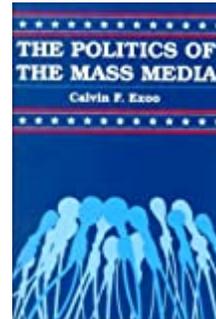


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Calvin F. Exoo.** *The Politics of the Mass Media.* St. Paul, Minn.: West Publishing Co., 1994. 300 pp. \$28.75 (paper), ISBN 978-0-314-02891-4.



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In this introduction to influences of modern mass media on everyday life in America, the author employs the cultural hegemony approach as initially formulated by the Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* during the late 1920s, as an overarching theoretical framework. With the help of many vivid examples he compares this with two competing perspectives, which are not tenable ultimately, as he tries to demonstrate: the counter-thesis of the “new class” and the counter-thesis of what he calls “the cultural democracy of markets.” The first of these comes from the school of neo-conservatives which argues that an emerging stratum of anti-capitalist liberals is now in control of the media and their basic messages. The second is centrist and often demonstrated by the work of members of the Popular Culture Association, Exoo contends. Its basic tenet is that a culture rooted in commerce, such as the American is, is a democratic culture. Mass media can only achieve their greatest audiences by giving a majority of the people what it wants, and popular culture merely mirrors what the people desire. The book opens with a chapter on selective perception in the ways US mass media have presented the Persian Gulf War—in order to demonstrate a persistent cultural hegemony of the “ethos of capitalist individualism” and belief in the American Way. The second chapter focuses on the structural bias of the selection and framing of news, with two strong ten-

dencies: trivialization of the news (emphasis on proximity, sensationalism and familiarity, timeliness, and novelty) at the cost of a deeper coverage of socially significant issues, and support for the powers that be. Especially the ways in which politics become trivialized, through dramatization and personalization of social issues, and deliberate strategies of impression management by politicians, are articulated here. How politicians get across to the general public, as constantly measured through surveys and opinion polls, seems to have become more important than their actual political behavior. The third chapter deals with the sources of news bias, which the author finds in the commercial imperative and pressures from advertisers and sponsors, government pressures and censorship, sources of the news—which are partly dominated by the public relations industry, conservative think tanks, corporate-produced “video news releases,” and corporate-ruled “media blitzes”—and, paradoxically, also the role of journalists’ norms in upholding specific interpretations of “newsworthiness,” “objectivity,” and “common sense,” as well as reliance on witnesses and “reliable sources” such as press secretaries, public relations officers, and “pseudoevent stage managers.” Chapter four covers the political impact of mainstream Hollywood films, their role in public opinion formation and affirmation of the dominant ideology. In the next two chapters the politics and ideological impact of

prime time television and advertising are highlighted. The final chapter is an expose on “alternative media” (mostly leftist journals, magazines, television, and film productions) and “alternative lives,” in which less time is spent on any sort of modern mass media, which are only used very selectively and to the real benefit of their users, in order to lead more active lives.

*The Politics of Mass Media* is written in accessible English for a general, educated audience. The author does not hide his liberal- leftist orientation, but avoids falling into the trap of dogmatic reasoning. He offers well-constructed arguments and interesting facts on the actual functioning of mass media in the American society, often using relevant data from general surveys and opinion polls. Exoo also presents brief intermezzos on the history of the mass media in the USA, to reveal foreshadowings and beginnings of current tendencies. He does not follow the trendy trend of new “cultural populism” in cultural studies—which puts much emphasis on the semiotic liberation of audiences through their active appropriation of media contents, often at the expense of ideology critiques and analyses of the power games that are involved as well. On the contrary, he tries to unravel specific workings of the various mass media which may entail one-sided influences of powerful elites and agencies on “ordinary people” in contemporary America (to whom all of his readers occasionally belong), without taking recourse to a simplistic conspiracy theory.

Yet there are flaws. I am not fully convinced that a Gramscian perspective is an adequate framework to tackle the problems at issue. Despite its subtleties, it remains within the general framework of a Marxist approach of “false consciousness” in (neo)capitalist societies, in terms of various socialization processes of “the people” into a taken-for-granted, general consensus, es-

pecially through mass media which give preferential access to the definitions of those in power. In Exoo’s book, between this framework and the empirical findings concerned are only rather loose connections. Here the Gramscian perspective functions as a handy framework to present the many—intrinsically interesting—facts and insights rather than a good theory which provides possible explanations. Recent European contributions to mass communication studies contain crucial components for the formulation of such a theoretical framework. (See Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, 3rd ed., 1994, for a general overview.) Especially the ways in which audiences themselves actually “read” media texts, and show “differential decoding”, need to be incorporated into this theoretical perspective, and therefore be studied empirically. This may reveal that people show semiotic power with regard to the mass media in specific cases, and are not just passive recipients.

Also, Exoo does not do justice to the diversity of approaches by members of the Popular Culture Association. They do certainly not all adhere to the “cultural democracy theory.” Furthermore, it should be stressed that there is still a good old tradition of investigative journalism in the US which sometimes leads to excellent forms of muckraking and debunking—even within the dominant mass media. This kind of journalism does not necessarily only produce surface explanations as Exoo suggests. It would have been worthwhile to pay attention to the mass communication processes that are involved in such cases, in order to uncover possible counter-strategies within these media, beside the “alternative media” and “alternative lives,” which are as yet reserved to only small numbers of utopists. Despite these criticisms, I consider this book to be a valuable addition to the literature in this highly relevant field of interest.

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