

# A-Level Sociology



**A Resource-Based  
Learning Approach**

## **Module Four:**

**The Mass Media and Popular Culture.**

## **Unit MM2: The Selection of News**

**The Selection and Presentation of Media Content.**

## Introduction

In previous Study Packs we've laid the groundwork for an understanding of the general relationship between the concepts of media **ownership and control**, **culture** and **ideology**. In this Study Pack, therefore, we need to look at this relationship in a bit more detail.

- Specifically, we are going to **apply** these concepts to a particular **sociological problem**, namely the **social process** whereby **media content** is **selected** and **presented** to an **audience**.

Before we consider this process, however, it is necessary to **recap** some of the ideas we have already established.

- We can characterise a **culture** as a "**way of life**"; that is, as a **shared system of beliefs** about the nature of the social world that incorporates certain **values**, **attitudes** and **norms of behaviour**. Cultures usually involve a number of different **ideologies** (ways of explaining the things we see and experience), although one ideology is always **dominant** (that is, most widely held in society).
- An **ideology** is a "**world view**" - a **framework of related ideas** that provides us with a context through which we can "make sense" of the information that surrounds us in our daily lives. We use **ideological frameworks** to help us to **classify** and categorise various social phenomena and, by so doing, this helps us to explain the significance of the things we experience in our daily existence.
- Ideologies**, therefore, can be conceptualised as doing a couple of things:
  1. They **structure our experiences**.
  2. They **select from and filter social reality**.

A "**sociological problem**" is **not** the same as a "**social problem**" and it is important that the two are not confused. A **sociological problem** is simply a question to which we want to find an answer. A **social problem**, on the other hand, is a belief (justified or otherwise) that the behaviour of something or some group represent a problem that has to be resolved (for whatever reason). Clearly, by using ideas like social problems we are making judgements about people that are unwarranted (what may be a problem to you, for example, may not be a problem to me).

That is, they allow us to **locate** ideas in a **wider, understandable, context**. We can use them to **classify** similar ideas and, by so doing, give these ideas an understandable context.

In this respect they provide a **powerful**, highly developed, **reference point** for the **interpretation** of our **experiences**. We use our **ideological preconceptions** as a kind of **mental map** to "make sense" of the information with which we are continually bombarded.

There are so many ideas floating around in a **complex society** such as our own that we need to develop a way of **separating the significant from the insignificant**, the **special** from the **everyday**, the **consequential** from the **inconsequential** and so forth.

In any modern (or, if you prefer, post-modern) society the mass media play an important role, one that encompasses a number of related aspects, although we can perhaps characterise this role in terms of three primary aspects:

- **Entertainment,**
- **Information (Education)**
- **News production.**

The linking-theme of the above is "**information**" and having established the central importance of the idea of the mass media as "**information-givers**" or "**educators**" (a source of **secondary socialisation** if you prefer), it means that we can concentrate on this idea when considering the way information about the social world is both **selected** and **presented**.

The **mnemonic EIN** (the German for "one") is appropriate here because although we can identify **three primary aspects** to the role of the media, it is useful to think of these three aspects as occurring at the **same time** in our society.

"**News**", for example, involves "**information-giving**" and it is invariably presented to us as a form of "**entertainment**".

"**Entertainment**" also involves "**information-giving**" and, while it may not be considered "**news**" in the conventional sense, it does involve the sending of messages to an audience that tell us something about the kind of society in which we live.

**Q.** The mass media are not the only sources of secondary socialisation in our society. Briefly identify and illustrate the role of two other agencies of secondary socialisation (4 marks).

We can begin, for theoretical convenience, by looking at a number of **models** of **news production** in our society, for two main reasons:

1. Firstly, these models are directly related to the idea we encountered in the **Ownership and Control** Study Packs (especially Marxist and Pluralist interpretations).

2. "**News**", in the sense of "**significant cultural events**", is a good place to begin when thinking about information in our society. The way "news" is socially-produced (through newspapers and television, for example), is one of the best, most straightforward and understandable examples we can use to illustrate the general ideological process that we need to outline and evaluate.

A **model**, as the name suggests, is something we use to represent reality. In this instance, it is a theoretical representation of the way "news" is produced in our society. You should be aware that a model is simply a device we can use to understand how, **theoretically**, something works.

**Models Of News Production.**

We can organise our knowledge about the way the content of the media is selected and presented around a number of **sociological models** that deal generally with this topic. In this respect, I propose to do the following for each of three different models of media production. (To help your analysis and understanding, I've bracketed the various **Skill Domains** that will be covered in relation to each area.)

1. Provide a basic **outline** of the model.

2. Examine **evidence** that **supports** the model.

Knowledge and Interpretation

3. Examine **evidence** that **criticises** the model.

Interpretation and Application

4. **Summarise** the **conclusions** that can be drawn about the **reliability** and **validity** of the model on the basis of the evidence that has been discussed.

Interpretation, Application and Evaluation.

Interpretation and Evaluation.

You should note that the three models fit reasonably neatly into the categories we looked at in relation to media **ownership and control**.

There are two Marxist models:

- a. **Manipulative** - a model put-forward by **Instrumental** Marxists.
- b. **Hegemonic** - a model put-forward by **Structural** Marxists.

and a **Pluralist** model. Each will be outlined and discussed in turn.

**A: The Manipulative Model of Media Content.**

1. An outline of the model.

For our purposes, we can assume that Manipulation theory has its **origins** within the **Frankfurt School of Marxism**.

A group of German Marxists who fled persecution in Nazi Germany during the 1930's). As you might expect, the **theoretical development** of this model was heavily influenced by the experience of the **Nazi propaganda efforts** throughout the 1930's and early 1940's

Two main concepts are significant to this model, those of a

- **"Mass society"** and
- **"Mass culture"**

We need, therefore, to briefly look at these **concepts** in order to understand the **theoretical basis** of the model.

By **"theoretical basis"** we mean the basic **ideas** and **assumptions** on which the model is based.

- The **Frankfurt School** argued that the 20th century was characterised by the development of a **mass society**; that is, a form of social organisation in which the **informal ties** of **community** and **neighbourhood** had effectively **broken-down** under the onslaught of **mass economic production**.
- Mass production involves constant and bewildering changes in technological development, labour mobility and so forth, such that, in effect, people experience a form of **anomie**. In this type of society, it is argued, human beings are reduced to **isolated individuals**, consistently encouraged to compete and consume in an unending cycle of exploitation.

In this complex, constantly-changing, world the **mass media** are considered to be the one social institution that can help the individual to both make sense of the world and, most importantly, create a **sense of belonging** - not to specific cultural groups, but to a **general** or "**mass**" culture.

Such a culture has to be broad and flexible enough to encompass **everyone** in society and so, the argument goes, it results in **cultural developments** that appeal to the **lowest common denominator** within a population. In basic terms, in order to appeal to everyone in society, **cultural forms** have to be pitched at a level that can be experienced and understood by everyone.

In **Nazi Germany**, for example, these "lowest common denominator" cultural themes are not difficult to define: Appeals to **Nationalism** (the "Germanic" or "Aryan" race), **hatred** and **scapegoating** of "sub-human races" (Jews, for example) all represent **mass cultural themes**.

In terms of modern societies such as Britain and America, an example of this form of **mass culture** (designed to accommodate a **mass society**) might be the output of the **American film industry** with its emphasis upon:

- **Simple themes**

For example, the simple juxtaposition of "Good" against "Bad"; the idea that although "Good people" will suffer trials (and "Bad" people might win small victories), the former will ultimately triumph; the way to solve your problems is to either beat someone senseless or, better still, maim and then kill them.

- **Plotlines**

Boy meets girl, boy loses girl to the bad guy, boy regains girl by vanquishing the bad guy (usually through some form of ritual humiliation or death).

- **Stereotypes**

The lone, rugged, individual; the straight cop in a corrupt society; the evil foreigner - you might be aware of the number of British actors in recent years who have played villains in Hollywood films. The simple reason for this is that, firstly, it does not portray Americans as being bad and, secondly, it avoids the portrayal of American minorities as being evil).

The above (and probably more) are endlessly repeated and recycled in a variety of subtly different ways - the basic idea being that people are manipulated (emotionally, ideologically) to both expect and respond to these ideas.

Get hold of a couple of newspapers from the library and analyse the American film reviews for a couple of weeks. What basic **themes**, **plots** and **stereotypes** are present?

- Another example might be **television output** and its domination by:

- **Soap operas**

→ The attempt to create a fantasy sense of community by identifying with the characters and settings of the series),

- **Quiz shows**

→ Where people are encouraged to play out their fantasies of growing rich and successful.

- **Sport**

→ Where the emphasis is placed upon successful team-work or individual heroics (especially Male / National successes.

- **News**

→ An essential information source in an increasingly complex society

- As should be apparent, the **manipulative** aspect of the above is found in the idea that those who **own and control** the media are, **if this representation is valid**, going to be extremely **powerful individuals and groups**. They can, in short:

a. **Monopolise** what is **presented** for **mass consumption** as **mass culture** in a **mass society**.

b. Present a **distorted, one-dimensional**, view of the **nature of society** and **social relationships** that supports a particular world-view (one that supports the **Capitalist system**, for example).

c. **Define social reality** by **imposing** their **ideology**, through their control of the media, on a mass of **socially-isolated individuals** and by **excluding** other possible **interpretations** from exposure through the media.

## 2. Evidence for the model.

It is not too difficult to find evidence that supports the general proposition put forward by this model that the content of the media is manipulated (consciously or unconsciously) to reflect the needs and interests of a powerful ruling class in Capitalist society.

- **Historically** and **cross-culturally**, we have evidence from various **totalitarian** societies across the world:

That is, societies ruled by **dictators, absolute monarchs** and so forth.

- Although this may appear rather **extreme** and **not representative of liberal**

In Fascist **Germany** throughout the 1930's, all aspects of the media were tightly controlled by the government and extensive propaganda was directed not just against Jews, homosexuals, Communists and so forth, but was also used to prepare Germany for war by fostering notions of German racial superiority

In **Iran**, satellite television receivers have recently been banned to "prevent the spread of Western Imperialist propaganda" (American films, pop music stations and the like).

**democracies** such as our own society, evidence of media manipulation is not

difficult to find - even though such manipulation tends to be **subtle** and not well-publicised...

The most obvious evidence **for** the model comes in relation to **patterns of media ownership**. As we have seen, newspaper, television and radio, book and magazine publishing and the like is dominated by a **relatively small number of owners**. Where **competition** between companies exists it is likely to be over **market share** rather than over fundamental ideological disagreements about the nature of society.

Thus, although daily newspaper owners compete vigorously with one another for readers, there is little difference in the **world view** put forward in papers such as the Sun, Today, Star and Mirror (even though the latter has, historically, always supported the Labour Party politically).

On the contrary, **all** of the **major daily papers** conform to a relatively **narrow, consensual** view of **social reality** that can loosely be characterised as **politically and socially conservative** (and the majority are actively Conservative in their political support).

- There is a wide body of evidence to suggest that **owners do try to directly control** the content of the media - this is especially true of newspaper owners (such as Lord Beaverbrook, Lord Northcliffe and Lord Rothermere in the past and Robert Maxwell and Rupert Murdoch in recent times), possibly because unlike television and radio station owners they are not bound by rules of "**political balance**" (The basic idea here is that in any political discussion the views of all the major political parties should be invited or represented).
- In addition, it is also evident that the **distribution** of printed materials (newspapers, magazines,

**Trowler** ("**Investigating the Media**") gives an interesting example of this type of intervention:  
  
"Robert Maxwell, interviewing Magnus Linklater for the job of editor of the London Daily News was in the middle of explaining that he did not interfere editorially when the editor of the Daily Mirror entered with a proof of page one from that paper for Maxwell's approval".

books and so forth) is highly dependent upon a very **small number of powerful distribution companies**.

For example, **W.H.Smith, John Menzies** and **Surridge Dawson** control nearly 75% of this market

The significance of this can be expressed in two ways:

1. Firstly, **distributors** can perform a **copyright role**, whereby they refuse to distribute material that they consider to be morally abhorrent or unlawful (in this latter respect, the **libel laws** in Britain mean that the **distributor** (as well as the **author** and **publisher**) of material judged to be libellous can be **sued** for damages).

The **big three distributors** have, at various times, refused to handle publications as diverse as the satirical magazine **Private Eye**, and the homosexual newspaper **Gay News**.

2. Secondly, it means that an unknown number of publications never actually appear in newsagents - even if there is a market for them - because they are either not distributed or stocked by the major retail outlets.

This may cast doubt on the **Pluralist** claim of **consumer sovereignty** and **choice**, simply because the consumer may be denied the opportunity to ever make a choice.

Continuing the **copyright theme**, a wide variety of **legal** and "**advisory**" government agencies exist

**Q.** Just because the major outlets do not distribute or stock a publication doesn't mean it cannot be sold or distributed. **Identify** 3 ways of publishing information and **evaluate** their likely effectiveness in reaching a mass audience (6 marks). If you need a **hint**, see the bottom of this page.

in order to **monitor** and, in some instances **copyright**, the media. While **direct** copyright tends to be **rare** (although it does on occasions happen - especially, though not exclusively, in times of "**national crisis**"), **indirect** (or **hidden**) forms of copyright are much more common.

Hint: Think about "The Big Issue", "Which?" magazine and "The Drudge Report: An Internet Magazine".

- For example, the **government** has a range of powers that include:



- **The Official Secrets Act:**

The government decides what information to classify as secret. To publish or distribute secret information is punishable by a prison sentence for espionage.

- **The "D" Notice system:**

"**Defence Notices**" are similar to Official Secrets but cover non-classified information concerning the armed forces. An extreme example here might be a newspaper that decides to print information on how to make a home-made bomb. The "D" Notice Committee has the power to both **advise** (perhaps suggesting that such publication would be potentially harmful) and, in some instances, to **cancel** publication.

- Secret Service "**positive vetting**" of government employees (including those at the BBC):

This involves checks being made on the background of all prospective employees of the **State**. These checks include not just evidence of criminal background, but also membership of "subversive organisations" (which can range from the Communist Party through Greenpeace to the Labour Party and Trade Unions) or even "Communist or Fascist sympathies".

- Indirectly, television stations are covered by various government **quangos** such as the **Broadcasting Standards Commission** and the **Independent Broadcasting Commission**.

- **Printed materials** are covered by the **Press Complaints Commission** (and by laws relating to **libel** and **contempt of court**).

("Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisations"). An example here might be the Board of Governors of the BBC. These people are appointed by the Government but are supposed to make decisions about the BBC that are independent of any direct political control.

- An **industry-funded censorship board** (the **British Board of Film Classification**) covers the **censoring** of films and videos. (Although the BBFC is not a government body and has no direct legal standing, it is illegal to sell a video that has not been given a classification by the BBFC).

We can **conclude** here by noting that, from this perspective, the relative lack of direct or overt censorship reflects the idea that **indirect** forms of censorship (through ownership of the media, and distribution companies, employment practices, the manufacture of moral panics and a phoney consensus) are so effective **that direct**

**Q.** Briefly explain how the **lack of direct** government censorship can be interpreted by Manipulation theorists as the successful manipulation of the public by powerful interests (3 marks).

**censorship is rarely required** (although, when it is seen to threaten powerful interests, there is little moral hesitation in attempting to directly censor the media).

**3. Evidence against the model.**

1. Perhaps one of the first things we need to

**Q.** In recent times, much has been made of the need for portrayals of violence. Explain, using an appropriate example, **indirect** censorship. (4 marks)

It is possible to argue that a ruling class **cannot** be theorised in this way - as a relatively clear-cut, **socially-cohesive**, group with a **clear** idea of its "**interests**". While manipulation theorists provide evidence to show that a ruling class of some (economic, political and ideological) description does exist, this is **very different** from the ability to show that, by existing, it is able to both tightly control media content and impose its interests upon a (passive and uncritical) audience.

note in this section is the question of whether or not people are affected directly by the things they see and hear through the mass media. This begs answers to a number of questions:

- a. Do we live in a "mass society" with a "mass culture"?
- b. Are the messages put forward through the media simply received uncritically by an audience?
- c. Do people understand the **political context** of newspapers, for example, and adjust their levels of belief accordingly

**For example**, are Sun readers aware of the paper's general political support for the Conservative Party and therefore "take it's political arguments with a pinch of salt"?

**Q.** If you have been introduced to **Festinger's** concepts of **cognitive dissonance**, briefly explain how the concept could be applied to point "c", above (4 marks).

2. Secondly, although it is evident that media ownership is fairly narrow and highly **concentrated** (that is, restricted to a relatively small number of owners), it is not

clear how this fact itself is evidence of "manipulation that serves the interests of a ruling class". While manipulation does take place at various times, it is difficult to see this as an **organised, concerted**, attempt by the members of a **ruling class** to protect their interests.

3. Continuing the above, one of the major (**Pluralist**) **criticisms** of the manipulative model is its theoretical basis. That is, manipulation theorists have tended to avoid **empirical research** into the media, which has meant there is **little research evidence** in existence to **support** this particular theory. The **theory is suggestive**, but as I've just noted, Instrumental Marxists have tended not to produce this kind of research...

4. Although there is evidence to suggest that governments, owners, etc. do try to censor some media content (which lends support to the manipulation argument), there is also evidence to suggest that **journalists, broadcasters** and the like **do not always** "toe-the-class-line". It is difficult to see how **critical journalism and broadcasting** is ever produced within such an apparently tightly-controlled world.

This means that it **suggests** possible areas to research. For example, it should be possible to research evidence of direct manipulation,

5. **Structural Marxists** argue that the main reason for the biased political and cultural (ideological) content of the mass media is the **nature of Capitalist society, rather than the (conspiratorial) activities of powerful individuals**. As we will see when we examine this perspective in a moment, the main argument here is that the **identity and class background** of media **professionals**, while clearly important in a secondary context, is **not a sufficient** form of explanation.

For example, the ITV programme "**Death On The Rock**" which investigated the killing of three "IRA members" in Gibraltar was highly critical of both the government and the secret services. The journalist Paul Foot also regularly writes columns openly attacking "the ruling class" in the Guardian (and before that, The Mirror)

To really understand the way ideological bias is manufactured and distributed throughout the media it is necessary to look at the **underlying structure** of the Capitalist society that produces particular kinds of class relationship.

A major weaknesses of the manipulative model is its failure to explain why the exploited do not revolt against their manipulation and exploitation. The **methodological weakness** here is that the model creates a **rigid dichotomy** between **those who manipulate** and **those who are manipulated**. By posing such a rigid relationship, manipulative theorists are unable to fully explain the subtleties involved in manipulation and censorship.

6. Finally, a major **Pluralist criticism** of this model is the idea that it is, **ultimately**, the **consumer** who decides on the **content** of the mass media. If a market exists for pictures of naked women, then this is what the media will compete to provide. If such a market does not exist, then no amount of competition will change this fact. Publications consisting of pictures of naked women will not sell, will not be able to attract advertising and will, as a result, go bankrupt...

They have difficulty explaining why, on some occasions the general public appear to fully comply with their manipulation (for example, the media portrayal of sex offenders as "beasts, pervers, psychologically disturbed" and the like) and yet, on others, appear to be at odds with the attempted manipulation (for example, although the majority of newspapers support the Conservative Party politically, in July 1995 this Party trailed in the opinion polls by between 25 and 40%).

#### 4. Evaluation of the model.

- Although we've just noted some (**evaluative**) **criticisms** of the manipulative model, in this section we can draw some **general**

**Q.** Briefly explain, using appropriate examples, how Manipulation theorists argue their argument by suggesting that it is the **consumer** who is manipulated, rather than the media (10 marks)

For example, the idea that a ruling class is able to **easily** and **effectively impose** a **dominant ideology** favourable to its interests on a **passive** working class.

**conclusions** about the value of the model.

In general, while it seems evident that newspaper owners, for example, **do** try to manipulate the content of their publications to reflect their own economic, political and ideological preferences, these attempts need to be located in a much stronger **theoretical framework** than that produced by manipulation theorists. At root, the manipulative framework rests upon a number of **assumptions** about the behaviour of a Capitalist ruling class that are **not sustainable empirically**. The most obvious of these is the idea that because members of a ruling class have a common class background this automatically means that they:

- a. Know exactly what their class interests are.
  - b. Co-operate with other member of this class to ensure these interests are satisfied.
- The following model, therefore, attempts to cover much of the same theoretical ground as the manipulative model, using a **different form of Marxist analysis**.

#### **B: The Hegemonic Model of Media Content.**

##### 1. An outline of the model.

The hegemonic model represents an attempt to create a much more **flexible Marxist model of news production and media content**, one that **avoids** some of the **rigidities** of the manipulative model while also being highly **critical** of the role of the mass media in Capitalist society. This is a **major difference** between this model and the **Pluralist model** we will examine in more detail in a moment.

- The main initial **difference** between the **Neo-Marxist hegemonic** and the **traditional / orthodox Marxist manipulative model** is in the emphasis placed, by the former, on the **structure of society**. The concept of a **social structure** is important, and it can be broadly taken to mean the **web of inter-locking relationships that surround us in our everyday life**.

There are **two basic types of social relationship** that can be initially identified.

- Each relationship we enter into is governed by certain **rules (norms)** and **responsibilities** and it is these that give our relationships a **sense of permanence** and **stability** - in other words, **a structure**.

**a. Those we create through choice.**

**For example**, when we choose someone as a partner.

**b. Those that are imposed upon us by others.**

**For example**, we all have a relationship with the government. The government taxes us when we work, makes us go to school, imprisons us when we are caught breaking the law and so forth.

In the sense that we, as individuals, are all part of a **wider system of social relationships**, it is clear that by **observing rules** and **taking-on responsibilities** (willingly or otherwise) we become subject to certain **structural imperatives** (or **commands**, if you prefer).

In basic terms, structural imperatives relate to things that need to be done to maintain the structure of our lives, our culture and, ultimately, our society.

As individuals, we **always** have a **choice** about whether to obey these commands.

For example, in our society, "You must not break the law" is generally likely to be seen as a more powerful rule to obey than a rule that says "You must break the law".

- The purpose of these examples is to suggest that the **structure of society is not rigid**, but **flexible**.

Someone who secretly breaks a marriage norm is not automatically sanctioned, just as someone who breaks the law and is not caught escapes a negative sanction. However, it is clear that some rules are more powerful than others.

Clearly, all of this does not happen **accidentally** or **randomly**. There is a clear **pattern** to this behaviour and it is one that begs the question of exactly how these norms come into existence. We can answer this question in the following way.

- For Marxists generally, the most **powerful rules** in society relate to **economic** activity, mainly because the way in which **work is organised** in society is seen to condition the way other institutions (**political** and **ideological**) are organised.

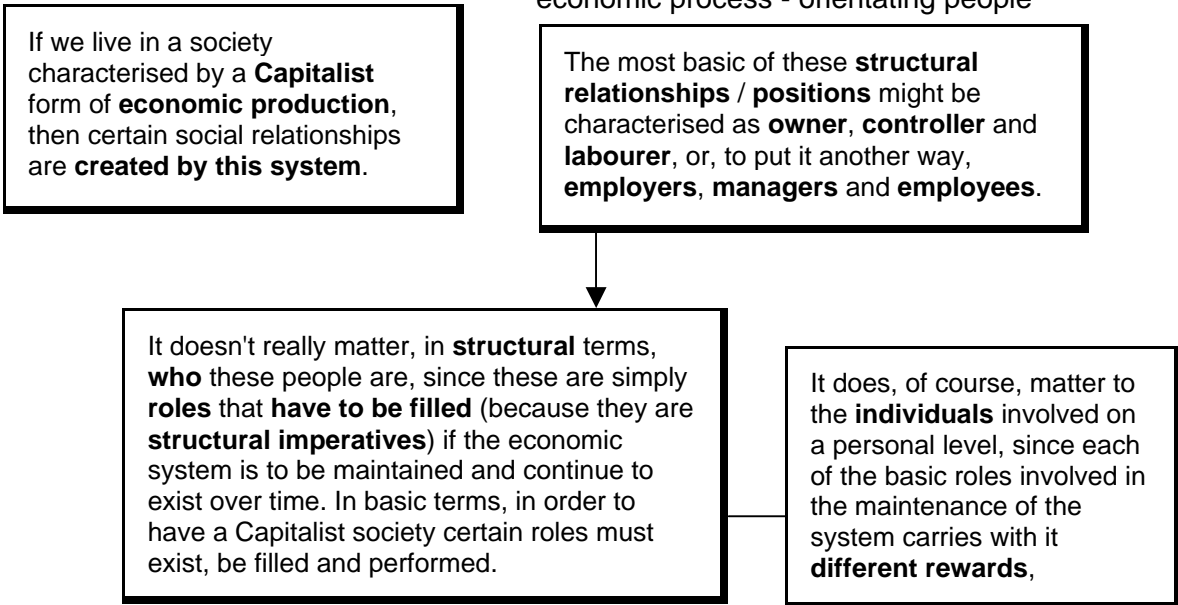
For example:

- **Political institutions** relating to government are charged with **overseeing** the **general form of economic production** in society. **Laws**, for example, are created by governments which relate in **two ways** to the **maintenance** of economic institutions:
  - a. Those laws which relate **explicitly** to economic production (for example, laws governing **privately-owned property**, **contract** law and so forth)
  - b. Those laws which relate **implicitly** to economic production (for example, laws that contribute to the general maintenance of **social order** - these laws are designed to make society as safe and as orderly as possible, since in a safe and orderly society people are free to go about their working lives which, of course, means that they make profits for a Capitalist class).

On a **personal level**, one of the rules of our culture governing sexual behaviour is that married men and women do not have sexual relationships beyond their marriage partner. This **norm** does not prevent such behaviour (since this is not its purpose). What the norm tells us is where the **boundaries** of acceptable behaviour are in our society; if we break the norm then we can expect some sort of (negative) social **sanction**.

On a **wider social level**, we can choose to break the law. Again, the **norm** exists as a **boundary** marker for behaviour (in this case, a legal norm). If we choose to behave in a way that breaks the legal norm we lay ourselves open to (negative) **legal sanction** (a fine, a prison sentence or, in extreme cases, death).

- **Ideological (or cultural) institutions**, such as **religion, education** and the **mass media** are charged with **maintaining** the **cultural values** surrounding the economic process - orientating people



towards work in a Capitalist society, encouraging them to adopt certain values (competition, private ownership of property, wage labour and so forth).

Thus, for **Hegemonic Marxists**, **society** exists as an **objective reality** that is created out of the many ways that people relate to one another. These **relationships** form a **structural framework** that reflects back upon the individual and is **experienced** as something that is **real**.  
 If we **assume** this to be so, then we can start to see the basic point to the hegemonic argument. For example:

From the **Hegemonic** viewpoint, the existence of a Capitalist form of society produces a certain form of **stratification system**, one in which **different social classes** are **differently placed** in the **class structure**.

From this, we are given the idea that the construction of the **basic rules of Capitalist society** follow from **the structure of the economic system**. Once we recognise this basic structure, it then becomes a matter of explaining **how** the basic rules of a Capitalist form of society are maintained. This is where the role of **cultural institutions** comes into the equation.

It may, of course, **try** to do this for various **political, economic** or **ideological** reasons. For **example**, a newspaper organisation may give their support to one political party rather than another because it believes that such a party will create a more favourable economic climate for its activities.

- From this perspective, **the role of the mass media**, as a **cultural institution** is

Q. Using an example, define the concept of "objective reality" (3 marks)

**not** to help maintain the position of any individual or group.

Rather, its **role** is:

- a. To **police** the **cultural system**.
- b. To help **maintain rule boundaries**.

This idea of "**complexity out of simplicity**" enables such theorists to explain both the nature of society and the role of institutions such as the mass media in the maintenance of society.

- In terms of the above, it is important to remember that when we are talking about the **social world**, we are looking at a **hugely complex system of relationships**. No one group can hope to control all of these relationships, but what can be controlled and patrolled are the **basic, fundamental, tenets** (or **values** if you prefer) of a particular form of economic organisation. **Once these are established, all other "local rules" of behaviour and organisation can be read-off from these fundamental values.**

The main problem, here, is that in order to explain social behaviour such theorists have to create a scarcely-credible, conspiracy-like, scenario involving clear and close relationships within a cohesive and coherent "ruling class" - thousands of individuals sharing the same basic interests and backgrounds who are aware of their basic class interests and who act consciously to maintain and protect these interests.

- Thus, the **class** that is able to **shape** these **fundamental rules** will find it reasonably **easy** to **maintain** them. If these fundamental rules are maintained it becomes **impossible** for individuals to act in ways that seriously threaten their continued existence. People are, effectively, locked into certain social relationships...

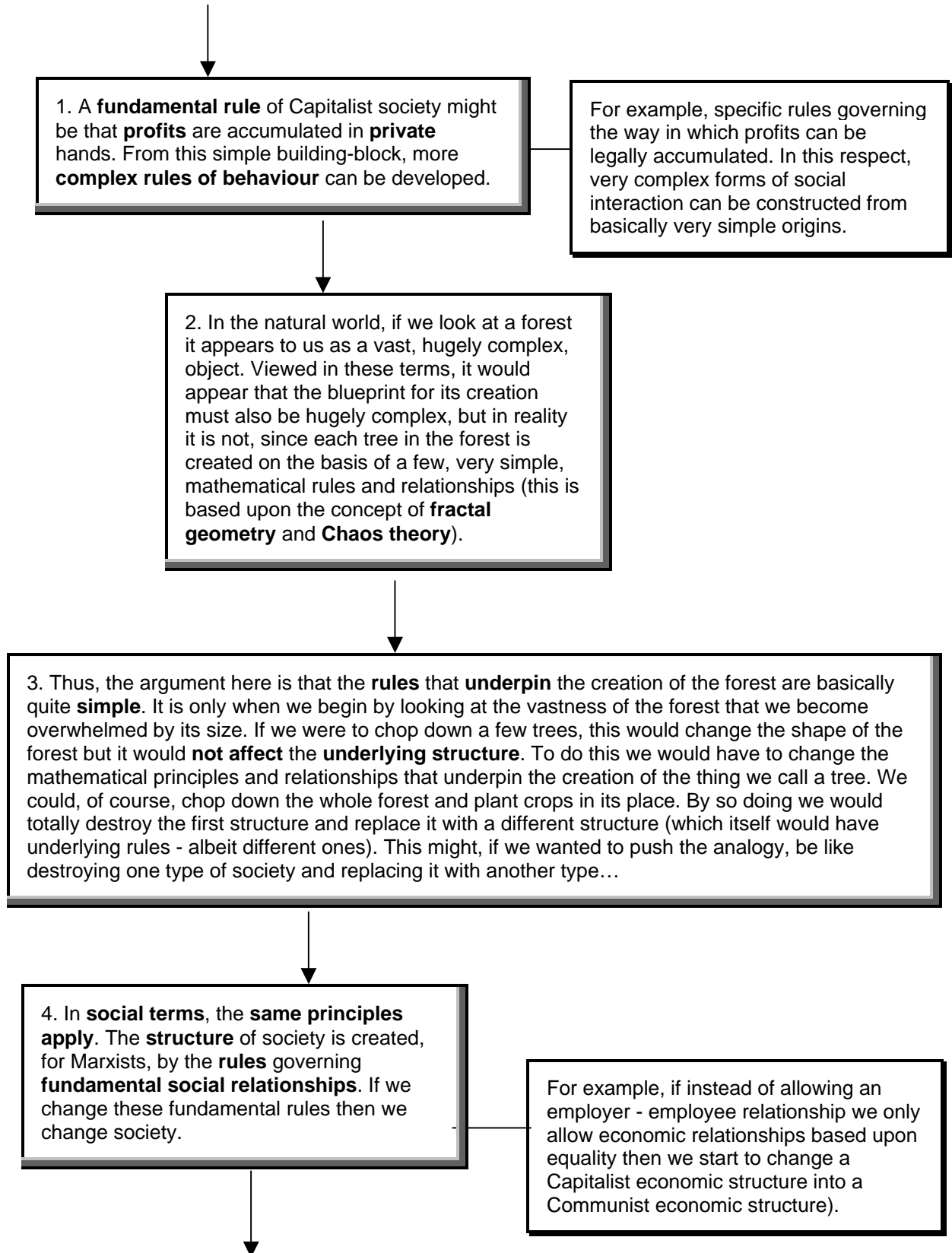
**For example**, you only have to think about the way governments have tried to manipulate public opinion in times of war to see that the manipulation of people's opinions is something of an everyday occurrence.

- If you want to remember the basic difference between these two (Marxist) perspectives (or interpretations), the following might help:
- **Hegemonic Marxists** argue that **social complexity** develops out of **simple, basic, social relationships** based around a relatively small number of **fundamental values**.
- **Manipulative Marxists**, on the other hand, argue the **reverse**; namely, that the **relatively simple relationships** we experience in our everyday lives are actually **based** on a **hugely-complex** series of **manipulated ideas and behaviours**.
- Thus, while it's possible to argue that **people are manipulated** in various ways the Hegemonic explanation for this manipulation of opinion appears far more credible and persuasive...



**Note:** If you want to explore the basic ideas involved in the Hegemonic Marxist approach the following should be of some help. If you're happy you have understood these ideas (or you can't be bothered to explore them further) you can skip this section and go directly to page 18.

- **Hegemonic Marxism: "Complexity out of Simplicity"**



5. Thus, the **basic values** in our society, for example, are those that derive from the way in which society is organised around a particular **system of economic production (Capitalism)**. These fundamental values represent a particular **world view** (or **Weltanschauung**) and this world view is **actively promoted** by members of a **ruling class** (the **dominant economic class** in our society). In modern societies, the mass media is, of course, one cultural vehicle that can be used to promote ideas...

There are many different possible and actual world views in our society, but only **one** is **underpinned** by the nature of the **economic system**. This world view is a **dominant** (or, more correctly, **hegemonic**) one precisely because people **experience it as real** in their everyday lives. In this respect, what we see emerging is a form of social consensus, whereby people experience the reality of a particular set of social relationships and come to accept these as real, stable and permanent (in short, these basic relationships become **institutionalised**).

6. The **hegemonic** aspect of the model, therefore, relates to the way a **particular world view** or **ideology** coincides with the **basic political and economic interests** of a **powerful ruling class**. Through their influence and **domination** of **cultural institutions** such as the media, this class is able to **actively promote** the **basic principles** underpinning Capitalist society (from which they benefit the most). In this respect, they provide the **leadership (hegemony)** that is required for the maintenance of a particular economic system and the social relationships that develop from it.

7. In this interpretation, the ruling class do not need to be totally involved in the day-to-day overseeing of all aspects of social life. Rather, through their **cultural hegemony** they are able to protect and maintain the fundamental social relationships characteristic of Capitalism. Once this is done, other groups and classes in society have a certain level of **relative autonomy** (freedom within certain limits) to act in various ways. **Only when the behaviour of such groups threatens the fundamental values of Capitalist society is action needed to limit their behaviour.**

8. **Finally**, one of the most important ideas to note here is that, for **Marxists, ideas do not change the world**. In this respect, it is of little importance what people think about the nature of society and its organisation; the important thing is how people behave. Thus, in this type of society the relatively free-flow of ideas is permissible; it is only when people start to act on those ideas that the State is likely to intervene (through political institutions such as the law and cultural institutions such as education and the media) to uphold the dominant (hegemonic) world view and the **status quo**.

## 2. Evidence for the model.

Evidence for this model is centred around the idea that the **role of cultural institutions** such as the **mass media** is to **reflect** and **propagate the fundamental values of Capitalist society**. One way this is carried-out is through what hegemonic Marxists call "**agenda setting**".

In this respect, there can be **no argument over the agenda itself** (whether or not Capitalist forms of economic production are the best possible way of organising society, for example), but **only over the best way to implement that agenda** (for example, should the State be involved in the regulation of private companies, what laws are required to maintain the status quo, etc.).

The concept of "**agenda setting**" involves, in this context, the idea that media institutions attempt to create a **social consensus** (an **agenda**) around certain fundamental assumptions about the nature of the society in which we live. In this respect, certain ideas or beliefs are considered so fundamental they are not included "on the agenda for discussion". **Stephen Lukes ("Power")** has argued that the ability to **set an agenda** for what can or cannot be discussed is an important dimension of power in any situation. If you can, for example, stop people talking about / questioning certain ideas this makes you powerful...

Think about your education. Each class you attend has an agenda, just as the School or College you attend has an agenda. You might like to reflect on / discuss the following questions:

What sort of ideas are "up for discussion" on your class agenda?

What ideas are "not on the agenda"? (Cannot be discussed / questioned).

Who is allowed to set the agenda in the classroom?

Why are they allowed / able to set the agenda?

An example of **agenda setting** as part of the attempt to build a **consensus** in our society might be the issue of **Northern Ireland**.

Before you go any further, note down your perception of "**What the situation in Northern Ireland was all about**". If you are doing this exercise in class, with others present, you might like to compare your notes with their notes to discover points of agreement / disagreement.

**"Northern Ireland" involved:**

For the past 20 years, the **basic principles** involved in any media discussion of "**The Troubles**" in Northern Ireland can be characterised in the following terms:

- There was no civil war, as such, in Northern Ireland. Rather, the British government was involved in a "policing action".
- The IRA was a terrorist organisation committed to the overthrow of constitutional government.
- The IRA had little or no real support among Catholics in Northern Ireland.
- The role of the British Army was one of "keeping the peace". It was an impartial role that did not side with Protestants against Catholics or vice versa.
- To report the views of the IRA was to give publicity to terrorists.
- Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and there was no question of allowing it to become either independent or part of a United Ireland.

- Although an **oversimplification** of a complex situation, the above characterises the **media consensus** concerning this situation. This is not to say that other interpretations have not been given about the situation in Northern Ireland (left wing political groups, for example, have consistently argued for a different interpretation). Rather, it illustrates the way in which **no serious cultural or political consideration** was given to these opposing interpretations.

Thus, on the one hand we find that the **dominant (hegemonic) ideological assumptions** about Northern Ireland, for example, are presented in ways that **stress their normal, acceptable, taken-for-granted, nature**.

On the other hand, **opposing interpretations** that clash with this hegemonic interpretation, , are presented as **extremist, irrational, meaningless, Utopian, dangerous or impractical** - in short, a variety of ways are employed by the media to illustrate that interpretations that oppose the dominant point of view are not to be seriously considered.

In this respect, the media's **audience is not directly manipulated** - but they (we?) are being manipulated, albeit in ways that are **indirect** and **subtle**. It leaves the reader, listener or viewer "free to make up their own mind" about a situation by presenting "the facts" - yet such **facts** are simply **social constructions** or interpretations of the world from a particular, **partial**, point of view. In effect, the reader, for example, is asked to **choose** between:

- a. A **point of view** that is **reasonable**, held by all **right-thinking people, moderate** and **practical** (the non-deviant, hegemonic, world view) and
- b. A **point of view** that is **unreasonable, extremist, crackpot, impractical, dangerous** (the deviant world view) and so forth.

Given this type of "choice", it is argued by Hegemonic Marxists, it is hardly surprising that vast majority of the media's audience subscribe to the former view...

- A recent example of the way views opposed to the dominant interpretation are **marginalized** through a **labelling process** is the development of the concept of "**political correctness**".

This term is used in the media as a shorthand way of saying that a particular view is being put forward simply to satisfy some (misguided) notion of fairness.

Thus, one way of interpreting the Labour Party's attempt to ensure that more women get into Parliament by only allowing women to compete to be candidates in a number of "safe" Labour constituencies is to argue that it helps to ensure that the gender balance in Parliament more accurately reflects the gender balance in society.

- Further evidence for the model comes from such things as **television scheduling**, where the majority of programming is political uncontroversial, undemanding and propagates a taken-for-granted, consensual view of the social world.
- News and current affairs programmes, for example, are required to be "politically balanced". Programming is designed to attract advertising and it reflects the need to deliver certain types of consumer to the advertiser. This, it is argued, explains why more intellectually-demanding programmes appear in the television schedules (because they attract an affluent, middle class, audience that is attractive to some advertisers).

However, amongst those opposed to women being given this "unfair" treatment, the label that is given to this practice is "political correctness" - the implication being that the Labour Party have adopted this method not because it attempts to correct a social imbalance of power and representation (something that all "right-minded" people could agree upon), but simply because it supposedly represents a "socialist dogma about gender equality" (something that no "right-minded" person should believe).

- In the main, however, a general diet of soap operas, "real-life" docu-dramas, period dramas, police and military dramas, quiz shows and so forth helps to deliver-up a mass audience for most advertisers by appealing to the lowest common denominator.
- In terms of **empirical studies** of the role of the media from an Hegemonic Marxist perspective, some of the most accessible are those produced by the **Glasgow University Media Group** (for example, "**Bad News**", 1976 and "**More Bad News**", 1980).
- Finally, we can note that the way the mass media is organised **bureaucratically** helps to **perpetuate** a **dominant interpretation** of the social world.

Thus, the label of "politically correct" is used as a way of arguing against something (by appealing to a common sense, taken for granted view of the world) while appearing to support the principle involved (in this instance, that more women should be Members of Parliament).

Both **Taylor et al: "Sociology In Focus"** (pages 552 - 554) and **O'Donnell: "Introduction To Sociology"** 4<sup>th</sup> edition (page 510) provide commentaries on this work (as do most textbooks with a Mass Media section).

In simple terms, the argument here is that the media operate a "**hierarchy of significance**" when it comes to the way a social context is given to events and their interpretation for the audience. **For example**, powerful individuals and groups are given more prominence and opportunity to explain their views than "ordinary people".

### 3. Evidence against the model.

There are a number of **problems** that we can note relating to this model, both in methodological terms and in terms of a **Pluralist** critique of the general Marxist perspective.

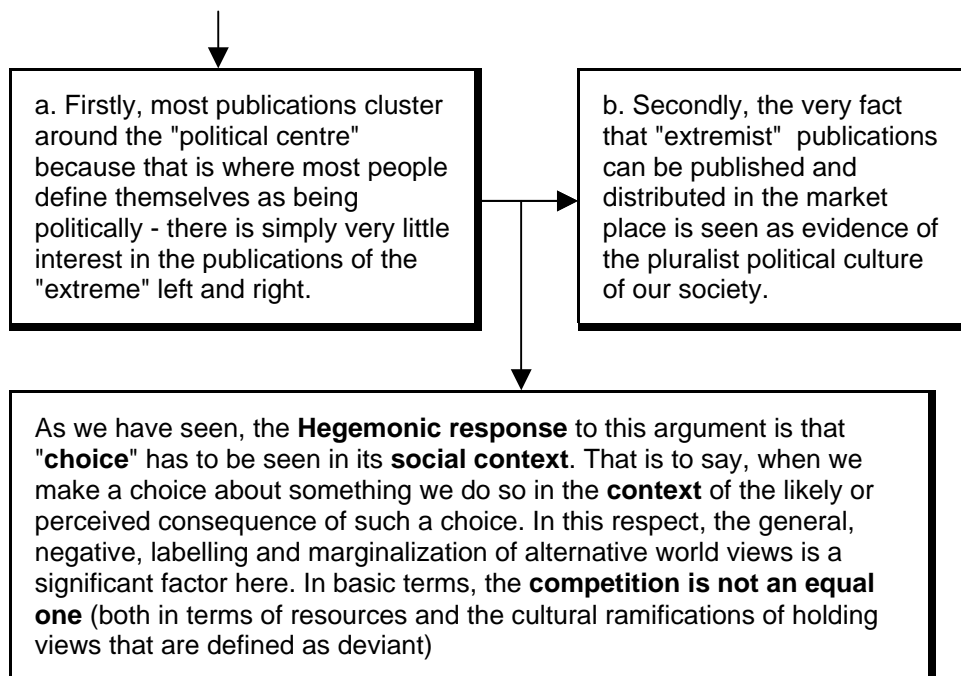
1. **Methodologically**, one of the main problems for all perspectives has **not** been that of **illustrating** bias within the media.

- Rather, the problem has been one of reliably and validly showing that the mass media itself has an **effect** upon the people who consume it. In this respect, it would not matter very much if the media did simply perpetuate one particular, ideologically-biased, world view if the people at whom it was aimed either did not understand it or believe it.

**Methodology** means the way we believe it possible to collect **reliable** and **valid** information about something. In relation to the study of media, for example, it's not difficult to demonstrate that various forms of **bias** exist (we can **reliably** and **validly** demonstrate this). However, demonstrating that something exists and showing **how** such **bias** **affects** people's **behaviour** and **attitudes** is far more difficult. These ideas are discussed in more depth in the "**Media Effects**" Study Pack.

2. A major criticism of this model is the idea that it downplays both the **role of the audience** and the amount of **choice** enjoyed by that audience.

- In the first instance, from a **Pluralist perspective** the audience has a large measure of choice over what is read, watched and listened to through the various media available. If people do not like what is being presented they do not have to consume it.
- On the other hand, it is frequently pointed-out that consumers have a choice, not just **across** a range of different media (newspapers, television, radio etc), but also **within** each medium. Newspapers and periodicals, for example, are published right across the political spectrum, from the far right to the far left. The argument here is two-fold:



3. One of the main **roles** of the mass media in a democratic society is the **dissemination of information** that gives people the **ability to make up their own**

**mind** about **how** to **interpret** events and **act** on those interpretations. Whether or not people choose to act on such information is matter of personal choice...

- In this respect, the argument here is that a **pluralist perspective** reflects the way our society **actually is**, rather than how **Marxists**, for example, **like to see it**. The **audience** for the media, it is argued, are more **politically aware** than Marxists will allow.

People who read The Sun newspaper, for example, are likely to be **aware** of the slanted political coverage and interpretations provided and they make allowances for such bias.

#### 4. Evaluation of the model.

The **Hegemonic** model would appear to be a significant advance on the manipulative model for a number of reasons:

- Firstly, it does not depend on an unrealistic (invalid?) analysis of the relationship between an "all-knowing and all-powerful" ruling class and the rest of society.
- Secondly, it explains how **choice** and **diversity** can exist within a society **without** these being a **threat** to the overall domination of a ruling class.
- Thirdly, it shows how an **apparent consensus** over the nature of society and social relationships can be **manufactured** through **cultural institutions** such as the mass media. In this respect, a ruling class, through its **ownership and control** of media institutions is able to set various forms of political, economic and cultural agendas **without** directly controlling the content of the media.
- Fourthly, one potential **weakness** in the overall model is the consistent failure to show, empirically rather than anecdotally, precisely **how** people are **affected** by the media. That is, to show a **meaningful relationship** between such things as **ownership, control, agenda setting** and people's **behaviour**.
- Finally, the validity of Hegemonic theories rests on the idea that certain fundamental values are encoded in media output.

On the one hand, such values must be **relatively simple** and **broadly-drawn** (for example, the fundamental Capitalist value of **private ownership and profit**), yet on the other hand the very fact of their simplicity and breadth means that a **huge number** of (normative) **interpretations** can be placed on and drawn from these values.

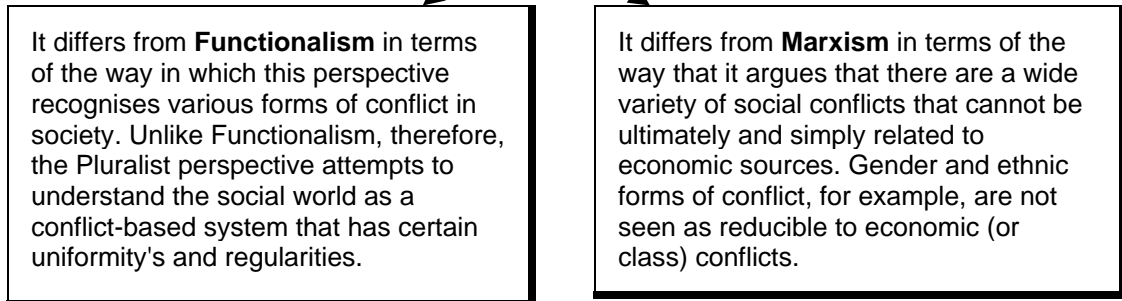
Given this idea it's difficult to see how a ruling class can maintain any level of internal cohesion (and hence domination over other classes) over time. In short, it's difficult to see precisely what hegemonic role the media play in society.

### C: The Pluralist Model of Media Content.

#### 1. An outline of the model.

The **Pluralist** perspective is most closely aligned with the general **Weberian** interpretation of the social world and it differs in a couple of ways from other general sociological perspectives:

In this respect, the basic interpretation here is that **any society** consists of a **variety of different ideological viewpoints and interpretations.**



- **At any one time, one particular ideology** is likely to be **dominant** but it is **not necessarily the same ideology at different times.**

From this perspective, the mass media **does** involve various forms of **bias**, since in any situation where there are differing viewpoints which cannot all be adequately represented, bias is bound to occur. However, three points are important here:

a. In general terms, the **range** of media available in society covers most of these possible viewpoints.

b. The audience / consumer **selects** those views that most closely accord with their own (and declines / **rejects** those that don't).

c. The media **responds** to audience **demand**. In this respect, if the audience is politically conservative then the media will have to respond to this. A newspaper, for example, that insists upon representing left wing viewpoints cannot expect to survive in the market-place if the potential audience does not agree with such views (or vice versa).

**For example**, in Britain following the 2nd World War, a Labour government introduced a wide range of radical social reforms (a National Health Service, a universal education system, a wide-ranging system of National Insurance and so forth) that were certainly not part of the "pre-war consensus". These reforms could be characterised as **significantly improving the social circumstances of the working class.**

In the 1980's, on the other hand, the Conservative government introduced a rather different set of economic and political reforms (the privatisation of State-owned industries, a reduction in the higher rates of Income Tax, a huge increase in indirect taxation, new laws governing the activities of Trade Unions and so forth) that, once again, broke-up the "post-war consensus". These reforms could be characterised as significantly improving the social circumstances of the middle and upper classes.

From this perspective, the main sources of **media bias** come **not** from the **ideological beliefs** of owners, but simply from **technical constraints** imposed upon various media. For example:

- **Newspapers**, by their very nature, have to deal with events that happen over a relatively short space of time.



- **Television** also, because of the relatively **limited time available** has to present words and images in a **highly simplified, shorthand**, form that **keys into** the **attitudes** and **levels of understanding** of an **audience**.
- Television doesn't just happen, it has to be **organised** and **planned**. Therefore, **stories** that are **immediate**, easy to put into a **recognisable context** and **highly visual** are likely to be included at the expense of stories which do not fulfil these criteria.

Thus, whereas **Marxists** tend to see it as ideologically significant that the **views of the powerful** (politicians, police officers, company directors and so forth), are frequently presented, **Pluralists** tend to see this as simply one of the **constraints** of the medium. **Access** to people involved at the centre of events, for example, is a requirement and the people most likely to be at the centre of things are the powerful...

Ultimately, perhaps, from this perspective the argument is that all media have to survive in the economic **market place**. If people are **not** given what they want they will, presumably, buy it elsewhere.

Although, from a Marxist viewpoint, this argument neglects any analysis of the way in which people may be encouraged to demand certain forms of entertainment and information, the Pluralist perspective does represent an alternative form of explanation of the content of the mass media.

## 2. Evidence for the model.

Evidence for this model can be found in a number of different areas.

- The wide **range of media** available (print, television, radio and so forth), in addition to the **range of viewpoints** on offer within various media suggest to Pluralists that there really is a **plurality of different views** on offer to the

**Q.** Identify **three** ways that the media can be considered to respond to audience demand. For **each** of these, briefly explain **why** you think this is an example of audience demand (6 marks).

consumer. Consumers are free to select those views they agree with and reject those with which they disagree. In basic terms, if you don't like Rupert Murdoch's vision of the future, you don't have to buy a satellite dish...

- Secondly, there is **no clear evidence** that the mass media **directly change people's beliefs or attitudes** (as both the Marxist models and various common sense interpretations suggest). On the contrary, from this perspective the **role of the media** is one of **confirming the prejudices and views** of the **consuming audience**. People read the Sun rather than the Guardian, for example, simply because they prefer its view of the world.
- Thirdly, it is frequently difficult to see how the things published and broadcast through the media are automatically of benefit to a ruling class. A newspaper such as the Sunday Sport which survives by printing pictures of semi-naked women may or may not be to your taste, but it is difficult to make the connections between this and the overall interests of a ruling class. Connections can, of course, be made, but these connections tend to be asserted rather than empirically demonstrated.
- **Journalists**, for example, are seen to have a **professional independence** (or **autonomy**) from the people who employ them (part of the **separation between ownership and control** debate). The main argument here is that not all journalists share a "dominant ideology" and significant individuals make explicit stands against censorship, bias and the like.
- Finally, Pluralists, as we have seen, tend to stress the importance of **competition** within the **market place**, whether it be for readers, listeners or viewers. A newspaper or television station, if it is to survive, is subject to certain technical and economic rules.

### 3. Evidence against the model.

Both the manipulative and Hegemonic models contain a number of implicit criticisms of the Pluralist model, so I will concentrate here on outlining some of the more explicit forms of criticism of this model.

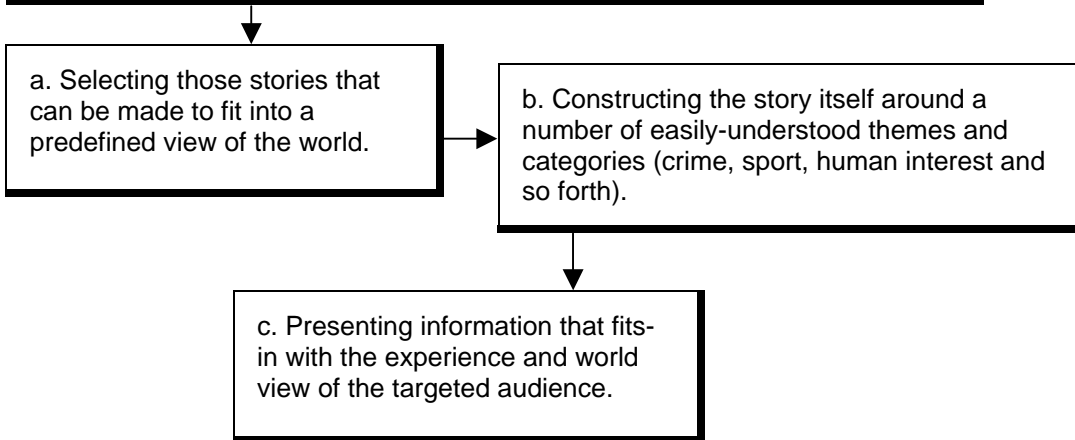
**For example**, a television station that bores its viewers is unlikely to achieve large audiences; hence, the majority of programmes are made with entertainment and interest (rather than education) in mind. This, therefore, is a significant constraint on the media.

1. In the first place, although **journalists**, for example, do have a degree of **relative**

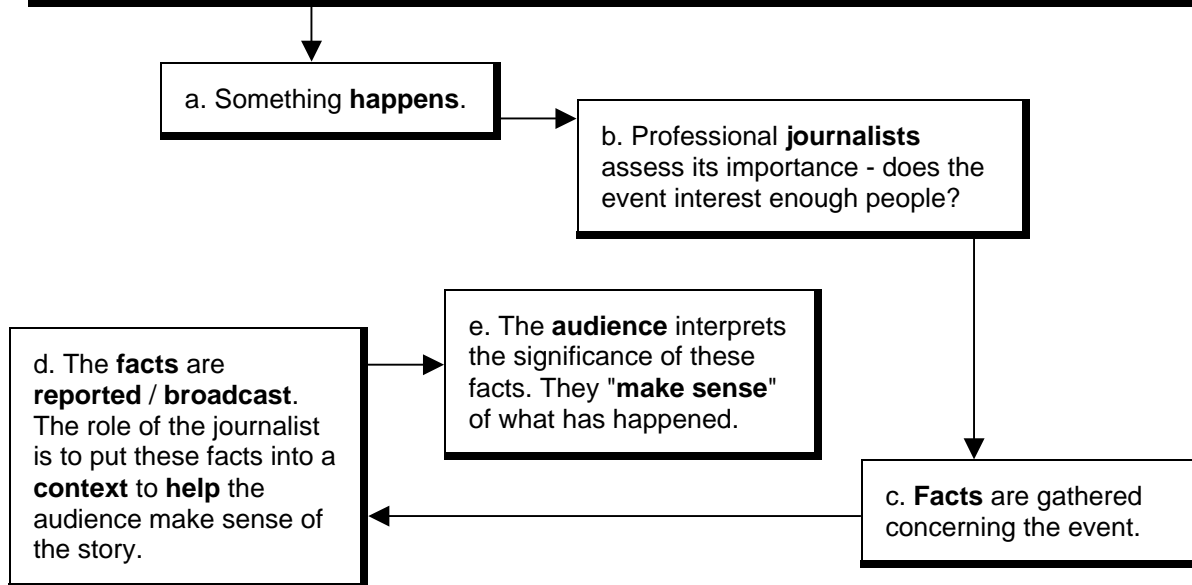
Similarly, in the newspaper world, The Sun for example has an audience of lower working class people with minimal educational qualifications. In this respect, to reach such an audience the journalists have to pitch the language of the paper at a fairly low level of understanding, which effectively means that stories have to be relatively short and in a restricted language - something that effectively rules-out long, complicated, articles about the state of the economy (if you want this type of reading material then you buy The Times, Telegraph or Guardian).

**autonomy** in their work (as do most, if not all professional workers), the crucial point here is the constraints, both practical and ideological, that surround them in the production of media content.

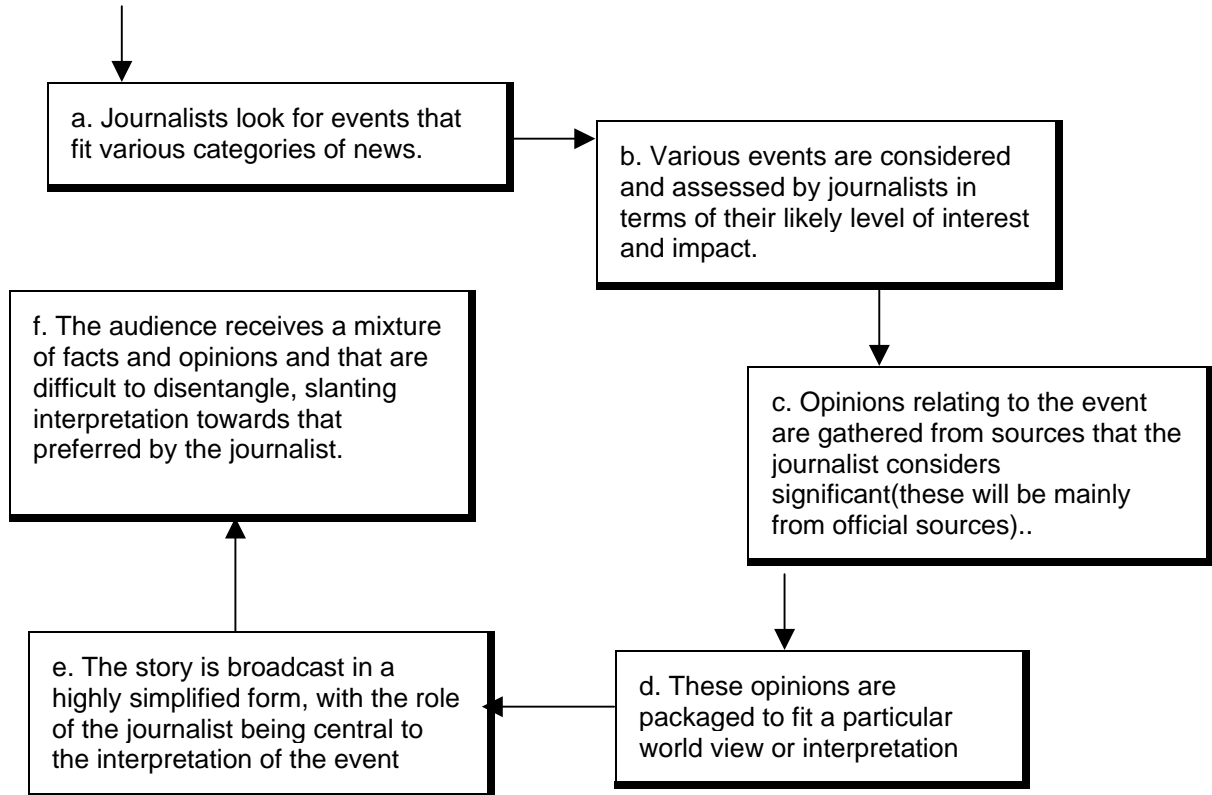
**Philip Schlesinger's** study of the way news is socially constructed ("**Putting Reality Together: BBC News**", 1978) has shown that journalists do not simply select their stories from an "objective reality" that exists somewhere "out there in society". Rather, journalists operate within a clearly defined (but rarely stated) set of ideological beliefs about such things as the nature of the social world, the nature of the audience, the nature of news and so forth. Within these ideological constraints "news" is constructed by:



Thus, what we have, according to writers such as **Schlesinger**, is a process of **media construction** that is the **reverse** of the **Pluralist view**. **For example**, according to the **Pluralist view**, the following (**idealised**) process is involved in relation to the production of a news story:



- **Critics** of the Pluralist model suggest, however, this process is rather different.



- A good recent **example** of this process was the **bombing of Federal Government** offices in **Oklahoma, USA** in **1995**.
  - The **facts** of the event were that a massive bomb was detonated in an office block, which collapsed killing many hundreds of people.
  - However, a simple telling of such facts was clearly insufficient, since it was **necessary** for the **journalists** involved to try to **make sense of the event**, to give it some sort of **context** and **meaning**.
  - Since journalists do not have any special insights into the human condition, the **first interpretation** imposed upon the event was that it was a **terrorist bombing**.
  - Once this had been established, the next step was to **speculate**, on behalf of the audience, as to who was **responsible**. In this particular context, the **dominant world view** governing the category "**terrorism**" located the event immediately in a **Middle Eastern context** - that it must have been carried-out by "**Arab terrorists**". Various suspects, both general and specific were then identified.
  - It was only a few days later, once the FBI had begun to **empirically investigate** the bombing, that the **context changed** and the real perpetrators were identified (an **ultra right-wing American militia group**).
- However we view the significance of the above, it remains clear that **journalists do not simply and passively report "facts"**. Journalists **actively construct**

news, both through their initial assessment and selection of what counts as news, through to the mixing of fact and opinion in the presentation of an event.

2. **Critics** of the Pluralist model also argue that it **downgrades** the **effects** that the

You can test the above, by watching (or recording) any **television news programme** and making notes on stories where the "facts" are entwined with journalist's opinions and interpretations of those facts.

media has upon people. While these **effects** may **not** be **simple** and **direct**, there is evidence to suggest that the media, as a form of **secondary socialisation**, do have an impact upon how we see and understand social reality.

3. A further criticism involves the idea that the media is accessible to all groups in society. Clearly, in terms of broadcasting (radio and television) this is not so, simply because the government licenses television and radio stations.

An example here might be the concept of "**fear of crime**", whereby people feel threatened by various types of crime even though the chances of them being a victim are very slight

- In terms of newspaper publication, while it may be much easier to publish a paper, the idea that its success or failure depends solely upon its ability to attract a sufficient number of readers is not necessarily true.

**Advertising** is the life-blood of newspaper and magazine publishing and it is the ability to attract sufficient advertising that seems to be the most **crucial factor** here. Left-wing publications, for example, invariably fail to attract such advertising and consequently find it difficult / impossible to survive in a competitive market, even if a solid readership exists.

4. **Access** to the media is also an important source of criticism in relation to the Pluralist model, mainly because the most **powerful groups and individuals** in society have far **greater levels of access** to the media than does the majority of the population. By having such access it makes it **easier** for such people to **influence** the output of the media. Whether or not they are able to do this effectively is another argument, but the fact that they have the potential to exert influence should not be overlooked.

5. Finally, while it is clear that a **range of media** does exist in our society, the anti-pluralist view is that there is **very little to actually choose between them**. Tabloid newspapers, for example, report much the same kinds of stories in much the same kinds of ways, whether you buy the Sun, Mirror or Star.

#### 4. Evaluation of the model.

- One of the main **strengths** of the Pluralist model is the way in which it looks in detail at **the role of journalists and broadcasters** in terms of the **structural constraints** on their role. Like the Hegemonic model, it locates the news-gathering role of journalists within a **social context** that focuses upon the way organisations are bureaucratically organised, limiting the ability of journalists and broadcasters to interpret events in ways that conflict with various dominant ideologies.
- Secondly, the Pluralist model focuses to some extent on the role of **the media audience**, assigning them a much more **active role** in the general process of interpretation than has traditionally been the case with Marxist models. A case can also be made in relation to the audience being able to **select** the information they receive from a wide variety of different sources.
- On the other hand, it is evident that the model has certain **weaknesses**, not the least of which being the **overemphasis** on the **relatively neutral role** played by the individuals involved in the gathering and dissemination of information.
- Similarly, the **power of advertisers** tends to be downplayed, both in terms of their financial support for various media and in terms of their influence on an audience. The very fact that advertising is such big business suggests that it must influence public opinion in some way - and if advertising can have this effect then it seems unrealistic to assume that all aspects of media content do not have an effect upon their audience.