideological Control

Within the theoretical framework, succinctly summarised above, we now focus on the mechanisms of ideological control. Ideologies have been defined as the “axiomatic” foundation of social cognition. They represent the various interests of social groups (often in relation to other groups, or to social issues) such as their identity, tasks, goals, values, position, and social resources. In that respect, ideologies are like the schemata that groups have about themselves and about their position in the social structure. Ideologies provide the evaluative basis of social practices, including discourse, but their influence is necessarily indirect. That is, at a rather abstract level, they monitor the development, change, and organisation of socially shared attitudes, which in turn control the opinions about social events represented in personal models of social actors; these models, finally, govern the specific social practices of social actors. For instance, propositions of neo-liberal market ideologies as well as racist ideologies influence the development of attitudes about affirmative action (and other attitudes about minorities) among corporate managers, and these attitudes monitor the models that control concrete hiring decisions or discourse about such events.

Ideological processes, however, run in two directions. Once an ideology and its concomitant attitudes have been acquired, they control the models of specific social practices. But when ideologies change, as is our contention for dominant ideologies as described above, we need to explain the conditions of such changes. We then witness the reverse process: models are formed that are no longer consistent with previously dominant ideologies, and if socially shared, these models may then be generalised to different attitudes about specific social issues (such as immigration or employment), which in turn need a modification of the ideological basis.

So, where do “different” models come from? Since models are mental representations of experiences, they are generally inferred from social perception and interaction, in general, and from discourse about social events, in particular. Such models can only be shared and “socialised,” if they are fairly generally known, and such knowledge presupposes public discourse, which is, in turn, largely provided by the mass media (and then by everyday conversations which are, in turn, based on such media discourses). Dominant media stories and their structures are the main source for shared models and for the specific public opinions about social events that are represented in such models.

It follows that a detailed analysis of dominant media discourses provides insight into the models, which indirectly influence the development of new attitudes and ideologies. This influence is most obvious for those issues and situations for which the audience has few other sources of information, or where attitudes and ideologies are not primarily developed on the basis of generally shared everyday experiences.

For instance, the unemployed or discriminated against do not need media stories to provide models and opinions representing such experiences. Media stories that contradict these models of personal experience are, by definition, less credible, and may be discarded as biased. If, however, social actors read media stories that may be interpreted as being consistent with their own experiences, then there will be reasons to generalise and abstract from such “shared” models towards more general attitudes. That is, social actors will then interpret their own experiences as individual examples



of “group experiences,” and develop the general opinions and attitudes that characterise such socially shared representations of the “collective” experience.

However, the media not only provide concrete stories, but also more general opinions (e.g., in background features, editorials, and op-ed articles). These may pre-formulate the conclusions of inferences usually based on models. Instead of learning by personal experience or stories, media users may directly infer elements of new attitudes and ideologies from media discourse, as if by informational short-cuts. Since there are usually several interpretative frameworks for specific models, such media pre-formulations may persuade media users to adopt the preferred ones. Besides preferred models, media users may also accept preferred general knowledge, opinions and attitudes, and ultimately preferred ideologies, as long as these seem to be consistent with their personal experiences (models).

Especially in situations and for issues where such detailed personal models are lacking, media discourse will be comparatively influential, if ideologies have not yet been fully developed. This is especially the case for reports and editorials about international events, general politics and policies, structural features of society, aggregate information (numbers), and information about relatively unknown people and groups. Indeed, it may be assumed that most stories and editorials in the media are about events that are **not** part of people’s everyday experiences and about which media users do not (yet) have detailed attitudes. If such is the case, we should be able to find evidence in dominant media discourses for the overall ideological development in contemporary Western societies.

For instance, what most media users in the West know and think about Islam will largely be due to the mass media, rather than to personal experiences and opinions, unless they have alternative personal or social knowledge and opinions that allow them to counter-read the dominant media discourses. The same is true for many other issues, such as the Third World, the global economy, or ethnic conflicts in other countries. Except for experts, the public, in this case, will largely have to rely on the mass media for its models and social representations, and the diversity of such models and social representations will, thus, depend on the diversity of the information in media discourse.

## **The Conservative Backlash**

If we examine the contemporary media discourse, at least in large parts of the world, and in Europe and the Americas in particular, we must first conclude that the ideological, political, ethnic and social diversity of the media is limited. The demise of communism may have brought some democracy to Eastern Europe, but the global ideological dominance that came with the “victory” of neoliberalism also challenged the ideals of social justice and equality.

In the Americas and in Europe, the leftist press has become virtually extinct (with some notable exceptions, such as in Mexico), as have many of the more progressive parties and organisations (Downing, 1984). Oppositional action groups exist, but are marginal. Although the vague notion of a “dominant ideology” may be theoretically controversial (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 1980; 1990), it seems to apply rather well to the global scene today, also to the media. Although there are increasing doubts about the blessings of the market, and renewed interest in mixed economies, there can

be little doubt about who is in power, and what ideologies dominate.

In this respect, the conservative “revolution,” or rather restoration, in the USA is merely the most recent and prominent example, prepared by Reagan and now celebrated by Gingrich & Co. In the Netherlands, the conservatives became the largest party in recent provincial elections, and similar stories may be told for earlier elections in Italy, Austria, and many other countries. And where the social-democrats still are (as in Spain) or probably will soon be again in power (as in Great-Britain), it is hard to distinguish them from the neo-liberal middle. The Latin-American “fledgling” democracies may have superseded gruesome dictatorships, but only after the popular forces had been destroyed by a combination of military and conservative action.

What is true for the socio-economic domain is also true in the socio-cultural domain. Increasing poverty and violence in the South have led to unprecedented immigration to the North. And to protect its riches and privileges, the North, generally, has reacted with an increase of its oldest of European evils: xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and racism. In the United States, the adoption of Proposition 187 in California is but one of the more conspicuous developments in the minds and practices of a white, Euro-majority against immigration from the South, a resentment that Democrats like Bill Clinton readily exacerbate in order to placate the New(t) Right.

In Europe, this has been a familiar paradigm since the early 1980s. Virtually all European countries have a vigorous extremist, racist right, garnering an increasing percentage of the vote, until a mainstream conservative party will adopt at least some of its xenophobic or nationalist tenets, as is the case in Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Italy, and Austria. Where once refugees were considered with some pity, concerns soon became paternalistic, and now have been transformed into increasingly racist resentment.

Affirmative action, even where it was invented after the pressures of the Civil Rights Movement, viz., in the USA, is under attack, whereas it never really made it in other European countries. Moderate forms of nationalism are no longer suspect, “realism” about immigration and minorities and scepticism about the multicultural society have become prevalent. The few forces that propagated change and diversity in the increasingly multi-ethnic societies in the North have become the target of vicious attacks after having been associated with “political correctness” (Aufderheide 1992). Even the strongest movement for change during the last decades, viz., the women’s movement, is largely on the defensive again, in a climate where not only white people, but especially white men, are defending their exclusive power.

## **The Media and Dominant Ideologies**

After this summary of some indicators of the conservative backlash in the North-West, we may finally examine the role of the media in the reproduction of its underlying ideologies.

First, it is obvious that many of the more general socio-economic and socio-cultural dimensions of the neo-liberal victory and the conservative backlash apply to the media, in particular. Ownership of the media has increasingly come in the hands of large, often multinational corporations (Bagdikian 1983). Their political, social, cultural, and ideological diversity, especially on the left, had been limited by the crucial criteria of

competition and profits.

White middle class men are still in charge, also in the media, although an increase in women's participation may be noted. Although there are still some elite media and journalists that may be described as liberal or even progressive, the vast majority of the press has now become neo-liberal or conservative, and is catering to a white, conservative majority, whose ideologies it helped shape in the first place. Locally, the media may occasionally criticise "the politicians" or government policies, but there is no question of a widespread intellectual and cultural movement, represented or propagated by the media, that might be seen as a basis for alternatives.

Politics and the media, although sometimes seemingly at odds, have basically become ideological bedfellows. This is largely the case for the socio-economic ideologies of neo-liberalism, although some popular opposition against the destruction of the welfare state is acknowledged and occasionally supported.

**Racism and ethnocentrism.** This is even more true for socio-cultural ideologies. We have already seen how mainstream Western media have partly followed the movement of elite and popular forms of resentment against the **Other**, and often even exacerbated it, as is especially true for the tabloids in Great Britain and Germany and the conservative press in Austria, France, and the Netherlands, among other countries (Bonafous 1991; Gordon and Rosenberg 1989; Gruber 1990; Jager and Link 1993; Merten, Ruhrmann et al. 1986; van Dijk 1991; Wodak et al. 1990).

Immigrants, refugees, ethnic minorities, and people from and in the South in general, are increasingly associated with socio-economic and cultural threats, deviance, crime, and violence, or at least with problems primarily blamed on them. In the Netherlands, a recent poll showed that "immigration" had become the major issue of concern among Dutch citizens, although the percentage of immigrants is still far below ten per cent, and the economy is one of the richest in the world. The explanation for such concern is not a harsh economic reality, or a perception of "unfair competition," but an ideological construct that has been created and propagated jointly by politicians and the media to blame all ills of society on the **Others**.

Similar stories may be told about many other countries in the rich North-West, as the spreading immigration scare in Europe and North-America shows. Where the presumed "objectivity" of market forces and the global economy seem unassailable, both among elites and ordinary citizens, there is always the socio-cultural escape, viz., to take it out on those, who cannot defend themselves: the poor, the unemployed, minorities and refugees, as well as women.

The logic of the neo-liberal right seems inexorable in this case: Whereas increased reliance on the market contributes to increasing socio-economic inequalities, conservative ideologies, at the same time, propagate as well as legitimate the socio-cultural inequalities that result from immigration restrictions, blaming the victim, criminalisation, marginalization, increasing discrimination, or the weakening of some the earlier advances of ethnic pluralism and equality. These complex ideological and socio-political processes further prevent the possible solidarisation, and hence the counter-power of social groups at the bottom by fomenting popular racism among the white urban poor, whose socio-economic condition is a fertile ground for accepting prevalent prejudices about unfair competition and favouritism. In a well-known

strategy of blame-transfer, elites are able to attribute the growing racism on society to the lower class.

As we have seen, these ideological processes are most obvious among political elites, whose opportunistic vote-baiting on the right has become clear in several recent elections, most notably in France and the Netherlands. Promises to further limit immigration and to be “tough” on minorities and ethnic relations have become the core of election strategies virtually everywhere in Europe and North America. However, such political strategies would be largely pointless and ineffective without the widespread adherence to racist slogans among the population at large.

Such popular ideologies are, however, unthinkable without the active contribution of the mass media. Following the theoretical framework of persuasive media power, this would mean that the dominant discourses of the mainstream media lead to the construction and adoption of preferred models, which, in turn, are the basis for the inference of preferred attitudes and ideologies.

Research shows that this is, indeed, the case. This does not mean, of course, that all news reports and programs of the mainstream media are blatantly xenophobic or racist, although this may be the case especially for conservative tabloids, such as *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* in the UK, and *Bild Zeitung* in Germany. Less blatantly, the same is, however, true for conservative broadsheets, such as *De Telegraaf* in the Netherlands, *Le Figaro* in France, *Frankfurter Allgemeine* in Germany, *The Daily Telegraph* in Great Britain, or the *Kronenzeitung* in Austria, among others. Together, these conservative newspapers dominate the market: that is, they have preferential access to the minds of the largest part of the population.

Apart from being staunch defenders of neo-liberal ideologies, the leading stories and editorials of these newspapers have always initiated or exacerbated resentment against the first non-European immigrants and continue to do so with the present panic about “waves” of refugees. The discursive strategies employed to manipulate the prevailing models of “ethnic events” are now well-known:

- a general **polarisation** between Us and Them;
- a general focus on a variety of social, economic, and cultural **problems** caused by Them, thereby **blaming the victim**;
- focus on a small set of **negative topics**, such as
  - immigration as invasion, attack, or threat;
  - negative socio-economic consequences of immigration, e.g., unemployment, lack of housing;
  - crime, violence, and drugs;
  - terrorism (especially by Arabs, Islamists)
  - social disintegration: teenage pregnancies, welfare abuse;
  - lacking adaptation to Our customs, or language;
  - cultural difference and deviance (e.g., due to Islam);
- preferential **access** and **quotation** of white elite sources;
- **positive self-presentation**: the good things We do for Them;
- opposition against most forms of active measures in favour of ethnic equality, such as affirmative action, or multicultural education; attacks on “political correctness”; and
- **denial** (or transfer) of racism, and mitigation of discrimination.

These are precisely the key elements needed to construct the preferred models that are most likely to be used in biased ingroup-outgroup attitudes and xenophobic or ethnocentric ideologies: Ingroup favouritism, outgroup derogation and polarisation, while ascertaining that other (humanitarian) ideologies are made less effective, because of the plausible denial of racism. That is — as is the case for the prevalent political discourse — the dominant media proposition reads “We are a tolerant country/people.” Where racism is admitted, it is conveniently attributed “elsewhere,” that is, to the extreme right (in France, Germany, or the Netherlands), to the past (in the USA), to other countries (in the Netherlands), or to the lower class (everywhere).

These observations do not only apply to the conservative press. On the contrary, although there are more ideological variation and occasional dissident voices, and although the style of discourses may be more subtle, the mainstream liberal press follows this general pattern. And whereas the conservative press will emphasise **Their** negative characteristics and **Our** good ones, the liberal press may occasionally admit that also **They** may be victims, and that some of **Us** may also be blamed (e.g., in stories about discrimination). Structural and everyday racism, especially among the elites (and always in the media) is always categorically denied. Anti-racist organisations are general ignored, marginalised, or even violently attacked.

Part of the generally ethnocentric, and sometimes more openly racist coverage of ethnic affairs, might be blamed on those who apparently have easy access to the media, viz., conservative and right-wing politicians. However, most specific strategies mentioned above are specific for the media, and result from more or less independent editorial decisions, even when these happen to be aligned with political and corporate ideologies (for instance, about the causes of minority employment, or about affirmative action).

Finally, that these discursive strategies do indeed contribute to mental control may be concluded from survey and qualitative research among the public at large: prevalent models and opinions, attitudes, and ideologies about ethnic relations largely vary within boundaries set by media discourse. This might suggest that editors, just like other elites, simply “reflect” the dominant ethnic ideologies shared about the white population. However, this is not the case. Further research shows that the influence of ethnic ideologies is largely top down, especially for issues (such as the arrival of the first refugees) about which the general population had no knowledge and no clear attitudes and ideologies. In sum, together with the political elites, the media have largely manufactured the ethnic consensus that now prevails in Europe and North America, a consensus that is increasingly ethnocentric, nationalist, and xenophobic, and which tends to blame socio-economic and socio-cultural problems on immigration and ethnic minorities.

**Other social issues.** I have taken the coverage of ethnic minorities, ethnic relations, and immigration as the most prominent example of the role of the media in the construction of an increasingly conservative ideological paradigm. Here the polarisation of Us and Them has become most obvious and most useful in the usual processes of scapegoating. However, it should be emphasised that this issue, also in the media, is construed as part of larger social, cultural, and economic problematic. Thus, the coded attacks against teenage pregnancies, welfare mothers, drug abuse, or

inner city crime, show the amalgamation of tacit ethnic derogation and more general conservative topics through which not only minorities, but also other socially dominated groups are blamed and marginalised, also in the media (Dines and Humez 1995).

Thus, resistance against affirmative action policies also targets women and the modest gains of the women's revolution, whereas feminism remains associated with negative characteristics (van Zoonen 1994). Similarly, with the demise of communism, also socialist ideals, as well as the groups which defended them, have become discredited and compromised, with obvious consequences for the rights of workers in the increasingly harsh capitalist economy (Glasgow University Media Group 1976; 1980; Puette 1992).

The gradual destruction of the welfare state is represented as a natural consequence of neo-liberalist policies, e.g., of liberalisation, privatisation, and individualisation in virtually all countries of Europe and North America. Besides the ethnic enemy, such conservative political and media ideologies also tend to emphasise the alleged or real threats by the moral enemy, viz., crime, and especially international crime (Mafia, Colombian drug barons). The international War on Drugs as well as on Terrorism, protagonised by the USA, combines crime and alien threats also in prevailing media stories and editorials (Chomsky 1992).

**International affairs.** It is not surprising that such a mixture of dominant conservative, male, and white ideologies also colours the perception of international affairs, and, hence, the ideologies in the North about the South; hence also, the new official NATO ideology about a threatening Islam, the refugee "invasion," the international terrorism-scare, Japan bashing in the USA, the global war on drugs, and so on. That is, threats and evil are located elsewhere — and after the obsession with communism from the East (strategically used especially to control leftist forces at home) — is now virtually always in the South.

A bomb explodes in Oklahoma during this writing, and although no suspects were yet caught, and no leads were found, the governor of this state "in the heart of America" voices what many have thought in the first place: foreigners! Hence his plea to further limit and control immigration. *The International Herald Tribune* (of April 21, 1995) headline: "THIS WAS AN ATTACK ON THE UNITED STATES," citing Bill Clinton across the full width of the page, also implies that bombs and terrorism are by definition alien. Op-ed articles in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* published after the bombing blatantly focused again on international, alien, or Arab terrorism. And when the first suspects of the bombing appeared to be "true Americans," headlines in the USA explicitly had to mention that they were "white" to contradict the prevalent prejudice that terrorists are usually alien and non-white.

This is no surprise if we further find that virtually all editorials and op-ed articles during 1993 in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* associate "terrorism" with Muslims, Arabs, or the Middle East, and rarely with the US trained death-squads in Central America, the attack on abortion clinics, or with the arms lobby of the National Rifle Association.

Reluctantly for some influential columnists, home-grown, white extremism may finally be acknowledged (though called "hate crime" instead of "terrorism"), but here

also the process of blaming the **Others** occurs: They are described as small, marginal, insignificant, or lunatic groups, whose ideas and motivation in no way may be linked to the tenets of the Conservative Revolution. In the same way, conservative parties in Europe violently reject any blame for increasing xenophobia or the attacks of skinheads against immigrants and minorities. At the same time, popular radio programs in the USA have widely broadcast racist, sexist and otherwise extremist voices of such hate groups.

Thus, threats, violence, drugs, crime, and cultural deviance are generally sought and found by politicians and media in the ghettos of the (mostly black, or poor) **Others at home**, or the global ghettos abroad, in the South. The parallelism in the coverage of **Them**, here and abroad, is remarkable in virtually all forms of elite discourse: in the media, in political discourse, in textbooks, in scholarly studies, and in corporate text and talk. In that respect, dominant media discourse does not stand alone, but partakes in a more general conservative discourse about the **Others**. This parallelism is not merely a mode of speaking, but based on deep-seated Western, European ideologies of ethnocentric and — sometimes blatantly racist — superiority and feelings of priority. This is not only true for “race,” but also for gender and class.

To be sure, racism is violently denied, since official tolerance is the dominant ethics after the Holocaust and the Civil Rights Movement. But many studies have shown that egalitarian opinions may be a thin veneer of respectability, and that a small economic crisis may be enough to reveal the deeper levels of European resentment against those with a different colour or culture.

The elites are eager to make us believe that they are exempt from such base feelings, and readily blame them on others, viz., ordinary white folks who are said to feel threatened by the alien “invasion.” But closer analysis shows that everyday racism is as prevalent in the newsroom, the boardroom, the classroom, and the courtroom, as it is in other rooms. With the fundamental difference that elite racism makes a real difference for those who are its targets, viz., in their chances to immigrate, obtain a residence permit, a job, housing, a good education, and so on. One racist journalist (and a sympathetic newspaper) may create or exacerbate prejudiced models and attitudes among millions of the majority, one racist minister of the Interior (and a condoning government and parliament) may make the lives of millions of minorities miserable, because of his harsh immigration and policing laws.

And what is true for the derogation of minorities in the North, is also true for other marginalised social groups at home, as well as for many of the peoples and nations in the South. Media stories and editorials, government policies, and corporate strategies may combine in a cynical, neo-liberal onslaught on those groups and people, who are seen as a threat to “freedom,” that is, to the power of the few.

## Concluding Remark

This is merely a rough sketch of the West and its media today. Much of the scholarly evidence to fill in this picture is still missing, but there is enough evidence that shows that its outlines are already clear. As media scholars we may be pessimistic, and simply observe the general trends towards increasingly market-oriented, neo-liberal, conservative, populist, nationalist, and xenophobic media. We may also

take a more critical position, and move to the side of a fast growing number of victims of these dominant ideologies.

There are vast domains of critical media research that remain unexplored. To my knowledge, there are less than a dozen people world-wide, who actively study and publish, for example, about racism in the media.

Post-modern scepticism, also in media research, not only often represents a political backlash, but also a theoretical one, that is, a lapsus in philosophical impressionism. The complexity of the relations between society, politics, media discourse, ideologies, and the public requires complex, highly sophisticated, and critical theories, not fashionable **écriture**.

If we talk about the influence of media messages, we should begin with an explicit and systematic analysis of text and talk, and go beyond superficial content analysis or a simplistic enumeration of repertoires. If we want to understand media effects and uses, we should then examine the detailed cognitive processes and representations involved, so that we know what it means exactly when we speak about (changes in the) opinions, attitudes, or ideologies of the public, and how these are, in turn, related to the social practices of media users. The same is true for the microsociology of news and program making, and for the relations between social contexts and the minds of media workers. And we might as well start to integrate, finally, various micro level insights with macro level studies of economic, institutional, and cultural constraints of the media and their consequences.

Among the large number of crucial research topics, we advocate a thorough and critical study of the relations between media discourse and practices, and the dominant ideologies that are at the basis of contemporary western policies in the economy, politics, social affairs, and culture. In the same vein, we might look for, and help formulate, alternative anti-ideologies capable of supporting the counter-power necessary to resist the prevailing forces against ethnic and gender equality, multiculturalism, and real democracy.

The largely critical tenet of this contribution should not be interpreted as a form of pessimism and passive "victimism." On the contrary, critical analysis is a condition for serious and well-informed resistance. True, the conservative backlash may have become dominant in politics and the media. This does not mean, however, that there are no media and journalists who critically oppose it. These are the main change agents that will play a role in the resistance against the right. We should make sure that our research is solid enough to provide them with the most effective strategies of change.

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