

A-Level Sociology



**A Resource-Based
Learning Approach**

**The Mass Media and Popular Culture:
Ownership and Control 2**

Introduction

Thus far we have looked in broad terms at two main sets of ideas:

1. Firstly, ideas relating to the way in which the mass media is owned in our society and the historical tendency of media organizations (like other economic organizations in Capitalist society) towards increasing concentration of ownership and conglomeration of interests.

2. Secondly, ideas relating to the concepts of culture and ideology. In basic terms, the attempt to define and operationalise these concepts in a generalized way. We can now start to bring these ideas together by trying to outline different sociological interpretations of the relationship between economic ownership and control, on the one hand, and the concepts of culture and ideology on the other. In this respect we should be able to arrive at:

a. An evaluation of the significance of media ownership in our society (as it relates to culture and ideology) and,

b. An evaluation of the significance of the distinction that can be made between ownership and control of media organizations.

We can start to sketch-in the significance of the ownership and control debate within (media) sociology by organizing this section into three conflicting forms of interpretive framework. All of these frameworks are broadly Structuralist (that is, they focus primarily upon the relationship between institutions in society) and can be loosely labelled as:

- a. The Functionalist framework,
- b. The Traditional or "Instrumentalist" Marxist and Structural Marxist frameworks.
- b. The Pluralist framework.

It needs to be stressed that these are idealised interpretive frameworks that we can use for our theoretical convenience and clarity. That is, we can outline some of the basic principles involved in each framework, whilst keeping in mind that no one sociologist necessarily accepts all of the ideas involved (sociological theorizing, in the real world, tends to be a messy mixture of theoretical principles and interpretive frameworks).

Interpretive Framework A: Functionalist.

Before I start to outline this framework in earnest, it is important to note the distinction between "Functionalism" and "Pluralism". Whereas the former places a great deal of emphasis upon social and institutional consensus, the latter framework tends to be slightly wider in scope, in that it looks not only at forms of consensus but also at sources of social and institutional conflicts. In this respect, Pluralist frameworks are probably closer to Weberian interpretations of the social world than to Marxist interpretations.

Organizing Principles of the Functionalist Framework.

The initial focus of attention, as I've already noted, is the nature of institutional relationships in any society. The picture painted by Talcott Parsons (for example, "The Structure of Social Action", 1939) can serve as a useful model for our purposes here.

Parsons argued that any "system of social action" (such as a society or a social institution like work, education, religion or the media) is governed by a basic and fundamental set of functional prerequisites. These can be characterised as general problems that have to be solved in order for a social system or institution to both function and maintain itself over time. These prerequisites, in ascending order of importance (that is, the most important first) are as follows:

- a. Adaptation.
- b. Goal attainment.
- c. Integration and
- d. Pattern maintenance.

Once an institution exists, Parsons argues that we can group related types of institution into **four** basic **sub-systems**:

- a. The **Economic** sub-system (institutions that relate to work and physical survival, for example).
- b. The **Political** sub-system (institutions such as government, civil service and so forth, whose function is to oversee and control political activity in society).
- c. The **Kinship** sub-system (which includes institutions such as the family that are concerned with the primary socialization process).
- d. The **Cultural** sub-system (institutions that relate to the way in which social equilibrium and consensus is maintained on a system-wide basis. These institutions include education, religion and, most importantly for our purpose, the mass media).

For Functionalists, therefore, their consensus approach to understanding societies (and, in particular, the "problem of social order" - the ways, in short, that order and equilibrium in society can be created and maintained) leads them to stress:

- a. The importance of the social system as a whole (its needs and purposes).
- b. The importance of ensuring that people conform to social values and norms.

In this respect there are two main ways in which order is created and maintained:

- a. Through the kinship and cultural sub-systems, whereby people are socialized into conformity to prevailing social values and norms. The kinship sub-system takes care of primary socialization whilst the cultural sub-system attempts to ensure conformity through the secondary socialization process. In particular, people are encouraged to internalise the most important values and norms in society (a type of informal social control). Formal social control mechanisms also develop through the political sub-system to deal with crime, political deviance and so forth.
- b. The functional requirements of the system as a whole (the functional prerequisites of an institution and society) mean that people have to broadly conform if social life is to continue without serious breakdown.

The Role of the Mass Media.

As I have noted, the mass media is considered to be part of the cultural sub-system in large-scale, modern, industrial societies (small scale pre-industrial societies do not develop a system of mass communications because they possess neither the technical knowledge nor the social need to disseminate information across large numbers of people - religion tends to be the cultural institution charged with such a function in this type of society). In this respect, the role of the mass media can be considered to be basically two-fold:

- a. Firstly, spreading knowledge (information-giving) across society as a whole.
- b. Secondly, the media performs a social control function by broadcasting to the population a set of values that reflect the requirements of the society as a whole (the need to maintain order, restore equilibrium to the system and so forth).

In this respect, one of the primary functions of the media is seen to be the propagation of an ideology that broadly supports the status quo in society. It is the role of this institution to provide support for other institutions in society. Thus, in this respect, the mass media will necessarily emphasise consensual views about the nature of society and try to marginalize (that is, present as unimportant, dangerous, mad and so forth) conflict views (since conflicts can be seen as potentially harmful and disruptive to the system).

In simple terms this involves a sense of bias, of course, since the media will tend to report and support views that fit into the current dominant ideology in society, whilst attempting to discredit views that do not support the supposed consensus. However, since each and every ideology that arises within a society is, in a sense, biased towards one set of views rather than another set of views, Functionalists tend to see nothing wrong with the media taking on this type of role. If the objective of social institutions is to create a sense of order and permanence within society, it is hardly surprising that the role of cultural institutions should be to support and reaffirm the dominant values and norms.

Within this **evolutionary model** of social development (change occurs slowly and in an orderly fashion) there is room for deviation and conflict (since it is possible that deviation from social norms will provide one means whereby societies are helped to evolve. For example, the industrial revolution could be considered a form of deviation from the then current (pre- industrial) norms of economic behaviour. However, the encouragement of this form of deviance led to economic development and technological progress). You may recall, if you have worked your way through the Deviance Study Pack ("Functionalist Theories") that Durkheim argued that deviance (or crime if you prefer) is functional for a number of reasons, not the least because it encourages innovation (a theme that was further developed by Merton through his Strain theory of crime and deviance).

Ownership and Control...

For Functionalists, the relationship between ownership and control of the media centres on the importance of there being a range of views on offer through newspapers, magazines, television and so forth. In this respect, social stability is considered to be best-preserved by there being a reasonably wide range of different media from which people can choose.

Specifically, ownership and control is seen as being separated. The function of owners (individuals or multiple shareholders) is an economic one, whilst the function of management (the controllers of media output) is one of ensuring the content of the media appeals to as wide a range of people as possible. Thus, highly popular publications (for example, daily newspapers selling millions of copies) sit alongside more-specialist publications (those that cater for minority tastes).

Ultimately, in a democratic society the consumer will determine the success or failure of an enterprise; the content of the media, in this respect, is seen to be largely consumer-driven. If people do not like what is being offered they can refuse to buy a publication or they can seek-out publications that do offer them what they require. Since the media are an economic enterprise dealing with cultural values there is invariably a tension between making profits (where the medium is privately owned) and highlighting moral issues. The fact that newspapers, for example, may risk alienating some parts of their readership by supporting unpopular cultural issues is evidence of the multi- functional role of the media. Given the emphasis upon the cultural role of the media it is hardly surprising, for Functionalists, that the most popular forms of media should be broadly conservative and supportive of the status quo, since this is one of their main functions.

As we will see in a moment, the above ideas concerning the role of the mass media in society are similar to Pluralist views and, but before we consider the latter in more detail it would be useful to move on to consider various forms of Marxist interpretive frameworks.

Evaluation.

There are a number of problems we can identify with Functionalist perspectives on the media.

1. Firstly, in methodological terms, when Functionalists talk about social consensus they tend to ignore the idea that such a consensus may be more apparent than real. That is, they tend to discount the idea that consensus, where it exists, may be the result of the imposition of a particular ideological framework. In simple terms, Marxists tend to criticise Functionalist perspectives on the basis that a ruling class are able to impose a dominant ideology upon the rest of society.
2. The role of the media in promoting common values can be seen as promoting the values of one particular class, rather than the values of "society as a whole".
3. The idea that the consumer of the media is the ultimate judge of success or failure tends to ignore the idea that people are encouraged to want what the media offers (rather than the media being encouraged to offer what the public wants). This is particularly evident in relation to the interpretation of just who the consumer of the media actually is - as we will see, many sociologists have argued that advertisers are the real consumer of the media. The media provides a diet of programming that will deliver-up to advertisers the size and audience composition they require.
4. The media do not reflect equally all points-of-view in society. Some views are marginalized and down-graded because of the political perspective of newspaper owners, broadcasters and the like.

Interpretive Framework B1: Instrumental Marxist.

Like most (all?) sociological perspectives, Marxism is home to a wide variety of different interpretive frameworks, although each shares a certain number of common principles concerning the basic aspects of the social world (the idea that Capitalist societies, for example, involve some kind of class conflict would be an example of just such a principle). For our purposes here, however, it would be useful to look at two sub-perspectives within the overall theoretical framework that we term "Marxism" and the first of these that we need to consider is that of "traditional" or, more correctly, "instrumental" Marxism...

Organizing Principles of the Instrumental Marxist Framework.

We have already looked, in some detail, at a general overview of the organizing principles of Marxist perspectives in both the Deviance Notes "Orthodox Marxism" and the "Perspectives and Methodologies" Notes. If you have not looked at either of these Study Packs then it would be useful if you did so before proceeding further, since they will familiarize you with some of the basic principles that I am now going to elaborate in relation to this particular form of Marxism.

Marxists generally see social class as the most important variable in the explanation of social interaction. Whilst Marxists may differ over their interpretation of the specific ways in which class plays a part in determining the overall social organization of any society, they generally agree that, ultimately, an individual's position in the economic structure of society determines the way they see and experience the social world.

For instrumental Marxists, society tends to be seen in terms of a traditional form of class structure - Bourgeoisie and Proletarians (Upper, Middle and Working classes). Those who own the means of economic production in society (the bourgeoisie) are necessarily the most powerful and influential grouping in any society; their power and influence stems from their ownership of the most important social resource in any society - the means whereby people create and recreate the physical means of their survival (work and the production process).

The bourgeoisie (or ruling class) attempt to consolidate their position in society (their economic dominance) by two means:

- a. Control of political institutions in society.
- b. Control over cultural (or ideological) institutions in society.

Thus, like Functionalist sociologists, instrumental Marxists focus their attention on the relationship between social institutions, which they group into three main types (or spheres):

- a. The economic sphere (sometimes called the economic base or infrastructure of society).
- b. The political sphere.
- c. The cultural / ideological sphere.

The latter two tend to be grouped under the heading of "political and ideological superstructure" to differentiate these spheres from the economic infrastructure. For this type of Marxism, economic ownership allows a ruling class to dominate in each of the spheres of influence in society:

- In the economic sphere is assured by their ownership of the means of production.
- In the political sphere by using their economic power to persuade politicians and political parties to represent their interests.
- In the ideological sphere through the control of media organizations, cultural institutions and the like.

We can characterise this perspective as arguing that a ruling class tries to directly impose what it sees as its interests on the remaining classes in society. They do this in two main ways:

- a. By persuading people to conform through ideological institutions (education, religion, the mass media).
- b. By forcing people to conform through political institutions (government, the police, army and so forth).

In the above respect, two main ideas need to be clarified:

1. The way in which a ruling class establishes its internal cohesion (that is, how people come to see themselves as belonging to a ruling class) and class interests (that is, the things that a ruling class seeks to protect and enhance).
2. The role of the State as the main institutional agency through which a ruling class can channel and present its interests as the interests of "society as a whole". According to instrumental Marxists such as Ralph Milliband ("The State In Capitalist Society", 1973), a ruling class develops around its common economic interests (in basic terms, the desire to ensure that their economic domination and privileges continue) and its common cultural background. In the latter respect, a common cultural background is created and reinforced through such things as education (Public schools, Oxford and Cambridge Universities etc.), family ties and relationships, inter-locking directorships (that is, where members of a ruling class sit on the boards of numerous different companies), media ownership and so forth.

For Marxists such as Milliband, the role of the State in society is a complex one, but one that can be expressed simply:

On the one hand the State has to appear even-handed (or neutral); that is, it has to appear to act to protect the interests of everyone in society.

On the other hand, the State is seen to be an instrument of class domination (hence the term "instrumental Marxism"), whereby a ruling class is able to use the State like an instrument against other classes to further its own interests, whilst maintaining the fiction that it acts in the interests of all.

Domination of the State (government, Civil Service, police, etc.) is ensured in two ways:

1. Firstly, because the economic base of society is so important, politicians are forced to take account of the powerful class who own the means of production.
2. Secondly, the cultural dimension is again apparent. Politicians, Civil Servants, the upper reaches of the police, judiciary and armed forces all have a common class background with the owners of the means of production. In effect, such people share a similar view of the social world and act accordingly on the basis of this view.

The Role of the Mass Media.

For instrumental Marxists, the role of the mass media in Capitalist society is that of ensuring that the views and interests of a ruling class are presented to the rest of the population in such a way as to ensure that people accept as normal and right the inequalities inherent in Capitalist societies. The main function of the mass media, therefore, is one of social control; that is, the attempt to control the behaviour of other classes in society. This is achieved through such means as:

- a. Denying access to competing views about the nature of the social world.
- b. Presenting a picture of social life that is invariably favourable to the interests of a ruling class.
- c. Directly influencing the way in which other classes receive information about the social world.
- d. Providing entertainments and diversions that stop people thinking about the ways in which they are exploited and oppressed. This includes the use of scapegoating techniques (for example, "normal people" as opposed to "travellers") designed to create divisions within and between social classes, ethnic groups, genders and the like and so deflect any possible criticism away from a ruling class.

In relation to the above, therefore, we can note that the content of the mass media is inevitably biased (both directly through privately owned media such as newspapers, television channels and so forth and indirectly through publicly owned media such as television).

Ownership and Control...

From the instrumental Marxist perspective the relationship between ownership and control of the mass media is relatively clear and straightforward. Owners have ultimate control over the nature of an organization, although in modern Capitalist societies they tend to employ a wide range of managers to deal with the day-to-day control and operation of the organization. However, managers can be:

- a. Employees like any other employee (they can be hired and fired etc).
- b. Part-owners of an organization (through share options and the like).

In either case it is clear that those who manage an enterprise only "control" its operation in the sense that they oversee its operation. Ultimate control resides with the owners of an enterprise. For example, the editor of the Sun newspaper may have control over such things as the stories that go into the newspaper each day, the hiring and firing of employees and so forth. The owner of the Sun (Rupert Murdoch) ultimately controls such things as the political stance of the paper, the type of audience it is aiming to reach and so forth.

Evaluation....

There are a number of problems that we can identify relating to this perspective on the media.

1. Firstly, this view has been criticised as being a conspiratorial view of the social world. In this respect a powerful group of people (a ruling class) are seen to directly impose their interests upon all other classes in society through their ownership of cultural institutions such as the mass media. This begs a number of questions:

- a. How cohesive a group are the ruling class (does every member of this class share the same interests, for example)?
- b. How does society change if it is so tightly controlled by a ruling class?
- c. Why do some areas of the media criticise the activities of powerful individuals, companies and governments?

In the above respect, this form of Marxism tends to resemble Functionalist perspectives (Jock Young, for example, has called this perspective "Left-wing Functionalism"). The only real difference between the two seems to be that while Functionalists talk about the needs and interests of society as a whole, instrumental Marxists talk in terms of the needs and interests of a ruling class.

2. Secondly, we can question the idea that a ruling class can be seen as a tight-knit class sharing a number of common interests. Whilst a ruling class may have a broad interest in trying to maintain the status quo in society (because it is this class that benefits the most under Capitalism), it is evident that a ruling class in modern societies consists of a number of different social groupings (or "class fractions" as Poulantzas terms them). For example, owners of manufacturing industries may have very few common interests with owners of service industries or banking industries. In fact, they may be largely antagonistic and competitive towards each other.

Financial institutions, for example, may prefer not to lend money to manufacturing industries because the rate of return on their investment may be low, slow to materialize and highly risky (they may not see a profit for many years, for example). In Britain, the Channel Tunnel experience is a case in point - profits from this enterprise will not start to materialize for many years (assuming, of course, that the operators do not go bankrupt...).

3. Thirdly, this perspective tends to see choice as very limited in relation to the media. A narrow range of ideas, all of them broadly in line with the interests of a ruling class, are seen to be published and transmitted. However, this may be debatable, since the media in modern Britain, for example, does seem to offer a reasonably wide range of choice in relation to different perspectives and points of view. The choice could always be wider, of course, but it does exist.

4. This perspective tends to see the audience for media products as passive; people consume what they are told to consume, for example. As we will see when we look in more detail at the effects of the mass media, this may not necessarily be the case. Finally, instrumental Marxism doesn't clearly explain the sources of conflict in society. For a Marxist perspective this is odd, since class conflict lies at the centre of most Marxist theorizing. In particular, if a ruling class controls society so directly and carefully it is not clear how and why social life changes. Why, for example, is the material condition of the working class so much higher in present day Britain than it was 50 or 100 years ago?

Interpretive Framework B2: Structural Marxist.

The second Marxist perspective that we are going to study tries to address and resolve some of the problems associated with the instrumental approach. In this respect it is a more complex form of Marxism that seeks to distance itself from Functionalist forms of explanation whilst retaining the central Marxist ideas of class conflict, political and ideological domination and the like.

Organizing Principles of the Structural Marxist Framework.

Unlike their instrumental counterparts, Structural Marxists have developed a more-complex view of the nature of the class structure in modern societies. Whereas instrumentalists tend to see class in the "traditional" way (upper, middle, working classes arranged in a hierarchical manner, one on top of the other. The diagram below, taken from Bilton "Introductory Sociology", illustrates this idea), this form of Marxism takes a more fluid view of social classes. In this respect, social classes are not seen as being:

- a. Clearly separated.
- b. Distinct and self-contained.
- c. Arranged hierarchically.
- d. Free from internal conflicts.

E.O.Wright ("Classes", 1985) has described the above view as being a "static taxonomy" - a taxonomy being a way of classifying something - that is inadequate as a means of capturing the richness of meaning involved in social classes in the real world. As the following diagram tries to show, social classes are seen to be a mixture of economic, political and cultural (ideological) relationships that ebb and flow in a dynamic fashion. Each class consists of a number of class fractions; that is, sub-classes who, whilst sharing a similar general class position and set of interests, may well have economic, political and cultural interests that are not held in common with each other.

The important thing to note here is that a social class is defined in terms of its economic, political and cultural relationships - not simply in terms of its economic relationship to other classes. Thus, a bourgeois or "ruling" class will consist not only of those who own the means of production; it will also co-opt groups from the petit bourgeois classes (manager / directors for example) and also groups from the proletariat (for example, minor supervisory officials).

In addition, within the bourgeoisie itself there are seen to be divisions and conflicts of interest. For example, if we look more closely at a schematic representation of a ruling class we can see that it consists of a number of competing class fractions whose specific interests (as opposed to their general class interests - basically, the desire to maintain a Capitalist economic system) will frequently conflict...

The strength of this way of looking at the class structure is that it reflects the complexity of class relationships "in the real world". Class associations, for example, do not only reflect purely economic relationships (although these still tend to be given primary significance), they also incorporate political and cultural beliefs about class relationships that can be based around concepts such as gender and ethnicity (or example, individuals from some ethnic groups may be economically successful whilst seeing themselves, culturally, as not belonging to a bourgeois class - they may see themselves as having more in common culturally with the petty bourgeoisie or proletariat).

Having noted the above it is evident that a major weakness of this kind of class structure model, for our purposes at least, is its complexity - it becomes very difficult to actually make sense of the class structure of modern societies...

The Role of the Mass Media.

From this perspective, the role of the media is a complex one that reflects the complexity of class relationships and interests. In this respect, the media tend to be considered in terms of the way in which they help to maintain the broad status quo in society, whilst at the same time reflecting a diversity of opinion. We can understand this role in the following terms:

For Structural Marxists, British society is viewed in terms of the way in which the economic system (Capitalism) has a logic of its own. For example, we can outline some of the basic principles of a Capitalist economic system in the following terms: Companies have to make profits. If you have an economic system that does not involve this principle, then it is no-longer a Capitalist system.

Profits have to be owned privately, since without this system of private ownership we would have a form of State Capitalism / Socialism.

The basic economic relationship (between employer and employee) is an "unequal" one, in the sense that the former has to be able to profit from the work of the latter. Employees must be free to sell their services to whoever wants to buy these services. The logic of competition dictates that they must have the freedom to try to sell their services to whoever will buy them. If this is not the case then we would see societies based upon slavery or serfdom (Feudal society).

Thus, the logic of Capitalist forms of economic production locks people into certain types of social relationship and from this sense of "structural imperatives" develops an awareness of certain basic principles of social organization in Capitalist society. As should be evident, by seeing things in this way, the basic elements of Marxist analysis are retained (the focus on class conflict, exploitation and the like), whilst the need to relate the domination of a ruling class over all other classes using an instrumental or conspiratorial approach is removed.

The role of the media in this situation, in basic terms, is to support, reinforce and enhance the basic values that flow from the logic and organization of Capitalist forms of economic production. If the logic of Capitalism dictates that wealth has to be owned privately, then this logic is reflected in both:

- a. Political actions (laws against theft and so forth) and
- b. Cultural values (the belief that it is wrong to steal).

In these terms, the mass media does not involve deliberate forms of bias as the norm (although you will be aware, of course, that many media organizations do attempt to interpret and portray social reality in highly distorted ways. The tabloid press, for example, are hardly renowned for their objectivity and political impartiality). Bias is clearly involved (for example, a tendency to report the views of the "great and the "good" / rich and powerful rather the poor and the powerless), but it is a form of bias that develops out of a particular way of seeing the world rather than an attempt to unquestioningly support a particular social class.

In this respect, a useful concept to employ here is that of "agenda-setting". The media reflect a set of cultural values that emphasise a taken-for-granted interpretation of both the social world and social reality (a taken-for-granted assumption about the nature of social reality is one that is considered to be so obvious and fundamental that no sane person would seriously argue against it). For example, since the concept of private property is a central value of Capitalist economics the media will use this "taken-for-granted" assumption as the basis for their interpretation of various forms of deviant / criminal behaviour.

Within this general system, according to Structural Marxists, the outcome of the process is the same - a ruling class benefits most from the attempt to preserve the status quo - but the means to achieve this outcome are very different. We can start to explain this idea in the following section..

Ownership and Control...

From this perspective, "social reality" is actively constructed by people acting in various ways. However, human behaviour is not random and uncoordinated; rather it is constrained and shaped by social structures (the massive web of social relationships that people enter into in their everyday lives as members of a particular society). This central contradiction between structural imperatives (the need to make profits and so forth) and human consciousness (the ability of people to interpret social reality in a multitude of different ways) is resolved through the cultural system in society. That is, powerful groups are able to construct and impose a definition of social reality by interpreting the social world in various ways and transmitting that interpretation across society as a whole.

The main concept used to express this idea is that of a "dominant ideology". That is, one ideology (amongst many possible conflicting ideologies) dominates all others in society. This concept gets around the problem of explaining how and why various conflicting views can exist within a society and directs the analysis of the role of the media away from a relatively simple conception of a ruling class imposing its views to the exclusion of all other views. In its place, Structural Marxists tend to argue that the media is relatively autonomous from the ruling class (that is, it has a degree of apparent freedom). Such autonomy is limited, however, since it will be played out in a context that is effectively determined by the most powerful social actors and groups within a society.

These powerful social actors are basically:

- a. Media owners - people have a direct economic stake in the presentation of a particular version of reality.
- b. Media managers (controllers) - again, people (professional journalists, editors and so forth) who have a slightly less direct stake in the presentation of a particular version of reality.

The experiences of these individuals in the social world (which is based around their class position, education and so forth) leads them to present and promote a particular view of the social world and social reality - one that accords with their experiences.

In this sense, media owners and professionals have a common cause in attempting to promote and preserve certain basic values, since these values support and enhance their individual and class interests.

Within this general scenario, media owners and professionals have to also operate within certain political constraints. Once again, these constraints on their behaviour (laws, moral values and so forth) stem from the basic values that exist within Capitalist society. These values may take different forms across different societies, but the important point to note is that by perpetuating them the intention is to try to preserve a particular set of assumptions about the nature of social reality.

Questions about whether ownership or control is most significant are largely irrelevant within this perspective since they are two sides of the same coin - professional media workers operate within the general constraints of their values and assumptions about the nature of the world. Since owners and controllers have similar class experiences it is hardly surprising that they come to similar conclusions about these ideas. Additionally, since owners are employers it would not be too surprising if they employed people who shared similar views about the world.

Clearly, questions relating to the specific content of the media, day-to-day control and so forth are important in this context, but we can discuss these in more detail when we look at the way in which interpretations of social reality are socially constructed and maintained.

To summarize this section, therefore, we can note that:

1. The values that derive from the economic organization of Capitalist society compel owners and managers to act in ways that benefit a ruling class rather than "society as a whole".
2. Media professionals do have differing levels of personal autonomy (the freedom to make day-to-day decisions about the running of a newspaper, for example), but this only really exists for as long as their decisions accord with the values of their employers.
3. Structural Marxists acknowledge the existence of a ruling class, but allow for the idea that there may well be differing interests within this class. However, differences over the best way to manage economic activity, (for example, whether Britain should abandon its manufacturing industries in favour of the development of its service industries - banking, insurance and so forth), are simply questions of degree; whatever the differences within this class there is fundamental agreement over core values (for example, that we should continue to pursue Capitalist forms of economic organization, political democracy and the like).

Evaluation...

1. The Structural Marxist view, whilst overcoming some of the drawbacks of the Instrumental Marxist perspective can be criticised for exaggerating the role of owners. In companies where shares are mainly held by large pension funds, for example, the role of managers assumes greater significance (mainly because the only interest a pension fund has in the running of a company is whether or not it produces a good return on investment).

In this respect, shareholders tend to support any management policy that will produce a good return, regardless of the ideological content of the newspaper, television programme and so forth.

2. In many instances, journalists and broadcasters produce information that is highly critical of powerful individuals and groups. This performs a useful service to the public since it attempts to check the misuse of power.

Interpretive Framework C: Pluralist.**Organizing Principles of the Pluralist Framework.**

The Pluralist framework is rather different to both the Functionalist and Marxist frameworks, in that institutions in society are seen to have a logic of their own which can, ultimately, be reduced to the individual actions of their members (although these actions will, of course, be shaped by the social context within which behaviour takes place).

Although we can talk about various institutional areas in society (the political, the economic, the cultural and so forth) these tend to be seen in generally abstract terms - as concepts that we use to impose a sense of order and meaning upon a situation, rather than these areas being real in the physical sense. The picture we get from the Pluralist framework is that of various interest and status groups being forced to compete against each other in the "economic market place".

An example of an interest group might be a business pursuing some economic or social objective. whilst an example of a status group might be a profession or Trade Union publishing information specific to a particular occupation.

From a Pluralist perspective, therefore, society is seen to develop various groups who seek to pursue their own narrow or sectional interests within the overall constraints imposed by a particular form of economic structure. Power, whilst clearly related to economic ownership, is not seen to solely come from this source. Trade Unions, for example, might be considered politically-powerful organizations (then again, they might not) whose power comes from the ability to disrupt the economic production process, rather than from economic ownership itself.

For Pluralists, competition between different groups in society is seen as one way in which these groups strive for power (whether it be economic, political or ideological power). Different companies, for example, compete energetically with each other in the market place for market share.

Since the objective of each group is the pursuit of some desirable outcome (profit, political power, influence and so forth), competition between groups for market share will dictate that the consumer will, as with the Functionalist model, be the ultimate arbiter (that is, one who decides) of the success or failure of an enterprise. If people do not buy your newspaper, watch your TV station or listen to your radio programmes, then the logic of competition will ensure that:

- a. Someone else will seek to capture that market or,
- b. You either go out of business or adapt to market conditions and effectively provide people with the newspapers, television and radio programmes that they want.

The Role of the Mass Media.

In a similar way to the Functionalist perspective, Pluralists tend to define the role of the mass media in democratic societies in a number of ways:

1. Firstly, it provides an information service that keeps people in touch with political and economic developments, serves specialist interest groups (youth, gardening enthusiasts, cookery enthusiasts and so forth). A major role, therefore, is that of information provider in an increasingly complex society.
2. Secondly, it provides a means whereby the activities of powerful groups can be policed, criticised, held in check and reformed in a modern society. The function of the media, in this respect, is one of providing a countervailing balance to the power enjoyed by politicians, business groups and so forth.
3. Thirdly, the media performs a social control function in that it is powerful enough to represent the interests of "ordinary people" (who tend to lack the power and organization to effectively confront deviance by the powerful). In this respect, the mass media can hold up for public scrutiny the activities of politicians, political parties, powerful individuals, business organizations, Trade Unions and the like.

Ownership and Control...

In terms of the distinction between ownership and control in the mass media, Pluralist writers have tended to argue that economic ownership is an important source of power in society. This is a similar interpretation to that put forward by Marxist writers. However, one way in which the two perspectives differ is in relation to the idea of control of the mass media. For Pluralists, the nature of modern social systems makes the role of those who control the day-to-day running of the media of central (and increasing) importance.

The reason for this emphasis on the primary importance of control over ownership is to be found in two ideas:

1. Firstly, modern business (unlike its counterpart in the early years of the industrial revolution when Marx was formulating his ideas) is much more of a joint venture. That is, modern companies tend to be owned by groups of shareholders (which may be individuals, other businesses, pension funds and so forth) rather than by all-powerful individuals.

2. Secondly, in order to survive a business has to compete in a market place. This competition means that the consumer (the people who buy the product being sold - or not as the case may be) exercises a great deal of influence over the behaviour of an organization. This influence is not individual but collective. For example, if prospective buyers of a product do not like what's on offer then the seller either has to change their product or go bust.

The above perspective has been neatly expressed by John Burnham ("The Managerial Revolution", 1943) in an influential argument relating to both the increasing complexity of business organizations and to changes in the way businesses are capitalised. In particular, Burnham argued that where ownership was spread amongst a large number of different shareholders (and where no one shareholder had overall control of a business), this effectively meant that directors and managers were the main policy-makers for that business.

Although directors invariably developed policies in line with the interests of their shareholders (to which they have a legal responsibility in British law), the day-to-day running of a business was seen to be left in the hands of a "technocratic managerial elite", rather than an autocratic individual owner (autocratic in the sense of making decisions without the need to consult anyone else).

Burnham argued that Capitalism in the 20th century was very different to the Capitalism of the 19th century (the form of Capitalism that existed when Marx developed his critique of Capitalist society). In particular, he developed a theory of the Corporate State, whereby a plurality of groups - managers, politicians, Trade Union representatives and so forth - all combine to administer both:

- a. The State itself (the institutions of government) and
- b. Individual businesses that existed within a society.

In this respect, power was seen to reside with a number of differing groups (as above) and the behaviour of these groups was subject to various checks and balances imposed by the interests of other competing groups. For example: Organizational pay policies could be decided by managers, but in developing a pay policy they would have to take note of governmental policies on pay, taxation and so forth, as well as demands made by Trade Unions.

In this sense, Pluralist writers frequently talk about a "managerial revolution" in the 20th century, whereby ownership of a business has become clearly separated from control in the favour of the latter.

Ralph Dahrendorf, for example, argues that whilst Marx was probably correct in stressing the significance of economic ownership, this is not relevant in modern society since Marx was addressing a situation that no-longer exists.

Berle and Means ("The Modern Corporation and Private Property", 1932) argued that nearly two-thirds (65%) of America's top 200 non-banking Corporations were controlled by a managerial elite (a "Corporation" is a company that is owned by shareholders, rather than a single owner). Berle and Means classified a Corporation as being under managerial control if the largest shareholder held less than 20% of the total stock in a company.

Such Corporations were seen to be under managerial control because no single shareholder could effectively dominate company policy (either because they had no interest in trying to do this or because they were unable to do this), effectively leaving the managerial elite to dictate day-to-day policy and organization.

Finally, from the Pluralist perspective the role of the State (the institutions of government) is seen to be significant only in terms of the idea that it is seen to adopt a neutral role in relation to the various forms of conflict (which, in this sense, means competition) that exist within society. The State, therefore, is analogous to a referee at a sport's match; it's role is to ensure that everyone plays by the same rules, to punish those who deviate, to set the basic "rules of society" (laws) and so forth.

Evaluation...

There are a number of points that we can note in relation to Pluralist and Marxist perspectives on the mass media that help to illustrate the overall nature of the argument concerning the relationship between ownership and control of the media. Firstly, Marxists such as Murdock and Golding ("Capitalism, Communication and Class Relations", 1977) have argued that Pluralists tend to overstate the distinction between "owners" and "managers", to the extent that the two roles are considered separately rather than in terms of their possible correspondence. We can outline this argument in a number of ways.

a. Although the running of an organization does tend to involve a day-to-day separation of the functions of owner and manager, Marxists argue that we have to look at this relationship in a cultural context. The objective of a Corporation is to make a profit. Marxists argue that the primary aim of any economic organization is the maximization of profit - all other aims (such as creating employment, benefiting society and so forth) are secondary to this aim. What this means, therefore, is that the cultural organization of any business is geared towards making the greatest possible profit.

If we assume, for the sake of argument, that this is the case then it follows that the role of a managerial elite is heavily influenced and constrained by this principle of profit maximization. Their primary duty, therefore, is to make profits for the owners of a business. In this respect we can see that the relationship between owners and controllers (the managerial representatives of the owners) is a separate one only in organizational terms. Managers are answerable to owners for their actions and any managerial elite that fails to produce profits can ultimately be replaced.

b. In addition, it is evident that managers may also be owners, in the sense that directors of large Corporations often have a direct stake in the ownership of the business through their ownership of shares. In these terms, the "separate relationship" tends to merge into an "owner - manager" role.

c. On a more individual level, it would appear unlikely that the owners of a business would employ managers who were antagonistic to their social and economic interests. In this respect, the argument is that a managerial elite can be "trusted" to run a company in the interests of its owners for two main reasons. Firstly, managers are seen to share the same values as their owners and, secondly, any manager who does tries to pursue policies that are antagonistic to owners can be sacked and replaced by someone more attuned to the wishes of the people who employ them.

Secondly, we should not underestimate the nature of shareholding and ownership when it comes to the question of control of an organization. Two points can be noted here:

a. Firstly, to influence the overall direction of an organization does not require a huge shareholding. Where shares are held by numerous individuals and organizations it is more than possible to effectively control a business by owning 10 - 20% of its overall stock. What matters here is not the percentage of shares owned but the number of shareholders and the level of their economic organization.

b. Secondly, modern business organizations are increasingly diversified (part of the process of concentration and conglomeration noted earlier), which means that they may well have interests across a wide range of different individual companies within an overall industry such as the media. For example, we have earlier seen how News International and its major shareholder Rupert Murdoch has a wide range of interests across a number of media areas (newspapers, magazines, terrestrial and satellite television and so forth).

Thus, where one branch of a media organization relies upon another branch for its existence, ownership of the latter will make you very important (and influential) in relation to the former. A good example here is newspaper production and distribution in Britain.

Although it is technologically and legally possible for anyone in Britain with enough money to start-up their own newspaper or magazine (unlike television and radio which has to be licensed by the government), a further barrier to selling your publication is the distribution network that surrounds getting your publication into the shops. In Britain, distribution is dominated by a small number of companies who effectively decide whether or not they will handle, deliver and sell your publication... The following chart looks at News International's holdings in relation to satellite television by way of an example of the way in which modern media organizations are international concerns.

Perspectives and Ideologies: Closing Comments...

The three basic perspectives on the media that have just been outlined can be characterised as ideologies. That is, they represent particular ways of looking at the same thing (social reality, the mass media and so forth). In sociological terms, neither is right, (just as neither is wrong), in the sense that we have no real and ultimately valid way of coming to such a conclusion. This conclusion reflects the nature of the social world, to the extent that we can characterise it as being socially constructed.

The important point to note here is that the way you see the nature of a social phenomenon (in this case the mass media) will determine the way that you interpret its nature and significance. A simple analogy might help you to grasp this idea. Imagine a pint of beer that has been half finished. An optimistic person might claim that the glass is half full, whilst a pessimistic individual might claim that the glass is half empty. Both, in this instance, are correct, but the important point to note is that the ideological perspective of each individual (optimism or pessimism) determines the way in which they interpret the same phenomenon.

Having looked at various perspectives on culture, ideology, ownership and control, as they relate to the mass media in very general terms, our next task is to look at the more specific implications these perspectives have for their explanations of the way in which social reality is actively constructed in our society. We can start to do this in the following Notes by looking at various sociological models relating to the way in which media organizations attempt to construct and impart a particular "world view" of our society.