COMMUNICATION AND FREEDOM: AN ALTHUSSERIAN READING OF MEDIA - GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

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Abstract

This essay draws on the work of French philosopher Louis Althusser, particularly his contributions to the development of ideology, in an assessment of the relationship between communication and freedom. Althusser's understanding of freedom as an ideological creation not only privileges the role of ideology in the construction of social relationships, but also calls into question the complex interplay between media, society, and freedom. The current billion dollar anti-drug public service announcement deal is interrogated in an effort to illustrate how the United States government has been inserting ideologically driven propaganda into prime time television shows with the full co-operation and approval of network executives. The anti-drug advertising deal provides an example of how freedom may be compromised as the ideological state apparatus of television places ruling class, government sanctioned ideas into the forefront of society.

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Freedom is the essence of humanity. Whether we reject it or embrace it, the embodiment of freedom remains integral to the human spirit. Marx tells us that human beings are "destined to freedom" (quoted in Althusser 1990, 224), that freedom is a fundamental component of what makes us all human.

Since the colonial foundations of the United States, media have often served as symbols of freedom and democracy. Enlightenment thinkers such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine envisioned a press that would not only serve as a check on governmental activities, but perhaps more importantly, would educate and inform citizens, freeing them from the bonds of ignorance and oppression. Throughout the history of the U.S. newspapers, radio, television, and other media properties have been thought to "free" citizens from spatial-temporal limitations, creating in Habermas's (1989) words, "public spheres" which not only provide information but which also serve emancipatory interests.

In contrast with prevailing Enlightenment-grounded views of the relationship between communication and freedom, French theorist Louis Althusser rejects an understanding of the emancipatory potential of media. Althusser maintains that in contemporary capitalist societies that the concept of freedom is merely an ideological construction used by both the power elite as well as those being oppressed to justify their specific conditions of existence. Rather than acknowledging any material reality associated with the idea of freedom, Althusser insists that the notion that all people are free is merely an imaginary construction which helps to "mystify" the exploited and keep them in line while reinforcing the power of the ruling class (1990, 235). The ideology of freedom is lived by both the elite and the working class and traps both groups in a set of relationships that are necessary to justify their specific material conditions of existence. Althusser's understanding of freedom as an ideological creation not only privileges the role of ideology in the construction of social relationships, but also calls into question the complex relationships between media, society, and freedom.

Over the years, three different meanings have been associated with the concept of ideology; researchers have not only used these meanings interchangeably but have also used a combination of these different meanings in their work. According to social theorist Raymond Williams, ideology has been defined as:

> *(i) a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group;*
> *(ii) a system of illusory beliefs — false ideas or false consciousness — which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge;*
> *(iii) the general process of the production of meanings and ideas*
> (Williams 1977/1988, 54).

Althusser's development of the concept of ideology not only differs radically from the traditional Marxist definition of ideology as false consciousness, it also contrasts with other more neutral understandings of the term, adding yet another dimension to this concept. For Althusser, "ideology is a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 1971, 162). This imaginary relationship has a material existence; however human consciousness is not produced by class positions or political and economic power but instead through autonomous ideological practices that operate in autonomous ideological apparatuses and transform individuals into social beings. Ideology expresses individuals' lived experience rather than their actual reality; it is invested

with practical behaviours that offer representations to help people live their lives.

Ideology "interpellates individuals as subjects" (Althusser 1971, 170), who exist both as free subjects as well as subjected individuals. In other words, ideology calls to individuals and in a sense recruits or transforms them into subjects. Althusser uses the example of a person being called to or hailed on the street, and explains how in the process of turning around to answer the call, that the individual becomes a subject. It is the recognition and acceptance that the individual is the person being called to, or chosen, that turns him or her into a subject. For Althusser, it is impossible to get outside of ideology, yet individuals are reticent to admit that ideology is all encompassing. In the new millennium, it is commonly suggested that ideology is no longer a valid concept:

> *what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside of it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside of ideology* (Althusser 1971, 75).

Not only does a denial of ideology work in favour of the ruling class, but perhaps more importantly, the lack of any understanding of the role of ideology actually encourages people to accept the exploitation and oppression in their lives willingly, without seeing themselves as manipulated or coerced.

From Althusser's perspective, ideology reproduces the relations of production primarily through the Ideological State Apparatuses, a group of specialised institutions including: churches and temples, public and private schools, family units, trade-unions, the press, advertising, and popular culture, political parties, sports, and the arts. The Ideological State Apparatuses function primarily through ideology rather than through violence, but when necessary these institutions may also use repression, although it is often concealed as socialisation, discipline, and censorship (Althusser 1971). These cultural institutions guide our thoughts, beliefs, and interests and reinforce the status quo, discouraging individuals from challenging their existing place in society. Ideological State Apparatuses help us to keep some images, experiences, and memories alive and prominent in our minds while distorting and forgetting others and ultimately they encourage us to see a "correct" vision of our society as well as our specific place within it.

The Ideological State Apparatuses work with the Repressive State Apparatus, which is also known as the "machine of repression" because it functions primarily through violence. The Repressive State Apparatus exists in the public sphere and encompasses the police, courts, prisons, army, government, and the administration. Specifically, the Repressive State Apparatus helps to maintain the power of the ruling class through the exploitation of the labour power of the working class (Althusser 1971, 142-46).

Although the concept of ideology was at one time central to an understanding of social and cultural theories of media, in recent years it has for the most part fallen out of favour. Some researchers now find the notion of ideology problematic because of its neglect of human agency, while others suggest that the term is overly broad and tries to explain too many different things. On the other side of the abyss, postmodernists maintain that in our post-ideological epoch, any notion of blatant manipulation from the top is simplistic and perhaps even ludicrous because personal response is the only reality that matters these days.

Cultural theorists have responded to and acted against Althusser's structuralist conceptualisation of ideology since the early 1970s. Initially drawn to Althusser because of his understanding of the interrelated relationship of ideological practices within society (Hardt 1992, 186), researchers soon began to distance themselves from Althusser's conceptualisation of ideology. For example, Tony Bennett suggests that Althusser attempts to make ideology do to much. "On one hand, ideology is viewed as a practice, the product of a real, materially constrained process of production" (Bennett 1979, 188). However, Bennett suggests that Althusser also views ideology as an invariant structure to which we all must ultimately conform.

Williams maintains that although scholars attempt to make the concept of ideology represent a variety of different things, that all of these versions of ideology still abstract the material social activities of thinking and imagining from the social process. Instead of trying to make ideology represent yet another thing, Williams instead draws on Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Williams restructures Gramsci's understanding of the domination of a ruling class through ideology, through the shaping of popular consent, to include both the structural elements of ideology as well as the cultural practices, conventions, and expectations which "constitutes a sense of reality for most people in society" (Williams 1973, 9).

According to Williams, ideology represents a formal system of meanings, beliefs, and values that delineate a type of world view or outlook which tends to overlook the actual experiences of individuals and focuses instead on a more generalised system. From Althusser's perspective, each ruling class possesses a worldview, which it imposes on the subordinated classes, who without their own ideological consciousness, must struggle to develop against this dominant ideology. Ultimately, for Althusser it is impossible for individuals to get outside of ideology; alternative thought can be accepted, and at times even publicised to illustrate diversity, but truly oppositional positions are always converted, subverted, and/or appropriated by the dominant culture.

In contrast, Williams maintains that the concept of hegemony recognises the wholeness of the entire social process and acknowledges that oppositional and alternative conditions emerge within the cultural process and that individuals may be able to challenge and change the dominant ideological position (Williams 1977/1988, 113-123). Williams's emphasis on hegemony is meant to include the dominant ruling class position as well as the possibility of challenges to and resistance of that dominant ideology by individual members of society.

However, in recent years, particularly in American Cultural Studies research, the emphasis is more and more frequently placed on individual acts of resistance that are separated from any social or historical context. To borrow Ien Ang's (1991) book title, in "desperately seeking the audience," currently researchers seem to overlook the dominant structures of society. Rather than acknowledging the power of the dominant culture to maintain the status quo, the emphasis is now often placed on individuals' apolitical reactions or responses to cultural practices and artefacts. Cultural Studies practitioners like John Fiske reassure us that resistance may even come from a sense of empowerment that an individual feels when confronting his or her environment. Audience response is no longer merely central — in many cases, individual readings and responses are now all that matter.

For example, in her article, "Consuming Doubts: Gender, Class and Consumption in *Ruby in Paradise* and *Clueless*," Angela Curran dismisses Althusser's position that ideological messages supporting the status quo are imbedded into popular culture. She argues instead that films, as an art form, may "inspire viewers to struggle for social change" (Curran 2000, 222). Rejecting any connection between films and the culture industry, Curran not only sees irony and social satire in the Hollywood film *Clueless*, but insists that the parody and imitation represents social criticism which encourages viewers to resist the pressures of consumer society.

Curran's analysis illustrates a growing trend away from the reliance on an overarching theoretical framework, in favour of the multiple yet fragmented audience readings of postmodernism. Angela McRobbie explains that postmodernism rejects any overarching theoretical perspective and it:

> *implicitly challenges the narrowness of structuralist vision, by taking the deep interrogation of every breathing aspect of lived experience by media imagery as a starting point. So extensive and inescapable is this process that it becomes impossible to privilege one simple moment* (McRobbie 2000, 386-7).

In the realm of advertising, postmodernism is now openly embraced and proponents of this perspective suggest that any emphasis on ideological manipulation must now be viewed as naive and passé. Researchers currently suggest that advertising messages cannot be read literally and instead are open to a myriad of interpretations from audience members (Brown, Stephens, Maclaran 1999). Paulie Boutis finds that in our postmodern environment, the relationship between production and advertising has been "radically subverted." This is a change that he suggests has resulted in the elevation of image to its lofty perch as the solitary construction of truth, as well as the belief that advertising is now the "public conscience" of society (Boutis 2000, 11). Insistent that postmodern consumers are no longer manipulated by advertisements, Boutis maintains that audiences now are free to respond to advertising on a "mediated, knowing level," and currently react best to irreverent and self-referential advertising (Boutis 2000, 21).

Advertising's current carte blanche rejection of the possibility of manipulation may be seen to reinforce Althusser's understanding of the role of ideology in maintaining the status quo. Advertising researchers' seemingly naive rejection of the possibility of manipulation may be seen to beg the postmodern question: can something exist if it isn't readily observable?

On the surface it may seem comforting to dismiss the relevance of ideology in contemporary American society and expedient to maintain that Althusser's assessment of freedom as an ideological construction is wrong. However, there are specific warning signs in the economic, political, and cultural realms of U.S. society which encourage us to question this prevailing wisdom, particularly as it relates to the relationship between communication and freedom. One such example comes from the current anti-drug public service announcement deal that demonstrates the co-operation between the U.S. government and the media, and illustrates the contemporary American relationship between media and freedom. This example exposes how the U.S. government has been inserting ideologically-driven propaganda into prime time television shows with the full co-operation and approval of network executives. An assessment of the current anti-drug public service announcement deal may help us to understand the centrality of the role of

ideology in the relationship between media and American society and it may help us to observe how freedom is compromised by such constructions. A consideration of the response from government officials, critics, and viewers to the public service announcement deal, also illustrates some of the larger societal issues associated with the way ideology interpellates individuals.

On January 13, 2000, Daniel Forbes, a reporter for the on-line magazine *Salon*, broke the story that for the past two years members of the Clinton administration have been weaving anti-drug messages directly into network television programming. According to Forbes's "prime time propaganda" scoop, government officials review, alter, and approve scripts and advance footage of top rated television shows including "ER," "Beverly Hills 90210," "Chicago Hope," "The Cosby Show," "The Drew Carey Show," "The Practice," and "Seventh Heaven," in order to conform with the administration's anti-drug stance. Five networks: NBC, ABC, CBS, WB, and Fox have filled more than one hundred episodes of their television shows with anti-drug messages in order to benefit from a little known but lucrative government advertising subsidy (Forbes 2000).

In 1997 Congress first approved a five-year, one billion-dollar anti-drug advertising campaign that required media outlets to match advertising time, bought by the government, with an equivalent number of public service announcements (PSAs). This half-price advertising deal essentially will provide two billion dollars worth of advertising for Congress's one billion dollar financial allocation. Approximately two-thirds of the budget is earmarked for television advertising; the rest is spread among a variety of other media including newspapers, magazines, radio, billboards, and Internet advertising. The paid advertisements began running on the five networks during the summer of 1999 and are targeted both at the "nation's youth and adult influencers" (Forbes 2000).

Since the beginning of broadcasting, public service announcements have promoted a diverse variety of social causes including AIDs awareness, seat belt usage, crime prevention, and pollution control. During World War II, PSAs encouraged citizens to purchase war bonds and during the cold war era threat of nuclear war, a cartoon character known as Bert the Turtle was created to warn children to "duck and cover" in case of a nuclear explosion. Broadcasters regularly ran free PSAs to help satisfy the public service requirement mandated by the Federal Communications Commission. In the early 1990s, commercial broadcasters began to fight their public service commitment arguing that public service announcements embedded in commercials such as Budweiser's "Know When to Say When" campaign fulfilled their public responsibility. At this time networks also began to showcase their own television programming and personalities in the PSAs that they did run, a marketing practice that critics insist distorts the intention of public service messages (McChesney 1999, 70). By 1997, the number of PSAs had significantly declined prompting former FCC Chairman Reed E. Hundt to comment that public service advertisements "have dried up and disappeared like rain in the forest" (Farhi 1997, 10C).[1]

While the advertising campaign may have seemed like a wind-fall for television networks during a slower 1997 economy, recent demand for television advertising and a new revenue source of income from "dot-com ads" has helped cool the networks interest in the anti-drug deal. In response, McCaffrey offered the networks a compromise: networks can reduce the number of anti-drug public serv-

ice announcements that they are required to run if they incorporate anti-drug themes into their most popular television shows.[2]

According to Alan Levitt, an official with the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, all five of the networks are participating in the compromise arrangement and have already saved more than twenty million dollars in advertising costs. The revised program gives government officials the opportunity to view television programs in advance and negotiate changes that will create "a new, more potent strain of the anti-drug social engineering" (Forbes 2000). Levitt explained that the Office of National Drug Control Policy might suggest changes regarding how a line should be rewritten to show characters turning down drugs, or how a scene could be changed to show characters who are ruining their lives because of their drug habit (Lacey 2000, 1A).[3]

While network executives may have knowingly entered into this arrangement with the Clinton administration, most of the television shows' writers and producers had no prior knowledge of this arrangement. When they were asked about the deal they felt that it would now undermine the credibility of anti-drug messages, "which would now be seen as motivated by financial rather than moral considerations" (Macintyre 2000).

Forbes, a New York based freelance writer whose work often focuses on issues of social policy and the media, interviewed twenty writers, producers, and production executives working on top network television shows and reported that only one person had ever heard anything about the anti-drug arrangement. John Tinker, last season's "Chicago Hope" executive producer, said that although he thought that he was well informed about his program, he knew nothing about the government's incentives. When Tinker was told about the PSA deal, he called it "manipulative" and "disturbing" (Forbes 2000).

An Althusserian assessment of the public service announcement deal certainly agrees with Tinker's assessment of media manipulation; it also maintains that the network anti-drug advertising campaign illustrates how freedom is compromised as the ideological state apparatus of television places ruling class, government sanctioned ideas into the forefront of society.

Not surprisingly, government officials credit the public service announcement advertising campaign, as well as the anti-drug programming, for a fifteen- percent drop in drug use among young adults during the last year. Overall they are defending the arrangement as an effective way to "spread anti-drug messages to young people without infringing on creativity" (Lacey 2000). Unwilling to acknowledge any manipulation of the public, Bob Weiner, a spokesman for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy said, "I guess we plead guilty to using every lawful means of saving America's children" (quoted in Lacey 2000).

President Clinton is insisting that the arrangement is not prime time propaganda but rather a partnership between the government and the networks. The president is focusing on the "benign content" of the anti-drug messages as well as the health benefits of the campaign; overall, he considers the program beneficial but reminds the public that there are still "too many kids using drugs" (quoted in Morgan 2000). The rhetoric of public officials clearly distinguishes between positive pro-social information and the seemingly dangerous messages of propaganda and espouses an ideological position that finds the idea of pro-social public manipulation an oxymoron.

A few media critics have questioned the legality of the deal and are wondering about the First Amendment implications of this practice. The *Salon* article quoted Andrew Jay Schwartzman, president of the Media Access Project as saying, "This is the most craven thing I've heard of yet. To turn over content control to the federal government for a modest price is an outrageous abandonment of the First Amendment ... The broadcasters scream about the First Amendment until McCaffrey opens his checkbook" (quoted in Forbes 2000). Nieman Foundation curator, Bill Kovach is also dismayed that the networks are selling out their audiences and calls the deal "a form of mind control" (quoted in Forbes 2000). Yet it is the limited amount of money that networks are negotiating for which seems to be the primary issue for these critics. Such a perspective leads us to wonder if they might be less concerned about the anti-drug deal if the networks held out for more money?

Other critics suggest that the negative response to the advertising campaign is merely a "knee-jerk suspicion of anything authored by government" (Williams 2000, 29A). They applaud the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy for embedding drug messages directly into television programming where they will have a fighting chance against the advertising clutter and they generally see the incorporation of pro-social messages as evidence that the government is acting responsibly.

Writers like Marjorie Williams find it laughable that the government could undermine the creative integrity of shows like "Beverly Hills 90210" or "Sabrina the Teenage Witch." The advertising deal is obviously not a problem for *Los Angeles Times* media critic Howard Rosenberg. Rosenberg satirises other critics who dare to challenge the government advertising deal in his spoof from the White House Office of Optional Programming Services (WHOOPS) which includes the following example:

> *Josh Whedon, Executive Producer,*
> *"Buffy the Vampire Slayer," the WB*
>
> *Dear Mr. Whedon;*
>
> *Having Buffy enter college this season was a stroke of genius. By the way, you may have noticed that Chelsea Clinton is also attending college. Just a thought: What if Chelsea and Buffy were to meet in an episode? One possibility would be for them to become friends at a basketball game between their respective schools, Stanford and University of California Sunnydale.*
>
> *Afterward, Chelsea could join Buffy in combating the dark evils that lurk among us. For example, they could join in destroying a vampire who resembled, say, Linda Trip. Or even a certain former special prosecutor* (Rosenberg 2000, 1F).

It is clear that Rosenberg finds the notion of imbedding ideological messages in prime time television ludicrous. Yet, his knee-jerk rejection of any possibility of media manipulation illustrates just how insidious ideologically driven messages are once they become a part of our common sense.

A few critics suggest that it is unnecessary to worry about government messages being placed in network programming because this type of message is likely to be there anyway. Such a perspective maintains that since television producers

are reticent to go against the prevailing social attitudes, or the specific interests of advertisers, that network programming always reinforces the contemporary status quo. For example, Marjorie Williams notes that drug use is a major problem in American society. In response to the problem, she wants liberal media critics to focus their complaints on important issues such as "violence and sex and the lust for goods that the iron fist of the market insistently pounds into the lives of my children" (Williams 2000, 29A).

Response from *Salon* readers also focuses on the righteousness of these pro-social anti-drug messages rather than on any type of discussion about audience manipulation. They chastise *Salon* for making the deal sound "underhanded and illegal" and commend the government for taking positive steps to solve the drug problem. As one reader noted:

> *To accuse the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) of "mind control" for working with broadcast networks to include anti-drug messages in programming is ludicrous. To be shocked by the implication that someone other than the creative geniuses who came up with "Two Guys, a Girl and a Pizza Place" have been influenced by something outside their bubble worlds is absolutely hilarious* (*Salon* 2000).

The majority of feedback from government officials, media critics, and viewers alike differentiates between the government inserting what they see as pro-social messages into television content from any attempts to manipulate viewers by showcasing "untrue" propaganda. But the issue here is not merely whether the messages are good or bad but rather the knowledge that ideological messages are being placed into popular culture venues and that these messages are being accepted by viewers and critics alike with minimal questioning or concern. The fact that these messages seem beneficial only helps to aid in their rapid dispersal throughout society. In recent years, thanks to a sustained governmental war on drugs, the notion that anti-drug propaganda is necessary and righteous has become a part of our collective common sense, which of course is precisely Althusser's point. Once ideological messages are incorporated into society, it becomes virtually impossible to get outside of them, to question their validity or morality, without being written off as socially deviant. When messages become part of our common sense they begin to seem natural and normal beliefs that can help us to understand and actively participate in or complex contemporary culture.

Ultimately the intention of this paper is not to reject the concept of hegemony or even a Cultural Studies approach to understanding the complex interplay between media and American society. It is instead to revisit Althusser's concept of ideology as a way to stem the current trend away from a consideration of societal structures in favour of fragmented audience readings. Any analysis of the relationship between media and culture must certainly include audience response, but it should also include a consideration of the social, economic, and political ideological conditions, pressure, and structures of society.

Ideological messages are usually difficult to identify, particularly after they become ingrained as a distinctive part of our common sense. However, the anti-drug public service announcement deal gives us a rare opportunity to observe the blatant manipulation of the American public, by the government, with the sustained help of the media. What remains surprising is the significant level of denial still

associated with this case. Obviously, if we cannot see these messages as ideological constructions, we cannot resist these messages, nor can we understand what they are and how they frame our individual and collective realities. No matter what Cultural Studies practitioners choose to see in individual response to media messages, without an understanding of how the prevailing ideology is constructed in these messages and how it interpellates us as subjects, there can be no hope of resistance or change. The exclusion of seemingly pro-social messages from the realm of media manipulation, threatens our freedom as much as other ideologically constructed information. For Althusser, pro-social messages, like all other ideologically driven information, merely help us to buy into the prevailing political and economic system which works to harnesses our personal freedom for what they tell us is "our own good."

Notes:

1. General Barry R. McCaffrey, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy initially saw the billion dollar anti-drug matching campaign as a way to encourage broadcasters to reduce self-promotional time and instead invest more heavily in issues of the public interest. Hundt initially opposed McCaffrey's anti-drug campaign because he felt that since broadcasters use public airways, they should be required to show public service announcements for free. "'It's a shame,' Hunt said. 'The public shouldn't have to be in the position where it has to buy the right to use its own medium'" (quoted in Pasternak 1998, 1A).

2. McCaffrey, a Vietnam War hero who is often referred to as the "drug czar," outlined a complicated system of credits during a House appropriations subcommittee: "An on-strategy story line that is the main plot of a half-hour show can be valued at three 30-second ads. If there is an end tag with an 800 number for more information at the end of a half-hour show, it is valued at an additional 15-second ad. A main story line in an hour-long prime-time show is valued at five 30-second ads, while such a story line in a one-hour daytime show is valued at four 30-second ads" (quoted in Lacey 2000, 1A).

3. For example, the government bought approximately twenty million dollars worth of anti-drug advertising time from News Corp, the global media conglomerate that owns Fox network. In order to partially recoup some of the matching advertising that Fox owed the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, it submitted a two-part "Beverly Hills 90210" program which focused on a character's "downward spiral into addiction." After the Office of National Drug Control Policy previewed each segment and negotiated specifics regarding the content and story line, a Fox executive said that the episodes were eventually valued at between five hundred thousand and seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars towards the repayment of matching advertising dollars (Forbes 2000).

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