**3. Powerful Media**

***People, Politics and Democracy***

**Aims**

This chapter will introduce you to:

* the role of media in a democracy
* theoretical ways of understanding and critically analysing the different ways in which media are used to exercise power;
* the power of media ownership;
* the power of media regulation;
* the complicated relationship between politics and media

There are so many aspects of the relationship between media and power in society that it is important to distinguish between some key critical questions that can’t all be dealt with together. For example, do the people in power own the media and use it to influence us? Or are the people who own media either influenced themselves, or working in partnership with other powerful people to support one another? What use of media do politicians make and in what ways might they need the media to be ‘on message’ with their policies – and how important is ‘media image’ for politicians these days – some say it is the most important thing in an election campaign, and that this has led to the rise of ‘media spin’. Then there are questions about regulation – who has the power to decide what media we can and cannot have access to? What kinds of regulation are there, or should they be, to restrict media ownership so that some very rich and powerful businesses cannot simply ‘buy up’ more and more media companies - if they do this, do they just acquire more and more economic power or do they also gain the means to influence the public? Also, there are more obvious and visible forms of media power (the reporting of events in a war, or a ‘smear campaign’ against a public figure or an allegation of ‘media bias’ or the control of film distribution by Hollywood companies in the UK). But alongside these there are lots of examples of less clear and measurable forms of influence – the commercialisaton of childhood through media advertising, gender inequality through the cultivation of images of women as sexual objects in the media, over decades. Or the power of the media to exclude people from minority groups – whether these be ethnically or culturally or sexually defined, or to with age or disability – from mainstream media representations. Put simply, if the media rarely portray gay people as ‘action heroes’, but often portray them as ‘camp’ light entertainers, then the ‘Cultivation theory’ suggests that the media audience will come to stereotype gay people in that way, regardless of evidence in the real world. Of course, it gets more complicated when you consider the question of whether media stereotyping constructs or just re-presents our ideas, and whether people in particular groups end up reinforcing stereotypes themselves – ‘acting the part’. As always with the study of media, it’s complicated.

**Powerful Media – Micro and Macro**

Broadly speaking, the theoretical ideas and approaches covered in this chapter will be concerned with ‘political economy’ and ‘ideology’, which are often connected but start out from different academic positions. **Political economy** (macro) is more concerned with a factual, institutional understanding of how media are produced and circulated. This will include ownership, finance, politics, regulation and law. Analysis of **ideology** is far more textual (micro) – decoding and deconstructing messages at work in media texts and how these are patterned and structured across texts. For our purposes in introducing the key concepts required to study media, we can view these as inter-related – there is a dynamic and powerful relationship, then, between the ownership of media production and distribution and the dominant ideas that are reinforced in media texts. This is a changing landscape, especially in the context of new social media but academics tend to agree on the ogoing importance of the political economy approach, however great the changes in the *context* of mediation.

Everything we consider in this chapter hinges on ideas about what kind of media we ought to have in a democracy, but this is more complicated than it might appear at first glance since democracy in action is far from straightforward. So, first, it’s essential to have a firm grasp of what democracy means in practice.

**Democracy**

There is a good deal of muddle about democracy…. the muddle of democracy is due to a genuine confusion as to what democracy is supposed to be about. (MacPherson, 1966: 1)

I am happy to confess that the visions I had as a youth for peace, justice and democracy worldwide have become more important to me now that I have had eighty-five plus years of experience and I cannot be dismissed on the grounds that when I grow up I will see things differently. (Benn, 2009: 147)

Tony Benn urges his grandchildren, and future generations, to pose five questions to anyone in power:

*What power have you got?*

*How did you get it?*

*In whose interests do you exercise it?*

*To whom are you accountable?*

*How do we get rid of you?*

To see how this works in daily life, consider those five questions in relation to a) any unelected dictator (at the time of writing, Colonel Gaddafi in Libya is a good example); b) any elected politician who represents you where you live, c) one of your teachers or employers and d) Simon Cowell, the super-rich creator of *The X Factor*.

A grasp of the process of democracy is an essential starting point. Democracy relates to power, control, citizenship and freedom. Comparing two very different political philosophers such as Plato and John Stuart Mill is a useful way in to this.

Plato (whose ideas were ‘written up’ by Socrates) asserted that there are different categories of human beings and there is little point in letting the second and third classes of citizens believe they are socially mobile in any way. A society functions, and people are actually happier, if they ‘know their place’ and stay in it. The ruling elite make decisions, the middle class ‘guardian’s make it all happen and inform the lower orders (the workers, who are essentially slaves) about what is to be done. The only use for art, in Plato’s doctrine, was to distract the workers from reality, to keep them entertained in blissful ignorance of how society is being organised and how, looked at another way, they are being exploited by those in power. Many recent and contemporary media texts explore this idea – the Matrix trilogy and the Truman show are modern-day reworkings of Plato’s simile of the cave (ref) and work on the same principle – is it better to know the painful truth or to stay in a fictional reality? The Marxist view of this is that it constructs a ‘false consciousness’ and the challenge is for the working classes to resist such ideologies and discover the truth about their exploitation but the Platonic view would be to argue that they won’t be any happier and society will cease to function if everyone has ‘ideas above their station’. Before we complacently assume that Plato was a fascist and his ideas are not applicable to our times, consider the educational system – in which the rich and privileged generally access the more ‘prestigious’ schools and universities and, in the UK, the continued interest in the monarchy – even during the harshest economic period in living memory, thousands turned out on the streets of London to celebrate the marriage of a Prince – might this, and the ongoing obsession with ‘Talent TV’ (The X Factor) be part of the kind of ‘distraction’ Plato was advocating?

So Plato’s idea of a functioning society (his ‘republic’) depends on a denial of freedom – people are to be ruled, kept in place and distracted from any questioning of how the system is constructed. A very different, liberal, political philosophy is demonstrated in the work of John Stuart Mill, who was writing in a very different time period (ref) but offers a useful contrast to Plato. For Mill’s idea of ‘utilitarian liberty’ the principle is that any society should function on the maxim of providing the highest possible amount of freedom for citizens, who can determine their own actions entirely up to the point where their actions can be seen to harm others. People, then, are never to be ‘kept in their place’ but instead can be self-fulfilling as long as they adhere to this ‘self-regarding’ principle. But it’s never very easy to pin down the point at which an action stops being self-regarding and starts being other-regarding. Consider these examples:

* Breaking wind
* Smoking
* Gambling
* Paying for a sex-worker to assault you in the privacy of your own home.

The first example is generally taken to be a socially embarrassing but fairly trivial, even amusing case. The second is, in some countries, now the subject of state intervention, the response to the third is culturally-specific and, unlike smoking which is now seen by many as always harmful to others, gambling is often discussed in terms of the extent to which it impacts on the economic circumstances of others (for example, debt). The most difficult one is the fourth. At first glance, many say “the only person suffering here is the person being assaulted” (although, presumably, if one pays for the action, then the ‘suffering’ would be a form of pleasure). However, if we think through the issues at length, we might consider the way that a system of exploitation – sex workers being forced into the industry, the relationship between the sex industry, addiction, trafficking and exploitation of various kinds – is being supported by this action. So we end up needing to analyse the relationship between the private sphere (our individual actions) and its impact on the public sphere (the lives of others). It is, then, very complicated.

A democratic society is one in which elected and accountable human beings are given the power to make decisions about the kinds of things we have outlined here on behalf of, and impacting on, the rest of us. If we don’t like the decisions, we have a chance to replace the people making them with others – so they are accountable to us. This is at the heart of Tony Benn’s five questions. In any society that is not anarchistic, people will have power over other people. But that becomes dangerous only in the absence of accountability. For MacPherson (1966), whose statement about the ‘muddle’ of democracy we began with, the liberal-democratic state (one of which you are quite likely to be living in if you are studying media) is defined by welfare and regulation. The government provide health and education to all, but regulate us more than would be the case if we were left to survive without those things. Where media fit into this is very interesting – how free can media providers be from the state, who controls the flow of information and in whose interests? In a purely capitalist system, media is like any other industry and media providers can do whatever they want to make money. In a communist regime (like China or Cuba) or an unelected dictatorship of another kind, media will be explicitly controlled by the state and used to convey their information and view of the world to the masses. In a liberal democracy, the state and media providers have a more complex and uneasy relationship, one which is tested out on a daily basis by contests over ownership, freedom of information and privacy laws.

Such a detailed context is crucial because, as we said at the start of the chapter, analysing the relationship between power, media and democracy is only possible if we have a clear sense of what democracy is – how democratic our media can be is a question that can only be answered with this political-philosophical understanding secure.

In the American context, the ideas of John Dewey have long been influential in helping people understand the impacts that education, community and public sphere information (in our times, media) do more or less to construct a sense of citizenship in a society at a given time. The extent to which media, and other public sphere agents of influence (schools, for example) appear to be open and accessible for people to have a voice or appear to be most concerned with excluding access and distracting people from decision-making (through excessive examining in education or an abundance of trivial entertainment in media, perhaps) will shape the nature of democratic practice:

Dewey believed that the emergence of a modern mass media had the potential to improve the conditions and operations of American democracy, if structured with those ends in mind, but he worried that the particular shape of the American media system, governed primarily by commercial interests, would have a much more negative influence. (Press and Williams, 2010: 75)

So Dewey provided a kind of ‘yardstick’ for media students to use when looking at the extent to which media in a society at any given time is democractic. What is the balance between public interest and commercial interest? And what is the relationship between the accessibility of the media and the accessibility of the public sphere more broadly? Of course, these questions are complicated yet further by the impact of the internet as the idea of measuring the democratic nature of a single nation’s media is much harder when citizens are globally connected.

**Case Study: News Agendas**

An interesting way in to a consideration of how news agendas operate to gatekeep the flow of information in a society is the *Wag the Dog*, a film starring Dudley Moore and Robert de Niro. In this film, a discredited President, facing election defeat, is persuaded by a ‘spin doctor’ to construct a fake war to be reported through US television with a famous Hollywood director hired to construct the media operation. The task is very simple – watch the films and answer this question – *could it be done*? Here is a response to that question from Media student Kerri Harris (Newman University College, Birmingham, UK, 2010):

In the film the main “team” responsible for controlling the distribution of information for the President, and his public image all state that none of them voted for him during the last election. To me, this meant that it didn’t matter who won the election, who became President, they would be doing the same job no matter what, the President is just their puppet. A face for the voting public.

The News service is definitely not democratic, the news was controlled and organised, the viewing public only got to see what the people in power wanted them to see. I would say this was almost a cross between Authoritarian and Soviet media (using the classic models of media systems, Siebert et al 1963)

I don’t think that constructing a fantasy war would be able to happen today, the world is shrinking, communication between countries and people is much more advanced. Social networking sites mean the distribution of information is readily available, even if countries try and stop it (China, Iraq) the tweets still get through.

We can unpack various threads in this response that will help to frame an approach to studying news agendas in the context of media and power. First, Harris identifies a cynical idea at the heart of the film about the extent to which political leaders are really in charge of anything – if the film reflects reality, it means the ‘mediation’ of politics is at such an advanced stage that the people who appear to be in power are really little more than actors – ‘a face for the voting public’ – this would be an indictment of democracy. Secondly, Harris relates the news service depicted in the film to real ‘authoritarian’ news models she has studied – these are state controlled, profoundly undemocratic media systems, so it would be ironic for the USA (‘home of the free’) to be operating in a similar way. Most importantly, though, Harris locates the implausibility of the plot not in the intent (she doesn’t say that no government would think of doing such a thing) but instead in the way that social media would make it very difficult, citing China and Iraq as places where she has observed ‘the people’ resisting official media strategy by using the affordances and connections of the internet - ‘the tweets still get through’.

**Models of news production**

It is very important, but equally very difficult, for a Media student to develop an international understanding of media power, and one fairly straightforward comparison you can make is to look at how news is produced in a range of countries. The key distinctions will relate to ownership, political structure, regulation and journalistic practices / codes of conduct. Realising that media production is not the same from country to country allows us more critically to engage with our own news provision. This is particularly important for students in the UK or USA – who have, relatively speaking, similar media structures and may be forgiven for mistaking these to be universal. Oates (2008) provides a comparative analysis which defines the US system as ‘libertarian’ (very little publicly funded news media); the UK system as split (with broadcast news regulated for social responsibility and the free press operating in the US-style libertarian model) and the Russian news media as state regulated (despite appearances that the ‘Neo-Soviet’ system is not so). Oates traces the distinctions by using a model with key elements – political environment, media norms, regulation, ownership and journalistic practices. So the production of news is the outcome of these four determinants:

Examining these elements of the News Production Model reveals a range of constraints that will shape news content. These constraints start long before a journalist arrives at his or her desk in the morning to begin the task of covering events and gathering news. All of these elements will dictate the shape, direction, and final form of news coverage. That, in turn, will influence the citizens and the public sphere. (Oates, 2008)

In a democracy, the public have an entitlement to a ‘free press’. This is a liberal idea and the extent to which it is realistic in a capitalist world is the question that underpins most of what we are dealing with in this chapter. This key question of whether this freedom can be protected in a society where the rich and powerful have interests that are at odds with the liberal ideal is taken up by Marxist analyses of media:

Liberal theory argues that the press – and mass media in general – serve democracy in three ways. They play a key role in informing the electorate. They provide a means of overseeing and ‘checking’ in government – the watchdog role. They articulate public opinion….a Marxist perspective holds that as mass media organisations are owned and operated by ruling, or elite groups in society, the individuals running them will ensure that these institutions reinforce the dominant ideology in a way that appears to be ‘common sense’, thus helping maintain class inequalities. (Barlow and Mills, 2009: 41).

**Marxist Theories of Power**

A central Marxist theory that is often used in relation to media power is *hegemony*:

A state of hegemony is achieved when a provisional alliance of certain social groups exerts a consensus that makes the power of the dominant group appear both natural and legitimate. Institutions such as the mass media, the family, the education system and religion, play a key role in the shaping of people’s awareness and consciousness and thus can be agents through which hegemony is constructed, exercised and maintained. (Watson and Hill, 2003:126).

There is distinction between Marx and Marxism which is rather obvious but nonetheless important. Marx’s theories are his own work and Marxist theory is the adaptation and development of his thinking which is still happening today – so we have ‘New Marxism’, ‘Marxist Feminism’ and other variations. Marx himself did not write about ‘the media’, as such but his theories – particularly around *ideology*, have been applied to media for generations, and will continue to be applied into the future, for sure.

Three Marxist theorists are particularly useful in the study of media power. The first is Karl Marx himself who famously declared that the people who rule in any society do so not only by controlling the means of production (the ways of making money – in his day this would be land and factories but in our times we can think about Rupert Murdoch, Richard Branson and Bill Gates who own – and are striving to keep control of - the means by which information is exchanged) but also the production of ideas. In other words they keep the rest of us in place by making sure that we share their ideas about ‘the way things should be’. The British monarchy still proves this. If we wanted to, we could throw the Royal Family out of their homes and demand that we no longer fund their lives through our taxes but we don’t because of a consensus shared by many that this elitist hierarchy is understood as ‘heritage’ and ‘tradition’. The amazing level of interest in the 2011 Royal Wedding is evidence of this – it took place at a time of sweeping cuts and job losses, and yet the nation was seemingly transfixed by this marriage, convened by a super-rich family, largely at the public’s expense (the singer Morrissey controversially labelled the Royal Family ‘benefit scroungers’ in the lead up to the spectacle).

The Marxist thesis is that we don’t do very much about the unfair nature of the capitalist system because we are convinced that everyone has the chance to become Alan Sugar, or a similar ‘rags to riches’ role model (which is clearly not the case as the system cannot allow everyone to succeed) and because we cannot think of a viable alternative.

Althusser was a Marxist who developed this idea by distinguishing between two forms of state control – Repressive State Apparatuses – these are physical, ‘concrete’ ways of controlling us – the law, the police, the army and Ideological State Apparatuses – the media, the church, education. The point is simple – you don’t need the RSA if the ISA work. People won’t challenge the system if the ISAs are all working to make it seem natural and fair – so the ISAs, including the media, work to create consensus.

Gramsci (ref) was the Marxist intellectual who developed the idea of hegemony, which we started with, to explain the importance of this constructed consensus. In a famous book and subsequent documentary about the media’s role in all of this, Noam Chomsky described how consent is ‘manufactured’. This is a theory of media propaganda which sees the central function of media as being to serve the interests of the powerful who own, control and use media to convey and reinforce their values. In the Chomsky version of propaganda theory, media texts don’t tell lies, or distort the truth but in general terms oppositional points of view or broader contexts for political events are filtered out – a process of ‘gatekeeping’ which marginalises dissent and reproduces hegemonic processes. A criticism of Chomsky is that, like Adorno, he reduces media audiences to a passive mass – in his words the ‘bewildered herd’ (2002:21).

In simple terms, then, such theories aim to prove that we are manipulated by those in power – who control the media – to think we are agreeing with dominant ideas, which we come to think of as our own ideas. A much more recent example of the manufacturing of consent is explored by the *Outfoxed* documentary which sought to expose the incredible levels of editorial control imposed by Rupert Murdoch on the journalistic practices at work in the US Fox News network.

The campaigning journalist John Pilger is another commentator engaged in a propaganda model approach to news reporting. Writing originally, along with Chomsky, about the American manufacturing of anti-Communist ‘consent’, Pilger has regularly updated his work to account for more recent events – such as the reporting of conflict in East Timor, Afghanistan and what he sees as bias in the representation of Palestine-Israel tension by the American news media. Pilger, as a journalist, does not seek to present an academic model, only to expose injustices in news reporting.

Neither Noam Chomsky or John Pilger would necessarily describe themselves bluntly as ‘Marxist’, but it is clear that their work is premised on the Marxist theory that those in power use the media to reinforce their own ideological positions so it is important to redress the balance by exposing this.

**Cultural Imperialism**

An element of broader ‘postcolonial’ theory, this approach views media as part of a contemporary empire building strategy. Living in an era where powerful nations no longer seek more power by – in general - reaching out across the world through military force, they manage this through the ‘spread’ of culture which, ‘trojan horse’ like invades our ideologies. Media is only a part of this, it is important to state, working together with education, religion, customs and language. There is something of a ‘chicken and egg’ question here also. If we consider the dominance of Hollywood films in the UK, we could find the reasons in a political economy analysis that locates power in the vertical integration of cinema – the chains of multiplexes, modes of distribution and production are owned by the same American companies. Or we could locate it in a cultural imperialist model – British film-goers speak the same language as Americans and, as such, are influenced unwittingly by this constant diet of American ideology conveyed through film, to the extent that films produced in the UK and across Europe are rarely seen. In this way, American storytelling takes on a universal appearance when it is anything but. Or we could simply attribute the success of Hollywood films across the globe to their high production values and the marketing budgets allocated to them – the ‘market forces’ model will simply reveal the audience expressing its preference. Either way, the outcome, cultural imperialism theorists such as Schiller (19997) argue is a state of ‘cultural homogenization’ – the McDonalds effect (the same American food on offer in every city) is replicated in culture and in media representations. Another complex element of this is the theoretical idea of ‘the other’, whereby the dominant media-producing groups construct representations of other nations or cultures as ‘different’ and this is cultivated over time on a global scale – again, a particular representation masquerades as ‘the norm’. Said (1995) describes one example of this as ‘orientalism’- people from the East are thus portrayed as ‘other’ to the (Western) norm. More recent concerns about media representations of Islam are influenced by Said’s approach. Laughey makes sense of the relationships between these various related theories of media power as sharing a ‘postcolonial’ approach:

Whereas colonialism refers to political and military occupation of another nation, postcolonialism can be understood as a more covert form of occupation that does not require physical invasion but is instead linked to processes of media and cultural imperialism. (Laughey, 2007: 142)

Said’s work has many connections with the ‘discourse theory’ of Foucault who – too often ignored by Media students – argued that discourse (ways of representing the world in language in terms that appear, but are never ‘objective’) is the carrier of power. So the study of media is the study of discourse, and thus the study of power. Critical discourse analysis is a framework for locating and analysing how such power is ‘exercised’.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

The most influential writer in this field is Fairclough (1995), who provides a framework for analysing, at the micro level, political media discourse. Here, then, we are dealing with the use *of* media by politicians, or the political discourse *in* media texts. Fairclough draws on some key theoretical ideas about discourse from Bourdieu (ref) and Foucault (ref) and uses these to develop a more specific account of intertextual media discourse – this is concerned with the ways that individual texts are framed by, and received with reference to, a broader range of other texts that create ‘orders of discourse’ – ways of communicating that become ‘the norm’ in a particular field – for example, news journalism. Using Fairclough’s model to analyse what he calls ‘*mediatized political discourse’* (1995: 161), a media student will identify the key *agents* involved in political media discourse (eg politicians, journalists, experts of various kinds, the ordinary public); *genres* of media texts (such as political interviews, debate shows, magazine columns) and the *framing and reception* of texts (how texts are inter-related and how this sets up particular kinds of reading of them by audiences). The difference between this more ‘sociolinguistic’, textual approach to locating political power in media is that its focus is on the complexity of the discourse rather than on a broader, more basic idea about media texts ‘transmitting’ ideologies, or in Fairclough’s words, “*the link between texts and society / culture is seen as mediated by discourse practices*” (1995: 143).

**Feminist Theories of Power**

Feminist media theory is a complex range of approaches and must never be reduced to simplistic definitions. However, a shared analytical pursuit is the questioning of powerful gender norms that are reinforced to a greater or lesser extent in media, and the relationship between media representations of gender and inequalities in broader social life:

Historically people and movements have been called feminist when they recognised the connections between social inequalities, deprivations and oppressions and gender differences. (Humm, 1992: 403).

It’s a tall order to summarise a feminist approaches to the power exercised by media in a section of this size in an introductory text like this, particularly when the author is male. But that said, we can construct the following basic overview. The key distinction to begin with is between femaleness as a biological / sexual category, ‘femininity’ as a socially / culturally constructed set of ideas about the female gender and feminism as a political position – the struggle for equality and / or the celebration of gender difference (these two are different sides of the political coin). If, reading this, you don’t see a feminist politics as less straightforwardly important as anti-racism or anti-homophobia, then a feminist analysis of this would state that, in our contemporary ‘enlightened’ society, women are still marginalised in everyday discourse in so much as sexist jokes or comments and everyday misogyny are treated as ‘just banter’ in a way that racist statements would not be. The media, of course, play a big role in reinforcing these ideas – from the fact that both magazines for men and for women feature women on the cover – to be looked at by both genders, to the use by the current UK Prime Minister of the TV advert catchphrase ‘*calm down, dear’* when disagreeing with a female MP in the House of Commons.

So there is a broad, shared commitment by all versions of feminist media analysis that media texts and media discourse undermine gender equality and reinforce patriarchal ‘common sense’ / ideology as ‘the norm’. But different feminist approaches have contrasting ways of seeing / accounting for this kind of media power. Such contrasting approaches include Marxist feminism; Black feminism; Feminist psychoanalysis; Arab feminism; Feminist cultural materialism, Poststructuralist feminism (or French feminism) and Post-feminism. Whereas a Marxist feminist position will account for broad patriarchal ideology in media, locating women as subordinate, rather than the working classes more generally and in this way seeing men as ‘the ruling class’ controlling the production of ideas in and through media; a Poststructuralist position will identity, in textual practices, a set of binary oppositions with positive / negative values – head / heart, logos / pathos, father / mother and then look at how women are constructed in subtle ways as ‘other’ to the (male) norm. Laura Mulvey’s (ref) highly influential theory of ‘the male gaze’ argues that, in cinema, the camera constructs an apparently ‘objective’ view of events through a male perspective. In this sense, the male is active (looking) and the female is passive (an object to be looked at). This, of course, can be extended to magazine covers. Winship (1987) argues that “*the gaze between cover model and women readers marks the complicity between women seeing themselves in the image which the masculine culture has defined*”. This, in turn, resonates with the Marxist idea developed in Althusser’s (1971) notion of “interpellation’ – the social / ideological practice of misrecognising yourself. If we put these two together, a feminist-Marxist reading of magazine covers is straightforward – Winship’s notion of complicity is about us being prepared, for the reward of gratification, to recognise the ideal version of ourselves, despite the anxiety this will cause (when we compare our real appearance to the ideal). For feminists, the male culture reinforces its power by defining women in this way and encouraging this anxiety. The Marxist term for this is ‘false consciousness.’ Through a range of cultural reinforcements – a process of cultivation - of which magazines are just one, women are distracted from the inequality in our society. Instead of asking for equal pay and creating more positive representation in the media, women are commenting on the waistlines of celebrities.

The work of Judith Butler (1990) sets up gender as *entirely* cultural and an act of performance, suggesting ‘gender trouble’ – the deliberate subversion (or ‘queering’) of gendered behaviour as a political response:

That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (1990: 185):

Butler here is saying that it is only our collective daily performances of gender that make it what it has. It does not exist outside of these performances, so we are not performing anything that existed beforehand (this is ‘ontology’). Subverting these kinds of performances, then, does not simply mean constructing clearly alternative versions of ‘being male’ or ‘being female’, but instead there is a premium on parody and pastiche and these elements sometimes connect a feminist media theory to postmodernism, which we shall turn to next. For this reason, Lady Gaga is discussed as a postmodern ‘agent’ of feminist pastiche. According to Bacon, Mader and Klick (2010), postmodern feminism is challenges the notion of fixed gender categories. These categories, in media discourse, carry power so undermining them through subversion is an act of resistance to such power. Lady Gaga, in her videos, situates herself constantly on the boundary of various oppositions - confusing

the boundaries of human and non-human, sexy / distorted and ironically exaggerating female objectification so that ribs and spine are on display – in order to question whether all ‘male gaze’ looking is a distortion. Gaga’s clothes always exaggerate “normal” ideas of fashion and of sexual power and subordination, perhaps critiquing the history of gender oppression through / by fashion. But, crucially, with regard to Butler’s theory, is is entirely possible to read Lady Gaga as just ‘sexy’ – the idea is that the images in her videos simultaneously reinforce powerful and oppressive ideas about what women’s bodies are ‘supposed to’ look like and draw attention to such “embodiments” of the beauty standard? Bacon, Mader and Klick speak for Lady Gaga in this analysis:

Because I don’t allow my gender restrictions to represent how I am perceived, I don’t have to be the next “Britney” or “Christina”. Am I unwillingly objectified? Or am I authorizing my own power? I am both endangered and dangerous. The category of gender is a means of oppression. (Gaga is forced to be a sex slave) The category of gender is a source of liberation. (Gaga sets her captor on fire with her electrified bra). Are you buying into the idea that women’s bodies are readily available commodities? Or are you in on the joke? (Bacon, Mader and Klick, 2010).

Grouping these perspectives together just for a moment, we can say that more complex versions of feminist media theory suggest that either a feminist media text can only be constructed if an alternative set of conventions, structures and discourses are used because the form and discursive framing of mainstream media is in itself a site of patriarchal power, or a feminist politics is best mobilised by working within gender performance, through playful (and powerful) parody, frivolity and subversion.

**Postmodernist Theories of Power**

Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard offer different versions of either postmodernism, both of which are easily applied to contemporary media. Their ideas share a view that the idea of truth needs to be ‘deconstructed’ so we can challenge dominant ideas that people claim as truth, which Lyotard (1994) describes as ‘grand narratives’. In the postmodern world, media texts make visible and challenge ideas of truth and reality, removing the illusion that stories, texts or images can ever accurately or neutrally ‘reproduce’ reality or truth. So the postmodern perspective on media is that there are always competing versions of truth and reality, and postmodern media products will engage with this idea.

Two important postmodern ideas are that ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ are constructions and that media *re*presentations are actually constructions (*presentations* of reality, or our idea of it). It is important, during a discussion of powerful media to deal with the central critique of Baudrillard’s position - that it’s is a luxury, available only to people who live in advanced, rich nations and democratic states to take this ‘playful’ stance on matters of truth, whereas people living through the ‘Arab Spring’ or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan cannot afford such a frivolous disposition, given that crucial matters of truth justice and human rights are contested on a daily basis. Either way, a key distinction between postmodernism and the more ‘emancipatory’ grand narrative theories such as Marxism, is that a postmodernist approach cannot seek to expose and destroy one version of the truth and replace it with a ‘correct’ one. Another key argument against postmodernism is that the alternative to a belief in truth is relativism – whereby ‘anything goes’, leading to moral chaos and ethical anarchy.

Returning to the more basic idea that there is no longer a distinction between reality and its representing image, or ‘simulacrum’, Baudrillard introduced the idea of ‘hyperreality’, claiming that Disneyland is the best example we can think of for understanding how our reality works in the postmodern world – a place which is at the same time a real, physical space but also clearly a fictional, representational world. For postmodernists, we inhabit a world made up wholly of ‘simulacra’ - simulations of reality which are the only real, bearing no relation to any reality, which is replaced by the hyperreal where any boundary between the real and the imaginary is eroded.

Whilst Baudrillard was writing his theories with regard to television and cinema, many academics and media commentators see the internet as having ‘realised’ some of his postulations (along with those of McLuhan, as we have discussed). Whilst Henry Jenkins does not describe himself as a ‘postmodernist’ or name Baudrillard as an influence, there are some observations here about ‘convergence culture’ which would appear to resonate with a ‘Baudrillardian’ view:

We are entering a period of prolonged transition and transformation in the way media operates. Convergence describes the process by which we sort through those options. Audiences, empowered by these new technologies, occupying a space at the intersection between old and new media, are demanding the right to participate within the culture. (Jenkins, 2006: 24)

The ‘basics’ of postmodernism are very straightforward. If people tend to think of media as being ‘in between’ us and reality, hence the word ‘media’ and the idea of ‘mediation’, the postmodernist ‘shift’ is observe, or argue, that in a media-saturated world, where we are immersed in media constantly, 24/7, always connected whilst on the move, at work or at home, then any distinction between ‘actual’ reality and the (‘virtual’) media representation of it is now at least fuzzy, blurred or at most even entirely lost to us. In other words, we no longer have any sense of the difference between real objects and experiences and images or simulations of them. Media reality, or virtual experience, is the new reality. Some see this as a historical development – this has happened ‘after’ the modern period. In this understanding, artists in the modern era experimented with the representation of reality, and next the postmodern period, which we are living in, is one where reality and representation get completely ‘remixed’ through pastiche, parody and inter-textual references – where the people that make texts deliberately expose their nature as constructed texts and make no attempt to pretend that they are ‘realist’. Others say that postmodernism is not a temporal phenomenon, not a time period in history, but just a new way of thinking.

The mass media [...] were once thought of as holding up a mirror to, and thereby reflecting, a wider social reality. Now that reality is only definable in terms of the surface reflections of that mirror. It is longer a question of distortion since the term implies that there is a reality, outside the surface simulations of the media, which can be distorted, and this is precisely what is at issue. (Strinati, 1992: ref)

In relation to the analysis of media power, the postmodern position would tend to take invidual ‘micropolitics’ as the norm, and would certainly resist such ‘grand narratives’ as Marxism and Feminism – as these offer up an alternative way of seeing the world and seek to expose the falsity of dominant ideologies currently holding sway. A postmodern view of contemporary media sees a breakdown of the distinctions between producer and audience and the boundaries between people in time and space. But, despite allegations of an ‘apolitical’ stance, the work of Jenkins, cited above, might offer a new way of looking at postmodern political engagement.

Jenkins describes ‘knowledge communities’ and ‘textual poachers’ – consumers, critics, fans coming together and falling away from one another, generally online, in acts of interpretation a world of hybridity – old and new media converging. Although Jenkins does not explicitly adopt a postmodern approach, his work is perhaps the most obvious example of contemporary media theory connecting some of the ideas put forward by Baudrillard (writing before the internet) to current examples of texts and audience behaviours, framed by his interest in the idea of ‘participation culture’ which is the key political theme in his work. After discussing the kinds of concentrated media ownership which we have discussed, in terms of their significance for the distribution of access, influence and power, Jenkins (2006) suggests that ‘convergence culture’ complicates this picture in ways that might be ‘democratising’. To make his point, he discusses the ‘digital watercooler’ as collective intelligence, audience backlash against *American Idol* mobilised by an online ‘Vote for the Worst’ campaign, digital transmedia layering as an element of mass media diegesis; the uneven relationship between the ‘folk culture’ of fans (now more explicit and ‘knowable’ in digital space) and ‘big media’ producers, peer learning in affinity spaces and the ways in which participatory culture reworks political campaigning. All of these ‘case studies’ reaffirm a notion of a shared public ‘mediasphere’ but Jenkins suggests a paradigm shift to a new order of uncertainty over public–private sphere culture. In this sense, we can see some of the key postmodern ideas – that things are all ‘mixed up’ and that politics will become ‘micro’ – small scale struggles rather than grand ‘teleological’, revolutionary projects, with an emphasis on ‘guerilla’ tactics, as well as the more obviously technologically determinist ideas about how broadband internet ‘affordances’ are making all this possible.

**Politics 2.0? The Internet and Democracy**

Dixon (2011) describes ‘Politics 2.0’ as “*the idea that social networking and e-participation technologies will revolutionize our ability to follow, support, and influence political campaigns”.* If this is to be realised, then the ‘technologically determinist’ ideals will need to be realised in sustained evidence of information democracy (unfettered information construction and dissemination), democratisation of decision-making (e-democracy) and generally more engaged (in politics) citizens. In other words, a new kind of public sphere, that might be evidenced so far by online polling, blogs, public opinion fora, whereby ultimately the web itself becomes the medium for political action and activism. As always, there is conflict of opinion on all this. Whereas Rhenigold finds ‘smart mobs’ organising and mobilising, coordinating and collaborating online and Lievrouw identifies the Global Justice Movement as one such organisation, Morozov labels online politics such as this ‘slacktivism’. At the micro level, the ‘2.0’ advocates herald the way that campaign groups create online tools which enable users to send readymade messages to politicians whilst the critics point out that this is merely spam to their recipients. Similarly, whilst the current UK government struggles to define its conservative ‘Big Society’ agenda, it starts to points to social media as a catalyst and **Lanier** sees web 2.0, despite the bold claims, eroding individual identity. For Hindman it’s the claim that internet politics engage the hitherto disengaged that comes under attack:

All that happens in online discussion of social and political matters is that college-educated professional, established journalists, commentators, politicians, organisation and think-tanks get a boost to their visibility.

The counter-arguments to the ‘cyber-utopians’ go further, and suggest that on the one hand the web is increasingly used for surveillance and control *of* the people *by* the powerful and that, under scrutiny, the same people who decry moral panics about ‘harmful’ media use are actually constructing a mirror-image of such an argument in reverse, by overstating the ‘positive’ outcomes of media engagement. In reality, they say, most people use the internet for sex, shopping and entertainment, which suits governments and the rich and powerful very nicely. Returning to ‘hegemony’, whereby the powerful manufacture consent and attempt to colonise and control any potential sites of resistance, sceptics hold up Obama’s use of twitter to launch his 2012 election campaign, attempts by the Chinese government to control online access and free speech (and Google’s complicity in this) and evidence that the US Central Command have purchased fake online identities for propaganda and “counter-terrorism” purposes – the term for these is

“sock puppets”. Although we ought to pause to consider the fact that this kind of ‘control 2.0’ is a response to the fact that social media software can be used both for and against the powerful, a state described by Shirky (2010) as “the Dictator’s Dilemma”. For example, the Sudanese government set up a Facebook group calling for a protest against the Sudanese government, naming a time and place, and simply arrested all those who attended.

Further evidence of ‘control 2.0’ – the binary opposite of the ‘we media’ claims for a more democratic online world - is provided by Facebook’s storing and selling of personal data, GPS companies doing the same – offering the police data to ‘trap’ speeding drivers; iphone’s tracking software and more broadly the use by police and security forces of ‘Geotime’ which captures an individual’s movements and communications with other people on a three-dimensional graphic. But on the other side of the coin, there is ample counter-evidence of subversive use of the internet – from ‘culture jamming’ (subversion through popular culture in the form of ‘memes’) and hacking, citizen journalism, ‘mediated mobilisation’ (collective action re-orientated) and ‘commons knowledge’ (open, crowd-sourced collaborative media content).

Naughton (2010) suggests that the best way for media academics (and students) to sharpen their thinking in order to account for these changes is to resit any notions of ‘paradigm shifts’ (when one way of thinking ends and another begins) but instead try to conceive of the relationship between media and people as ‘ecological’. Going further, he describes ‘informed bewilderment’ as the best mindset for the contemporary media student. This confusion is created by a combination of mainstream journalism occupying / sharing the ‘blogosphere’ and the kinds of ‘remix culture’ Jenkins describes that lead to new forms of value and thus shift the economic basis of media production and consumption. In this environment, media producers have to adapt to survive, argues Naughton, hence his metaphor of the ‘eco-system’. This is a very striking endorsement (Naughton is a journalist) of the ‘people power’ view of new digital media – that the media industries are adapting to survive in the wake of citizen participation.

On the other side, Morozov (2011) attacks the bold claims made about the political power (for citizens) of the internet, and in particular social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Morozov argues that internet freedom is an illusion, and that technology has not only failed to protect people’s rights, but is even used against them by authoritarian regimes, through censorship, surveillance, propaganda and hostility to dissent (the other side, of course, of Chomsky’s ‘manufacturing consent’. Arguing that the ‘cyber-utopian’ view is both naïve and a “mis-reading of history”, Morozov views it as a quasi-political form of technological determinism, the view that technology in itself can lead to, or be a catalyst for political change. Perhaps most bluntly, Morozov reminds us that, despite the great claims made for the power of social media in Iran and most recently the ‘Arab Spring’, Twitter and Facebook played a minor role compared to mainstream media agents such as Al-Jazeera and, at the time of writing, the powerful have yet to be been overthrown in those places.

In a documentary series screened by the BBC in the UK, Adam Curtis attempted to trace current ecological thinking on crowd sourcing and the democratisation of media to the science of cybernetics combining with research into ecosystems and feedback loops n the 1960s. Curtis goes as far as to suggest that current ideas about the internet’s resistance to orthodox power hierarchies are part of a broader shared vision of a ‘non-political management of society’:

In the mass democracies of the West a new ideology has risen up. We have come to believe that the old hierarchies of power can be replaced by self-organising networks (Curtis, BBC2, 30.5.11)

This is surely an overstatement, but Curtis is more balanced in his critique of the bold claims made for the role of social media in revolutions and general counter-cultural activity:

I’m not criticizing the internet or Facebook or Twitter. In their main manifestations – the distribution of information – they’re wonderful, fantastic. What I take issue with are cyber utopians, who I think are mind crushingly naïve, who see democracy as simply you, me and million of other individuals connected together. And somehow if we could have perfect connections we could organise everything perfectly and there wouldn’t be any need for power. Facebook or Twitter can tell you where to join up and rebel but it doesn’t allow you to envisage another kind of world. (in Forrest, 2011: 23)

There is a crucial distinction in Curtis’ quote above. Democracy is more complicated than mere ‘connectivity’. So one mistake the ‘we media’ advocates might sensibly be accused of making is to confuse the two, or to assume that one equates to the other. This would make no more sense than to say that the telephone had been in itself a democratising technology. So, when looking back at McLuhan’s famous maxim – ‘the medium is the message’ – the key issue for media students is to gauge the degree to which the technology / medium in itself is determining social action.

Buckingham (2010) is equally sceptical about the power of new media to change the eco-system in any profound ways that we might consider politically important:

To a large extent, the most active participants in the creative world of web 2.0 are the ‘usual suspects’. Indeed, if online participation is as socially, culturally and politically important as the enthusiasts suggest, it seems likely that, far from liquidating social inequality, it might actually accentuate it.

(Buckingham, 2010b: 6)

Furthermore, ‘social media politicians’ are now commonplace on twitter especially, as are political ‘apps’ for mobile devices and Youtube campaigning. If you can’t beat them join them, on one level, but more sinister hegemony on another?

Perhaps it’s just a matter of which examples you choose to prove your case. And, as we have discussed, there is a sense here that Media Studies is drifting into the study of, well, everything – the law, politics, social policy, technology and human rights. On the one hand, it’s an enormous challenge to respond to such a far-reaching set of questions, but on the other, at least it makes the idea that it’s a ‘soft subject’ even more ridiculous. In a nutshell, in a chapter on media power, the key question is this – to what extent do you think that social media has eroded the gatekeeping model of political information flow? And that is a ‘weighty’ question.

This, then, is an area where there are no right answers, a debate requiring, from the Media student, balance, detail and informed, critical judgement.

**Case Study: Wikileaks**

Whether wikileaks is a media text or not is a matter of debate, but for our discussion in this chapter, it is certainly of great interest since it‘s an example of free media and democratic investigative journalism ‘par excellence’ but as it is not constructed as conventional journalism, analysing it with the key concepts of Media Studies is more difficult:

One of the main difficulties with explaining Wikileaks arises from the fact it is unclear – and also unclear to the Wikileaks people themselves – whether it sees itself and operates as a content provider or as a simple carrier of leaked data. …. One could call this the ‘Talibanization’ stage of postmodern – “Flat World” – theory where scales, times, and places have been declared largely irrelevant. What counts is the celebrity momentum and the amount of media attention. (Lovink and Riemens, 2010: 2).

If, as the saying goes, you’ve been ‘living in a cave’ Wikileaks is an international non-profit organisation. Ironically, it isn’t a ‘wiki’ in the strict sense, but it’s a website that publishes submissions of private, secret, and classified media from anonymous news sources, news leaks, and whistleblowers. In October 2010, it published Iraq War Logs (400, 000 documents), in coordination with major commercial media organisations (including *The Guardian* newspaper), in November 2010, it put out the   
US State Diplomatic Cables and in April 2011, the Guantanamo   
Bay files. All of this information has been kept under strict secrecy by governments, but claims that this represents a huge shift in power to the citizen must be kept in check by the fact that in every case, the ‘mass’ dissemination of the information exposed has been managed by mainstream media, rather than citizens accessing and digesting the cables for themselves.

The barometer is whether the informed media student believes that there should be a tipping point, where freedom of information and the accountability of those in power (going back to Tony Benn’s key questions) must end and ‘security’ begins. This dilemma is neatly summed up here by Jemima Khan:

Wikileaks offers a new type of investigative journalism. I have my doubts about whether some cables should have been leaked – for example, the list of infrastructure sites vital to national security – and I share the concern that diplomacy could suffer as a result of others. But I feel passionately that democracy needs a strong and free media. It is the only way to ensure governments are honest and remain accountable. (Khan, 2010: 25).

**Media Regulation – NOTE: written pre-Leveson: all here:** [**http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/about/the-report/**](http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/about/the-report/)

Media regulation relates to power in various ways. If we accept that media is powerful, then regulating it is necessary in terms of reducing influence and ‘effects’. Media can be regulated in terms of its content or its ownership and distribution. Media regulation is, of course, a kind of power – there are laws that prevent journalists, for example, from reporting some things. And ‘the media’ would like to see more regulation of ‘social media’, of copyright and of intellectual property.

Key issues for students of media to explore are - how media regulation now is different to the past, how different kinds of media regulation all seek to ‘protect’ people in some way; the degrees of efficiency and impact of various forms of media regulation (how well do they work, and what difference do they make to people’s lives?) and debates around the role of the regulator in a democracy – arguments for and against various forms of media regulation.

The press (newspapers) in the UK regulate themselves and as a result press regulation is considered ‘light-touch‘ in comparison to other media regulation. If members of the public do wish to take action, feeling that regulations have been infringed, then they can turn to the Press Complaints Commission, who are considered by some to be a weak body due to the fact that some newspapers perpetuate the practice of ’publish and be damned’ in the comfort that they have far more money to use in a legal battle than individuals who may sue them*.* This way of working is described by critics as ’power without responsibility’. The PCC code of practice gives guidance rather than rules with regard to accuracy, right to reply, distinguishing between fact and comment, privacy, harassment, misrepresentation, chequebook journalism, intrusion (into grief or shock), the identification of the relatives or friends of convicted criminals, the protection of children, confidentiality and the definition of ‘public interest‘ which is highly subjective. Investigative journalism into potential corruption by a Government minister is clearly in the public interest, but the invasion of celebrity privacy might well not be. On the other hand, editors would argue that if we buy the papers then we demonstrate ‘public interest’ – end of story.

%3Cbody%3E%3Cdiv%20id%3D%22adDiv%22%3E%3Ca%20href%3D%22http%3A//display.hbpl.co.uk/accipiter/adclick/CID%3D00002c0c3ea1e64800000000/AAMSZ%3D300x250/AD\_POS%3D501/AD\_POSITION%3D501/AD\_LOCATION%3DC/SITE%3DBRANDREPUBLIC/AREA%3DBR.NEWS.ARTICLE/DISCIPLINE%3D.1003.1304./SECTOR%3D.10006.10604./ACC\_RANDOM%3D4759495662/PAGEID%3D7986640073%22%20target%3D%22\_BLANK%22%3E%3Cimg%20src%3D%22http%3A//hbpl-images.adbureau.net/hbpl/BrandRepublic/House%20ADs/BRW\_MWJ\_300x250ani\_0408.gif%22%20border%3D%220%22%3E%3C/a%3E%3C/div%3E

It is very important that we spend some time reinforcing just how important this protection of the ‘free press’ is in a democracy. If we regulate the press more than we do at the moment, then we make it easier for people to use their power for unfair ends. The press are free so that they can monitor and report to the public on matters of national interest. In countries where the state own the media, there is no expectation amongst the public that they will get anything other than a version of the truth circulated by those in power. So, a free press is a cornerstone of democracy, along with a free vote in a secret ballot and public information being available. Conflict of interest is avoided in a democracy and there is no greater conflict of interest than powerful people owning media and avoiding regulation. The argument – should we have more regulation of the press – is illustrated by these conflicting statements:

No commission funded by the newspapers upon which it adjudicates, and working to a code produced by the very editors liable to censure, can possibly inspire public confidence. Self-regulation is toothless. (Jeremy Dear, National Union of Journalists)

The Press Complaints Commission doesn’t impose fines or indulge in histrionics, but it has steadied press standards of behaviour over almost two decades now. It’s part of the landscape, increasingly referred and resorted to. And it works alongside the law, not in opposition to it. (Peter Preston, former Guardian editor).

Regulation and freedom of the press is one area amongst many that are of importance for media students. Others include attempts to regulate the internet and social media, the classification of videogame content, film censorship, the regulation of advertising and the protection of children from media influence through the facilitation of ‘media literacy’. All of these attempts to regulate media are sites of conflict over media power, participation and equality.

**Case Study: Talent TV and Democracy**

Celebrity culture is said to be the zeitgeist (spirit) of the times. It is seen as significant because it appears to have established new cultural values not present in previous periods. Depending on your view it can either be a form of democratisation or a symptom of cultural decline. (Helsby, 2010: 64)

This section is about the relationship between democracy, interaction and *The X Factor*. It considers the power acquired by Simon Cowell and the extent to which it matters. If, as many argue, Nick Clegg is Deputy Prime Minister in Whitehall largely due to his polished appearances on the ‘Cowell-styled’ Live Election Debates and the use of social media as an ‘extra-textual’ feature, then Media students do need to make sense of the connections between seemingly more serious questions of media and democracy (phone tapping, ownership, ‘we media’ in Libya) and issues of access and accountability in apparently ‘lighter’ examples – the Susan Boyle debate, for instance – was her rise from obscurity to global stardom the American Dream ideal – liberal democracy in action – or exploitation (or both)?

This area of Media Studies tends to be looked at from the perspective of reality television’s popularity, cultural value and contribution to forms of realism. Is it democratic and interactive, as the likes of Peter Bazalgette will claim, when he compares young peoples’ willingness to interact with the programme by voting and their disinterest in formal politics?

The discourse of authenticity (who is a ‘real’ person) and transparency (being ‘seen’ to be who one says one is) may well offer significant clues to Big Brother viewers’ reasons for distrusting and disengaging from politics. (Bazalgette, 2005: 281-2)

Or is reality television attractive, in comparison to politics, because it is interactive but not necessarily *democratic*?

In 2012, ‘talent TV’ has taken over from ‘reality TV’ and we are now more interested in the rise and rise of the X Factor and all things connected to Simon Cowell. When the 2010 UK general election campaign was dominated by live TV debates connected to social media, the comparison to a ‘talent cost’ was much discussed and Simon Cowell was given serious credence for his revelation that he was looking at producing a kind of ‘X Factor’ for politicians – maybe by the time of publication it has happened. Along with ‘talent TV’ – a wide range of programmes where contestants compete over several weeks in particular contexts – from *The Apprentice* to *The Choir*, there has been a proliferation of ‘reality documentaries’ where elite people or celebrities are placed in unfamiliar and threatening situations – *Tower Block House of Commons* and *Rich, Famous and Homeless* both put celebrities ‘in the mix’ with ‘real people’ for the vicarious pleasure of the viewing public. This year’s Comic Relief extended this further by placing pampered celebrities in the slums of Kenya.

Finding a space in between the ‘difficult’ theory and seemingly ‘easy’ subject matter (‘talent TV’) – this is the perennial conjuring act for media students. In this case, a contemporary application of Adorno’s theory of the ‘Culture Industry’ (1973) is helpful to provide a theoretical framework for these questions about the ‘power’ of *The X Factor*:

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1973: 139).

Adorno’s work is a good example of the ‘coming together’ of analyses of political economy and ideology. According to this thesis (from the Frankfurt School of critical theory), the effect of both ownership and textual content is to standardise commodities, culture and, in effect, people. At its most cynical, popular culture is viewed as exercising social control:

The culture industry serves the ideological interests of economic and political powers by producing music, films and other sentimental novelties designed to make people cathartic, amused, satisfied with their lot, sleepy and, after a good night’s sleep – re-charged for tomorrow’s chores and the office, farm or factory. (Laughey, 2007: 124)

In this way, looking at Frankfurt School thinking as a development of Marxism, the shift is to see popular culture as the obstruction to a revolution, as opposed to physical power and religious or educational ideology. Of course, it is only possible to agree with this view if we a) see people as completely ‘passive’ in their reception of popular culture and b) see popular culture as formulaic. Most contemporary media theory has moved a considerable distance from these perspectives.

Adorno’s analysis was profoundly negative, but his theoretical desire was to expose the contradictory and illusory nature of popular culture in its status as a commodity ‘for sale’ masquerading as something external to economics. There was, in his view, very little difference between art and advertising, but the producers of the former were mystifying their actions in order to preserve a false distinction between these activities. Culture is always for sale and is, indeed, produced for that purpose and so the idea that we can escape from the daily workings of consumer capitalism through enrichment by culture is a myth. The clearest connection between Adorno’s work on popular culture and Marxist theories of power is in the idea that popular culture has a distracting function in the way that it presents the idea of the talented, or cultured individual when, in reality, that individual is merely a part of the capitalist system and is dependent on it. Adorno didn’t see anything ‘trivial’ in the role of popular (or ‘mass’) culture, though:

Although life in the capitalist democracy of America was a far cry from Nazi Germany, Horkheimer and Adorno did nevertheless find similarities between the two contexts. The experience of American cinema and commercial radio confirmed Horkheimer and Adorno’s view that ‘englightenment’ had turned into ‘mass deception’ through the machinations of ‘ the culture industry’ (Barlow and Mills, 2009: 184).

Whilst its important to carefully state at this point that no connections are being made between Simon Cowell and Hitler, it’s nonetheless apparent that some of these ideas about entertainment as ‘deception’ are applicable to *The X Factor*. Cowell’s creation would, in Adorno’s terms of reference, be an example of ‘mass culture’ (or ‘anthropological culture’) compared to, say, the novels of Ian McEwan. Adorno’s view was that high culture does have an emancipatory potential, through being in some ways ‘outside’ of the everyday processes of economics and administration – ‘material life’, but its form is conservative and not politically progressive, since it caters for those that are already favoured by the system. Popular culture, though, is the opposite – potentially revolutionary in its appeal to ‘the masses’ who are alienated and repressed by those in power, but in its form and content this kind of culture is absolutely part of the machinery of the system – not only does it ‘commodify’ culture to the extreme, it also serves to distract ‘the masses’ with its superficial, ‘accessible’ content. Thus Adorno presents the paradox at the heart of ‘the culture industry’:

The critical energies in the elite concept of culture had to be marshalled against the ideological function of its anthropological counterpart, while the progressive impulses of the latter had to be turned against the conservative implications of the former. (Jay, 1984: 115)

Turner (2010) describes the proliferation of ‘ordinary people’ on television in the twenty-first century as a ‘demotic turn’ and his view is different to Bazalgette’s in that this is **not** the same as a democratic shift. The cult of celebrity, for Turner, creates a new set of expectations of everyday life – so the ordinary person is not featured in the media on ‘ordinary’ terms:

No amount of public participation in game shows, reality TV or DIY celebrity websites will alter the fact that, overall, the media industries still remain in control of the symbolic economy, and that they still strive to operate this economy in the service of their own interests. (Turner, 2010: 16).

Once again, then, there is a question with no ‘right answer’ to be posed - does the attention to the ‘ordinary person’ by television actually constitute a revolution in the eroding of boundaries between elite and everyday, or is Turner right when he argues for attention to the more orthodox power dynamics ‘behind the scenes’? Turner’s argument is that there is no clear connection between the exposure given to ‘everyday people’ by reality TV and any kind of progressive or emancipatory shifts. Thus the ‘demotic turn’ equates merely to the increase in exposure of / to the public with no necessary democratic outcomes. Furthermore, he suggests that the rise of celebrity culture – and with it the clamour for us to seek the prize of commodifying ourselves as celebrities has had the effect of charging the contemporary media with the power to ‘translate’ cultural identity.

Is it possible to connect Marx, Adorno, Cowell and Turner in this way? Adorno, of course, was writing in a very different period and he was primarily concerned about the distracting nature of jazz! In addition his problem with ‘popular culture’ was not intended to be elitist. But what would Adorno have had to say about Simon Cowell, and would be have agreed with the idea that the internet creates democractic ‘affordances’? That’s highly unlikely. For certain, the relationship between ‘talent TV’ and democracy must be located within a very complex field. The crucial thing is to *connect* the ‘light’ and the ‘heavy’ – to understand that Simon Cowell’s (unelected) power, Murdoch’s agenda for UK domination and the affordances of twitter by people in Egypt fighting for liberation are connected – the *Culture Industry* is very different now to when Adorno was writing, but the relationships between culture, media, everyday life and power are the same.

**Power and Globalisation**

The next chapter provides an introduction to theories of global media. There is a clear overlap with this chapter, because a contemporary analysis of media power must grapple with the relationship between ‘state power’ in a particular nation, ways that global communication across borders will offer resistance and opportunities for power to be exercised globally. So global media is always the subject of debate and there are examples of all three of ‘people power’ ideological power and corporate power being increased by new digital media that transcend traditional boundaries of time and space. More basic theories of global media argue that McLuhan’s ‘global village’ prophecy is being realised as we move away from ideas of local culture, reinforced by such media as local news and radio towards a sense of ourselves as global citizens. Marxist perspectives on this thesis vary, but the idea of ‘cultural imperialism’ connects most clearly – whereby the ideas of powerful nations (most commonly the USA) are spread around the world to the extent that a ‘cultural empire’ is created through the virtual invasion of American ideas into the cultures of nations across the globe – not only does this mean that we expect to find a McDonalds or a Starbucks in every town but also that we come (in the UK context) to understand ideas about the world from America as ‘closer to home’ than those originating in other parts of Europe. It is, as always, much more complicated than that, and the ‘right answer’ tends to be that examples of global culture co-exist with people retaining local identities – and that global media often ‘culturally mutate’ to become hybrids of the global and the local – ‘glocalisation’. Furthermore, there are a plethora of well researched and documented examples of ‘diaspora’ – a term describing the process by which people disperse themselves across the world and take elements of their media culture with them – the popularity of Bollywood cinema in many parts of the world is a key ‘case study’. All of which is stated to remind you that, as we move from theories of media power to global media, the key questions about the role of media in society are common to both areas of study.

**Summary**

This chapter has introduced you to a range of different but related ways in which media can exercise power over citizens. At the same time, a range of examples of citizens using media (especially new social media) to challenge power or exercise power of their own have been discussed. The key theoretical ideas for studying power in / by media – Marxism, Cultural Imperialism, Political Economy, Feminism, Postmodernism and the more recent idea of ‘Politics 2.0’ have been described, and the most compelling ‘no right answer’ debates have been introduced – the degree to which we are ‘passive’ recipients of media ideologies; the dangers to democracy the media ownership can present; the need for more or less media regulation and the potential of new social media to facilitate a new ‘non-political’ ecosystem.

The ideas and examples covered in this chapter can lead to the following summative statements:

In a democracy, citizens are entitled to a free media, with open access and impartial information flow without gatekeeping, but media analysts and commentators rarely find this in practice.

* Power can be with or without various kinds of accountability and it is important for citizens to ask questions about the accountability of media owners and producers.
* Marxist analysis of media power attempts to reveal the ideological nature of media texts, whilst discourse analysis attempts to trace the intertextual framing of political media discourse.
* Feminist media theory is varied and changing, but a common thread is the analysis of seemingly neutral media as gendered, with the male point of view as ‘the norm’ and thus power is exercised through the construction of female as ‘other’.
* Postcolonial media theory looks at the ways in which physical empire building (by military conquest and invasion) has been replaced by ideological empire building, partly through the spread of dominant media across national and cultural boundaries.
* Postmodern media theory foregrounds mediation and challenges the notion that media represent any separate, prior state of reality. Media power can be amplified or fragmented in this model as ‘grand narratives’ (eg Marxism or Islam) are apparently replaced, for many, by single issue, short term ‘micropolitics.’ Much of what is happening with social ‘citizen media – for example in the ‘Arab Spring’ appears to support this thesis.
* There is great debate and disagreement over the potential of an online, mediated ‘Politics 2.0’ to lead to a new ‘non-political’ democracy.