CHAPTER 2

THEORY AND METHOD

Political Economy of Communication

This dissertation draws upon the intellectual traditions of political economy of communication to assess the state of radio in a deregulated environment. Contrary to free market theory which posits that consumers have unlimited access to the media content they desire and the power to "vote" for or against content with their remote control, a number of media critics argue that private, unregulated media ownership is profoundly undemocratic. A solely private, corporate model for media ownership, these critics contend, is fundamentally contrary to democratic principles. This claim, which is central to much of the political economy of communication literature, is premised on a particular vision of a democratic society, specifically the public sphere model theorized by Jürgen Habermas and further developed in both political science and communication studies. In the United States, the Habermasian model is often applied in compliment with the political thought of James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine, among others.

In an historical account of modern democratic societies, Habermas (1962/1989) charts the disappearance of the public sphere and the degenerative implications this loss has had for uncoerced public discussion and I nformed opinion, and thus, Habermas argues, for democracy itself. In his critique, Habermas' ideal democratic politics are predicated on a discursive model of the public sphere where citizens debate through reasoned, practical discourse the needs of society and the means for governing. The two necessary conditions for Habermas' discursive model are 1) the quality of discourse, which must be rational-critical, and 2) the quantity of popular participation in public

debate, which must be diversely inclusive (Calhoun, 1992, p. 2). Public opinion, in the Habermasian view, does not represent 'mere' opinion, but comprises a "reasoned form of access to truth" (p. 17), which is produced in social and cultural spheres as well as in traditional political realms (Benhabib, 1992, p. 104). The activity of public debate, consensus and identity formation is the mechanism by which people should govern and be governed (Habermas, 1989/1962, p. 54). In addition to these conditions for discourse, Habermas argued that the public sphere is a democratic mechanism only as long as it remains detached from the influences of the economy (wealth should not be a requirement for access) and the state (the public sphere should not be regulated or controlled by government).

Since Habermas' account of eighteenth century European political development there have been many critiques of his idealized public sphere in light of actually existing democracies. In particular Mary P. Ryan (1992), Nancy Fraser (1992) and Hanno Hardt (1996) have argued that the public spheres Habermas points to did not welcome the lower classes, and within the bourgeoisie, women were excluded. The bourgeoisie notion of the "public good," which was at the center of political debate in the public sphere, was assumed to serve the interests of all. However, as history reveals, the discriminatory interests of the bourgeoisie did not necessarily serve all of society. For example, a fundamental catalyst for the development of feminist theory and the women's movement in the eighteenth century was the denial of women's access to public realms.

Other critics have argued the communication model of "practical discourse" that Habermas supports is too restrictive as an ideal, and in practice leads to the exclusion of value differences not compatible with a particular moral orientation (McCarthy, 1992).

Notwithstanding these issues, the basic principles of Habermas' public sphere model, extended to all people regardless of gender, class, race, religion, etc., is the basis upon which critics of commercial media systems build their vision of a more democratic media.

In his short introduction to the injurious connection between private media ownership and democracy, Robert McChesney (1997) claims that participatory democracy requires no significant disparities in wealth, a sense of an individual's connection to the community, and an effective system of political communication that helps citizens make informed decisions (p. 5). In a highly mediated society, the public relies, although not solely, on the media to provide forums for participation in political and cultural life. Similarly, Graham Murdock and Peter Golding (1989) argue that in order for citizens to be able to adequately participate in public life, the communications system upon which they rely must afford equal access to information about citizens rights; provide the broadest range of information about public and private interests; allow citizens to use the media to register criticism; and citizens must be able to recognize themselves and their concerns in media representations of them, and be able to contribute to developing those representations. Thus, Murdock and Golding summarize, a communication system in a democratic society must offer at the level of production the maximum diversity of representations and the possibility for audience feedback, and at the level of consumption a guarantee of universal access regardless of social, political or economic difference.

If the media do not provide adequate forums for diverse discourse, the public is rendered ignorant of consequential social concerns and risks turning the democratic

process of decision-making over to an elite-controlled system (Herman and McChesney, 1997, p. 4). The problem with depending upon a commercial media system, the dominant system in the United States, is that the motives and operations of profit-based media are "antithetical to the cultivation and nurture of the public sphere" (p. 7). Discussions and news items that critically examine economic power, threaten corporations or otherwise challenge the status quo are not carried by advertising-dependent media (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Critical public debate on controversial issues of this sort has been largely relegated to noncommercial, nonprofit media, which represents a significantly smaller forum than commercial media. The influence of business interests over media content is increasing as the media become highly concentrated, owned and operated by corporations with multiple, global financial concerns (Herman & McChesney, 1997, p. 136). The detailed effects of the concentration of media ownership to Habermasian democracy is extensively catalogued by media critics.

For nearly two decades Ben Bagdikian (2000) has traced the influence of concentrated, corporate control of newspapers in the United States. He has concluded, time and again, that the concentration and commercialization of news production has led to an overall decrease in the amount of newspaper dailies in major metropolitan areas and small towns across the country. Towns with two or more papers in competition for advertising dollars change the content of news stories to reflect, or at least not offend, business interests. In this advertising bidding war, large corporate-owned newspaper chains have forced smaller papers out-of-business by subsidizing the cost of producing the newspaper. This allows a newspaper chain to offer lower advertising rates, thus taking advertising dollars away from the smaller paper until it either folds or is purchased

by the chain. Once a one-paper town is established, advertising dollars and subscription rates rise. The quality and content diversity of a well-funded paper does not necessarily improve once a monopoly is established. Instead, Bagdikian argues, newspapers owned by large corporate chains prioritize profit goals, and thus continue to serve business interests to guarantee advertising revenue. Either stories are directly pulled by the accounting office or editors learn what stories not to assign and censor their reporters accordingly. The effect of the relationship between business and news, Bagdikian concludes, has led to a decrease in access to diverse points of view and a new standard for journalists – profit over professionalism.

Concentration in private media ownership has influenced the content and access to information in other media spheres as well. Edward Herman and Robert McChesney in *The Global Media* (1997) draw an extensive map of the global concentration of media ownership and its influence on international issues as well as local and national concerns. The conflation of news production and entertainment, as illustrated by Disney's ownership of ABC (and thus ABC news), has resulted, as Bagdikian revealed, in news information geared toward supporting the commercial interests of entertainment companies. For example, Herman and McChesney show that Disney films are more likely to be reviewed on ABC programs, including morning shows to nightly news. The review may or may not be favorable; nonetheless, for Disney exposure is key. Featuring an upcoming film in a news program cuts through the advertising noise of other film releases competing for the same audience. This works well with concurrent marketing strategies that might appear in the same news cast, such as commercials for McDonald's which features toys from the latest Disney films and, of course, preview spots for the

film. The point Herman and McChesney, as well as many other media ownership critics, make is that commercial media, whether directly related to news information or encompassing news and entertainment, deflects attention away from information and concerns important for an informed citizenry and instead favors content that supports the ubiquity of commercialism.

Private media, McChesney argues in *Capitalism and the Information Age* (1998) is primarily interested in maintaining the status quo – monopoly capitalism. He claims, drawing from Karl Marx, that monopoly capitalism requires the privatization of all available goods, services and ideas so that capital can expand infinitely. In the realm of media, this incessant expansion is only available to conglomerated media companies that can leverage assets, take advantage of cross-promotion and other intra-corporate synergies, while controlling the means for public debate about the benefits and consequences of monopoly capitalism. Any threat to the essential premise of private ownership - that a market free of government regulation will address all social needs - is suppressed. At the end of the twentieth century, McChesney (1999) notes that media conglomerates have such control over public discourse that the United States faces a "political crisis." Cajoled to passive consent by the endless commercialization of culture, citizen feedback is registered largely through the purchasing of products. In a commercial media system, McChesney continues, the audience is addressed as consumers, not citizens. Audiences are unlikely to see, hear or read about long-term concerns which reach beyond point-of-sale decisions, such as environmental and public health issues, particularly if those concerns link the gains of private business to declines in the economic, social or physical well-being of individual citizens and communities (p. 281).

Spaces where media outlets might nurture the public sphere have been commandeered by a minority of business interests and, as more aspects of public life are privatized and commercialized (electoral politics, education, transportation, museums, parks), McChesney argues the ability for citizens to consider their needs, the needs of their community and to work toward social change is further diminished (p. 3).

Political Economy and Culture

McChesney, Bagdikian, Murdock and Golding, among others, employ a political economic approach to studying the social relations that influence the production, distribution and consumption of resources. This might include, for example, an examination of ownership structures, labor relations, the influence of market values on internal and industry-wide business practices, and the material processes of production. In terms of the political economy of communication, the resources in question are the products of media: newspapers, books, music, films, broadcast and cable outlets, Internet content, and audiences. Although much of the empirical work in this field is concerned with informational media (e.g. news, public affairs programming and other factual content) and its role in cultivating informed citizens for a robust democratic process, it is useful to consider other forms of media within a political economic analysis as well. Entertainment media, such as movies and music, also play an important role in the circulation of ideas and the development of citizen participation in the social world.

As noted cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1982) states, the media are not simply a mirror of society, but are actively involved in "selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping…the active labor of making things mean" (p. 64). He continues, "Meaning is a social production, a practice. The world has to be made to mean. Language

and symbolization is the means by which meaning is produced" (p. 67). In an age where everyday experiences are increasingly mediated, the media play an important social role in that the products of media organizations contribute to the system of meanings available for interpreting and living in the world, and, as Nicholas Garnham (1990) asserts, understanding how society might change it (p. 8). This includes both informational and entertainment media. The political economy of communication examines the allocation of resources for the production and distribution of meaning. The importance of the allocation of resources to understanding social relations in contemporary society is no less than an interrogation of the power and control of culture.

For example, feminist media studies scholars have called for more "real" or at least more varied images of women in the media (both fictional and news media) because of the important link between how a culture defines what it means to be a woman and how women might imagine themselves and are imagined by others. The stories about womanhood dominant on U.S. television during the 1950s and 1960s largely defined women's role in society to that of the happy homemaker. Even if this did not reflect the reality of many women's lives, especially working-class women, the idealized homemaker was part of the cultural imagination. Wrestling with the notion that a woman's place is in the home was central to the fight for equality in the workplace women waged in the 1970s, and continue to wage today. The struggle over representation in the media then, is a struggle over knowledge about oneself and one's place in the world in relationship to other people and institutions.

As fields for the circulation of meaning are increasingly commercialized—that is, the production and distribution of language and symbolization are administered by

institutions operating to generate profit - culture is shaped by the commercial needs of the organizations that control the means of communication. Meaning, when articulated through the marketplace, reflects stories of consumption where individual problems and social conflicts are resolved through the purchase of commodities (Jhally, 1995, p. 251). The commercialization of culture, influenced by the economic structure of media outlets, limits the knowledge available for understanding the world.

Although an examination of how media products are structured can reveal much about what circulates in the cultural environment, a political economy of communication cannot necessarily determine how those products will be interpreted. Other factors such as individual and social agency, which may uncover the motivations and behaviors of consumption, are not typically investigated. This point has, at times, sparked caustic exchanges among political economists and cultural studies scholars ("Colloquy," 1995) who argue over the usefulness of base/superstructure versus lived experience models for interrogating the politics of culture. Without observing how audiences incorporate media products into their system of meanings, some cultural studies scholars claim political economy "refuses to engage the question of articulation;" that is, the way in which the relations between production and consumption are actually played out in everyday life (Grossberg, 1995, p. 73). The data gathering methods of cultural studies, such as ethnography and focus group reception studies, are better suited to produce, in Clifford Geertz's (1973) terms, "thick descriptions" of the consumption practices and meanings audiences construct from the media products they consume.

The argument that political economy is unable to understand the relationship between media producers and consumers is largely dismissed by theorists who see a

necessary connection between political economy and cultural studies approaches. By returning to Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of cultural production and consumption, which is a corner stone of the British cultural studies tradition, Douglas Kellner (1997) argues the theoretical divide can be overcome.

Hall (1980) contends that producers of media messages or texts encode meaning into texts through the practices of production. Audiences, upon receiving media texts, decode those messages based on a vast array of cultural contexts. The textual analysis and audience reception approaches favored by cultural studies are useful for examining the decoding moment. Kellner (1997) suggests political economy is well suited to examining the encoding moment because, prior to distribution when media texts become available to audiences, the system of production through which media texts are created "often determines what sort of artifacts will be produced, what structural limits there will be as to what can and cannot be said and shown, and what sort of audience expectations and usage the text may generate" (p. 105). The structural analysis focus of political economy compliments textual and audience analysis because "studying the ways that media artifacts are actually produced within the structure and organization of the culture industries" provides some clues as to how audiences will interpret those artifacts (p. 107).

This thesis does not include an analysis of how audiences experience structural changes in radio ownership beyond the limited information that indirect consumption indicators (shifts in ratings, drops in record sales and the popularity of alternative forms of music distribution) provide. As such, this project is limited to questions of production and distribution, while the relationship between production and consumption is only

peripherally examined. Nonetheless, as illustrated above, this is an important place to begin exploring the influence of telecommunications policy on culture.

In addition to the methodological critique discussed above, this dissertation also heeds theoretical criticisms of political economy's tendency to privilege capitalism as the central, organizing characteristic of contemporary society. Within its critique of capitalist activities, political economy, as well as other intellectual traditions that theorize economy, often marginalizes other forms of economy and applies a deterministic lens to the processes of production, distribution and consumption (Gibson-Graham, 1996).

It is frequently argued that a political economic approach assumes that the structure of ownership necessarily determines the economic relations and practices of an industry. For example, a common tenet of political economy of communication is to connect diversity of ownership to diversity of content: The more owners in a market, the more differentiation of products in the market; and likewise, fewer owners, less differentiation.[1] However, is it necessarily and always the case that owners in a near-monopoly environment will make different decisions than owners in a competitive environment? And, to what extent is ownership structure a predictable indicator of an organization's business practices? To more closely examine the relationship between ownership and content, this dissertation asks if the programming content on radio stations owned by small or independent radio networks is more, less or equally diverse as programming content on large group radio networks? And how, if at all, do radio programming and other business practices (e.g., labor relations, marketing strategies, use

[1] The shifting and often contradictory ways in which diversity has been defined both within political economy and by the FCC, the broadcast industries, and public interest and media reform advocates are addressed in chapter four.

of technology) in an era of deregulation differ from radio programming during relative regulation?

Another common tenet of political economic analyses of communication systems is to associate size with influence. This dissertation questions the cause and effect relationship often assigned to ownership structure and asks if size necessarily determines influence or popularity in a market. As is discussed further below, although a broadcast station owned by a large, conglomerated radio group often dominates advertising revenue in a given market, it does not necessarily enjoy the greatest audience share. This disconnect between economic power and consumption not only reveals the potential for fluctuation in a highly concentrated market, but also challenges the assumption that large corporations in a deregulated environment always dominate and eventually push out smaller organizations. If that is not the case, perhaps small, independent broadcasters can envision strategies for survival that break the size/influence pattern, and political economy can reconsider the relationship of power to size and include the enfranchisement of audiences in the analysis.

Radio is an important dissemination point for music, often exposing listeners to artists and songs for the first time. How radio is organized in the United States, then, has a significant impact on what circulates in the popular culture. This dissertation does not suggest that a political economic analysis of commercial radio provides a complete picture of how music is produced and consumed in the United States. However, with its attention to the allocation of resources and mechanisms of distribution that participate in cultural production, political economy is a useful place to begin the investigation.

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