Human beings experience the world through the senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. But humans also experience the world through the more abstract phenomenon of consciousness, that is, we think, comprehend and mentally process insights. We have a capacity for understanding – a capacity for making sense of the world and our sensations. We do not simply take in perceptions, we are also conscious of these perceptions. We are ‘mental’ beings who try to ‘make sense’ of our world and of ourselves. We share our understandings, thoughts and feelings with one another through language. Our capacity to engage in this ‘sharing process’ has been greatly enhanced by the development of various media forms. Ultimately the human capacity for language, sharing and comprehension involves an ability to make meaning, that is we are able to take in perceptions, process them, comprehend them and then share them with others.

For many people, the meanings through which we live our lives are simply there; like the air we breathe. Meaning is taken for granted, and few reflect on how it is constructed. But meanings do not just exist – they are actively made as people encounter and think about the world, and then try to find ways to tell others what they are thinking. Meanings are also re-made as circumstances change.

In the contemporary world, meanings are frequently made within institutions called the media where meaning production has become professionalized. Such media-ized meaning-making is necessarily associated with sets of relationships between people that have been turned
into institutionalized behaviours and work practices. This involves the emergence of power relationships between the people involved in such institutional settings. Unravelling the agendas, interests and struggles between such people helps give us insight into the world of meanings that we inhabit.

Understanding our ‘meaning-environment’ is not merely an academic exercise. After all, failure to reflect on our meaning-environment creates the potential for being manipulated by those who do reflect on this communicative process, and reduces one’s capacity for engaging in democratic society. Being an active citizen and an engaged communicator requires being as conscious as possible of the nature and origins of the meanings we use.

For those interested in thinking about and unravelling meaning-environments from a critical perspective, there are two particularly useful approaches for analysing the communicative process, namely the cultural studies approach and political economy approach. Cultural studies has focused on deconstructing texts and coding systems as a way of denaturalizing the communicative process and stripping away the opaqueness and taken-for-grantedness of meaning. For example, a cultural studies examination of pop singer Madonna would look beyond the music dimension and explore also what she communicates about contemporary attitudes towards femininity. An analysis of Madonna and her fans could become a study of how the female body, sexuality and gender relationships are understood (‘constructed’) within conventional and alternative sub-cultures. Alternatively, the political economy approach focuses on how meaning is made by people within a productive process. This involves exploring the social positions people occupy, the relationships between them and struggles over meaning-production within organizations. For example, political economists would be interested in examining the possible relationship between the content of The Australian and the fact that this newspaper is part of a corporation owned by Rupert Murdoch. These two critical approaches are complementary, and can be jointly applied for maximum deconstructive effect when analysing communication processes. This book draws together elements of the work of those who have contributed to the political economy method and the cultural studies approach.

The cultural studies insight that humans swim in a sea of meanings that is the outcome of a process of semiosis provides a useful point of departure. We are born into pools of pre-constituted meanings and internalize these as we are socialized and learn to communicate. Various
communication pools have emerged as clusters or structures of meaning that have congealed over time. These communicative pools are coding styles or circulation patterns that have taken on identifiable forms which we call societies or cultures. The Anglo pool of meanings has grown into a ‘global culture’ which incorporates various sub-pools (or societies) including the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia and Eire. In Western society the various pools have become closely associated with the production and circulation systems we now call ‘the media’. As each of us internalizes the particular meaning-style that surrounds us, we are constituted as human beings and as members of various social groups/ cultures. These meanings are resources that we use to generate our personas, to negotiate with others and to position ourselves within a social milieu. But we also help to re-make these shared meanings as we proceed through life. Hence our societies and cultures are not static – they are continually being re-invented and struggled over, and every individual makes some contribution to re-shaping social meaning as we engage in the everyday process of communicating with each other. We cannot help but change the coding structure into which we were born as each individual grapples to make sense of, and shape our world. Hence the pool of meaning that shapes us, and that we in turn shape, shifts throughout our lives. Numerous, often imperceptibly small shifts result in the pool of meanings becoming different for each generation. Our cultures consequently change and grow precisely because the process of communicative coding and decoding relies on innumerable, small, creative transactions between active human beings.

**Contextualizing meaning-making**

The pools of meaning we inhabit are not constituted by arbitrary communicative acts of randomly positioned individuals. Certainly all individuals play a role in making, re-making and circulating meaning. But some individuals or groups have more power than others within the communicative process. People are positioned differently by the power relationships into which they are embedded, and these positions impact on the access individuals have to media production and circulation systems. The positioning of people is a contextual issue. Each person who communicates is part of a context – located in a particular place and time. The meanings they consume and make are contextually-bound, rooted in a unique set of circumstances and relationships. A great strength of the
political economy approach is that it stresses the need to analyse communication contextually. So for political economists, meanings need to be seen as inextricably bound to the (physical and temporal) sites in which they are made/used. Such an approach debunks the notion of universally valid meanings or ‘truth(s)’. Hence, political economists find the idea that meanings can simply be transported across time and place and still retain the author’s original codings as naïve. So ‘meaning’ is not a free-floating language game, as in the cosmology of a Derrida (1976) or Laclau and Mouffe (1985). Instead, even if ‘meaning’ is understood as a ‘language game’, it is ‘language’ necessarily read as being tied to specific sets of human relationships, located within concretized localities and within identifiable periods. ‘Truth’ is relativized by time, place and power – there are as many ‘truths’ as there are contextual and power relationships giving rise to such truths. For example, ‘peace’ and ‘democracy’ are signs shared by all within the Anglo pool of meanings, but (because their lived-experiences are so different) the actual meaning attached to these signs is unlikely to be the same for a Catholic in Northern Ireland, a Protestant in Ulster, a London lawyer, a US civil rights activist, a white South African, a Wall Street stockbroker, and a Malaysian-Chinese migrant to Australia. Also, the same Ulsterman would probably not attach the same ‘positive’ meaning to these signs during the 1999 Ulster negotiations as he did after the Second World War in 1945.

Hence, a political economist examining ‘meaning’ is concerned with mapping out human relationships and the way some individuals gain more power than others through their positioning relative to others, and to their positioning relative to media production and circulation systems. Implicit in this is the notion that meaning is struggled over as people work at improving their positioning. Within such a framework, meaning-making is implicated in contextually-rooted processes of struggle and power acquisition. Gaining access to the means of communicative production/circulation (and even to certain codes) is both derivative of power and a means for accumulating power. The key issue is that those with power, in any given context, will have a greater impact on meaning-making and meaning-circulation because they have greater access to the coding and code-circulation systems. Not surprisingly, sites where discourses are produced (such as newsrooms, film/television studios, parliaments, courts, universities and research institutes) and the channels through which discourses flow (such as schools, the media and telecommunications networks) are necessarily important sites of struggle. There
is a constant struggle over gaining access to such sites and/or restricting the access of opponents to these sites. The pools of meaning into which we are born are the outcome of numerous past struggles (rooted in past contextual relationships), just as the results of the struggles in which we engage in our lifetimes will help to constitute the meaning-pool of the next generation. The nature and outcome of these struggles are what define the texture of each context. For political economists, such textures are not peripheral issues. Instead, it is precisely the unique texture of each time and place that provides the key insights into the nature of any ‘meaning’.

For this reason power relationships between people are central variables to be mapped by anyone trying to understand why a particular set of meanings circulates at a certain time and place. But mapping power is as complex as mapping meaning because just as meanings are continually shifting, so too is the distribution of power. There is a continual struggle over power in all human groups and a constant realignment in winners and losers. And as power shifts take place, so the dynamics of meaning-production change. For this reason, mapping the mechanics of meaning-production (as with the mapping of meaning itself) is necessarily a highly contextual exercise in terms of time, place and shifting power relationships.

**The power to influence meaning-making**

Power does not have the tangibility of an object, yet as human beings we all intuitively recognize its presence. Like communication, it is omnipresent, yet it can be overlooked because it seems to be ‘just there’. But to overlook power is to miss a crucial dimension within the meaning-making process.

Power is a slippery phenomenon with numerous definitions. For the purposes of this book, power will be seen as the capacity to get one’s own way when interacting with other human beings. Weber expressed this best when saying that those with power are able ‘to realize their own will even against the resistance of others’ (1978: 53). Lukes added an interesting rider to this Weberian notion. For Lukes (1974), having power not only grants one the ability to have one’s interests prevail over others, but is also the ability to stop conflicts from emerging by preventing oppositional agendas from even being raised. But accepting the above definition of power still leaves at least three ancillary issues to be dealt
with. First, what is the relationship between power and social elites? Secondly, where does power come from? And, thirdly, what is the relationship between being 'embedded' within a power relationship and free agency?

The notion of power elites slides easily into conspiracy theory, although it need not do so. Similarly, discussions of the relationships between meaning-making and the media can easily end up sounding like a conspiracy theory in which power elites are seen to be necessarily in a position to manipulate media content to serve their own interests. For this reason, there has often been a relationship between power elite theories and those studying media ownership and control, with the political economy approach to communication being one of those theories which has lent itself to conspiratorial interpretations of media control. This occurred because theories of an all-powerful media being used to generate ‘false consciousness’ can all too easily be read as supporting a naive interpretation of elite theory in which social or economic elites are seen to conspire actively to use the media to subdue or misdirect the masses. That media production can be (and often is) used by individuals and groups for the purposes of manipulation is clear. But what is less clear is whether control of the media necessarily means ‘manipulation’ and whether manipulation can necessarily be assumed to be the work of power elites. In part, exploring these issues requires considering the validity of the power elite theory itself.

The debate between Dahl (1961) and Mills (1959) over the existence or otherwise of power elites is useful when considering the validity of the power-elite position. Pluralists like Dahl argued that there is no unified elite because power is diffused within a democracy, while theorists such as Mills argued that ultimately power resided with a small group of people within society. In Figure 1.1 these are represented as (a) Dahl’s pluralist model, in which society is seen as being made up of multitudes of intersecting (cross-cutting) interest groups (without a clear elite); and (b) Mills’s power-elite model in which society is seen as hierarchically structured, with a small unified elite ‘commanding’ the rest of society. This book proposes a third approach, namely (c) the hegemonic-domination model in which hegemonic elites are seen as alliances of interest groups. These hegemonic alliances become elites (‘rulers’) who dominate the ‘ruled’, but their dominance is more ‘messy’, tentative and less ‘hierarchial’ than in Mills’s conceptualization. Mills’s and Dahl’s positions may seem mutually exclusive but it is possible to see both positions as valid if power is seen to migrate and mutate, and the sites of
power are seen constantly to shift in the course of struggles taking place. The hegemonic-dominance model – as seen in (c) in Figure 1.1 – is based on such a mutable/shifting conceptualization of elites. At certain moments elites might well congeal and manage to become the dominant power brokers within a particular context only later to have their power challenged and overthrown either by another (emergent) power elite or by something more akin to Dahl’s pluralist-type, diffused power agglomeration. If society is conceptualized as a fluid and continually mutating entity, it becomes possible to view elite theory and pluralist theory as describing different ‘moments’ of a shifting continuum. Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemonic struggle is especially useful when conceptualizing the interaction between various competing interest groups – a competition theorized by both liberal-pluralists like Dahl (1961) and

![Diagram](image-url)
socialist-pluralists like Poulantzas (1980). Gramsci’s notion is also useful when conceptualizing existent, emergent and decaying power elites. Hegemonies have to be built and maintained – this is the mechanism for becoming (and remaining) a ruling elite. So ruling elites are not ‘conspiracies’; they are the outcome of hard hegemonic labour which can, in the contemporary era, involve coordinating the interests of millions of people.

Pluralist theory’s denial that elites can (and do) emerge seems naïve. But neither is the existence of power elites a necessary condition of human existence – contexts can exist where power is diffused in the way described by pluralist theorists like Dahl (1961). Similarly, the pluralist failure to address the fact that elites can and do intentionally work to manipulate and control non-elites also seems naïve. But the notion that non-elites are necessarily powerless and perpetually manipulated seems equally dubious. It is more helpful to recognize the existence of elites and aspiring elites, as well as non-elite groups who are part of a complex pluralist competition for (material and cultural) resources and power. Within this framework the media are one of the many social sites that are struggled over as means to acquire and build power.

The question then becomes, from where does this power come? Those trying to answer this question have broadly formulated three explanations of the source of power. These are: access to resources (to implement one’s will and buy others); the occupation of social positions (which enhance one’s capacity to get one’s will complied with, and/or to constrain the capacity of others to act); and language as a relation-structuring agent. The latter approach has become closely associated with cultural studies attempts to analyse meaning. For the purposes of this book, all three are seen as valuable – power is seen as derivative of access to resources (economic and cultural), social position and linguistic factors. And with each of these three sources, institutionalized communication is implicated. Various sites have effectively been ‘licensed’ to manufacture and circulate discourse such as educational institutions, the media, parliaments and courts of law. These sites are cultural resources, access to which is therefore struggled over. Access to such sites is controlled and limited, and often regulated by a credentialism. (Credentials are one of the discourses produced by communication sites as a self-regulating mechanism for limiting access.) A cultural resource that became especially important during the twentieth century was the media, because the media became a central site for defining social position and status (with publicity, for example, becoming a central resource to be battled over by
politicians). The media also became important agents for positioning people (through discourse). Media discourses are necessarily battled over, because such discourses serve to legitimate (or de-legitimate) particular hierarchies of positions and the incumbents of such positions. Given the importance the media assumed as ‘king-makers’ and legitimators/de-legitimators from the second half of the twentieth century, media institutions have become prized possessions for those seeking power. Owning or controlling a media institution empowers the owner to hire and fire the makers of meaning. From this can emerge a secondary power – the power that derives from the capacity to make or break political leaders, and either circulate or suppress information and ideas. Whether the ownership/control of media sites does actually confer power will depend on the individuals concerned, the context in which they operate and the wider struggles taking place within that context. Rupert Murdoch (Shawcross, 1992) is a good example of how media ownership within the context of the late twentieth century has been an empowering resource when mobilized wisely within the struggles of emergent Anglo-globalism. Power is not automatic, it is the outcome of struggle. However, such struggles are not fought on level playing fields because certain players are advantaged (or disadvantaged) by having more (or less) access to the sources of power at the start of play. Pre-existent access to power is necessarily an advantage in the next round of the struggle over power. This means existent power elites are advantaged, but not in a way that absolutely predetermines their success in the next round of battle.

The notion that battles are not predetermined is an important one when considering power (and when considering meaning-production). Essentially there are two conceptions of power. In the first, people are passive and have power exercised over them – they merely inhabit pre-ordained structures. The second definition sees humans as active and part of a process in which power is struggled over. In the first, people are conceptualized as ‘imprisoned’ within a power relationship or structure (whether these are economic, political or linguistic). In the second, people have free agency – our lifeworlds are seen as the outcome of mutable human activity in which we make (and re-make) our own structures. In communication terms, it is a question of whether we are seen to be free to make meaning or whether we merely inhabit predetermined sets of meanings.

An examination of the shift from Saussurian structuralism to Derrida’s post-structuralism will help position this book with regard
to the issue of pre-determined structure versus human agency. At the risk of over-simplification, Table 1.1 attempts to summarize this shift. For Ferdinand Saussure (1974) we are socialized into a prison-house of language – a world of subjective structures (signs and codes) into which we are born. Louis Althusser (1971) took Saussure’s notion of linguistic structures and used these to develop his idea of the ISA (Ideological State Apparatus). Dominant ideologies/meanings were seen as being fixed or coded into our heads via these ISAs. Within the Althusserian worldview, power derived from control of ISAs. Human agency was given little scope within this structural and subjectivist view of human communication. The shift into a post-structural interpretation of the Saussurian cosmology came with Michel Foucault (1977; 1979). Foucault also saw humans as being constituted within linguistic structures. However, for Foucault, we were constituted within discursive practices, and these practices are created by human agency within institutions. This Foucaultian shift was highly significant because it opened a space for human agency and struggle that was tied to a notion of institutionalized communication. There might be structures, but these structures, institutions and practices were mutable because they were themselves the outcome of struggles between active human beings within a particular context. The Foucaultian notion of discursive practices therefore represented a shift away from linguistic determinism. His notion of knowledge as being constituted by active human practice (within human-made

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Saussure</th>
<th>Althusser</th>
<th>Foucault</th>
<th>Derrida</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic structuralism</td>
<td>Early French structuralism</td>
<td>Mature French structuralism</td>
<td>Post-structuralism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign and code systems are a prison-house of language into which we are born.</td>
<td>Sign systems are institutionalized within socio-political apparatus (ISAs). ISAs socialize us into a prison-house of language.</td>
<td>We are socialized into sets of discursive practices which structure meaning. But human agency struggles over these meanings. Hence they are not fixed structures (prison-houses).</td>
<td>Meanings are never fixed within structures but are constantly shifting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predetermination through linguistics.</td>
<td>Predetermination through an ideological apparatus.</td>
<td>Human agency moderates the impact of structures.</td>
<td>Pure human agency operative.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
agencies) placed Foucault’s understanding of communication within the same cosmology as that of Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemonic struggle. For both Foucault and Gramsci, communication is the outcome of human practices that are struggled over. There may be communicative structures which set boundaries or parameters but these do not predetermine human action.

Jacques Derrida (1976) took this Foucaultian notion one stage further and explored the struggle over meaning as a process of trying to either fix meanings into place or uncouple meanings. In Derrida’s cosmology there was a constant shift in meaning structures as the process of fixing and uncoupling and re-fixing unfolded. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) progressed Derrida’s notion by even questioning the possibility of ever fixing meanings into place. At most, Laclau and Mouffe saw ‘fixations’ as partial. Within this Derridian/Laclau and Mouffe cosmology we are left with a shift into an understanding of communication as a pure semiosis – where meaning-making is understood as purely about language games. Stuart Hall (1983) noted the limitations of this extreme post-structuralist worldview. Essentially extreme post-structuralism decontextualizes meaning-making. It ignores power relationships embedded in identifiable political and economic contexts and so loses the substance and complexity that a Foucaultian or Gramscian approach has. The Laclau and Mouffe position of ‘pure semiosis’ is simply ill-equipped to deal with how power relationships emerge between humans engaged in struggles over resources and positions. These struggles involve symbolism and cultural resources but they are not reducible exclusively to mere battles over meaning.

The Gramscian or Foucaultian positions have the advantage of allowing for both human agency and structural limitations within the process of a context-embedded meaning-production. When making meaning we necessarily operate within pre-existing economic, political and linguistic structures, and hence within pre-existing power relations. But these existent structures and power relationships are not immutable or fixed. Rather, they simply set parameters within which the next wave of struggle for power and influence takes place. These contextual parameters may advantage certain individuals and groups engaged in the processes, but it does not imprison anyone into a predetermined outcome. Ultimately, both meaning and power relations emerge from a process of ongoing struggle. Within this process there will be those attempting to freeze certain meanings and structures if these advantage their position. And if they have sufficient power or influence they may even be successful.
for a while. But power is relational and messy, and is dependent upon the way humans interact in a particular location and time. There will always be gaps and contradictions in any system of control, and there will always be those who wish to circumvent, and will often succeed in circumventing, the mechanisms of control and meaning-closure. Total Orwellian control (as hypothesized in Orwell’s novel, 1984) is an impossibility because no monitor could ever be large enough. Ultimately, relational shifts cannot be prevented. Therefore power shifts are inevitable. Hence, power is always contextually-bound, transitory and slipping away from those who try to wield it. So both meanings and power relations are constantly sliding around, migrating and mutating, sometimes in sync with one another and sometimes out of sync, and this constant churning creates gaps for those who wish to challenge existent power relations and existent structures. It is relational churning that constrains the powerful because the powerful can never permanently pin down relationships that benefit themselves. Power is consequently constrained by the propensity humans have for struggle, and their capacity to find gaps and contradictions in any social structure. No structure, whether it be an economic or political structure, or a meaning-structure, is ever a permanent ‘prison’ – at most, structures ‘channel’ human agency.

The same is true for meaning-production. The process(es) of meaning-making are ‘bounded’ by a multiplicity of (contextually-bound) human-made power relationships and structures which may ‘restrict’ human agency but which can never ‘eliminate’ it. However, even if power relationships and structures do not determine meanings, they are part of the contextual framework within which meaning is made. Hence, mapping the structuring qualities of power relationships is a useful place to start when analysing meaning-production.

**Those licensed to make meaning – intellectuals**

As we enter the twenty-first century a high proportion of the meanings we individually process on a daily basis are produced and circulated by professionalized meaning-makers who work within an institutionalized set of power relationships. These people can be termed intellectuals – they make and circulate ideas.

All humans make meaning and all humans consume meaning. However, for some people, meaning-production and meaning-circulation become their full-time occupation. These professional communicators
exercise an influence in society disproportionate to their numbers because they become the primary gatekeepers and regulators of the meaning in circulation. In Western civilization there is a long-standing tradition of such professionalized communicators that reaches as far back as the rhetoricians of ancient Greece. But the communication profession is one whose numbers increased rapidly, especially during the twentieth century, thanks initially to the proliferation of mass education and the mass media and more recently to the growth of the Internet. Although these mass communication forms had their roots in the late nineteenth century, it was the twentieth century that really saw the widespread diffusion of mass-schooling, the print media, radio, film and, later, television, as important social phenomena. However, it was the emergence of the global information economy in the late twentieth century that saw communication professionals become not only still more numerous, but also more socially powerful than ever before. As a consequence, intellectuals have become ever more central to the very functioning of the (globalizing) economy because flows of data, information and ideas have become key commodities within the new economy that are just as important as raw (and processed) minerals or agricultural products (see Lash & Urry, 1994).

There was a proliferation throughout the second half of the twentieth century in the variety of professionalized intellectual roles in Western society as ever-larger percentages of the work force became engaged in the work of processing ever-growing volumes of information in circulation. We now have numerous types of professionalized intellectuals, such as academics, researchers, teachers, journalists, publishers, film-makers, television producers, multimedia workers, architects, artist-cum-designers, politicians, policy advisors and regulators, economists, judges, psychologists and counsellors, the clergy and those working in fields like advertising, marketing, public relations and community development. All of these people are part of the process of making, circulating and regulating the flow of meanings within which we live. As intellectual roles proliferated, the nature of intellectual work also shifted. The traditional Western image of an intellectual as a cloistered ivory-tower academic or a member of the clergy is no longer valid for the bulk of intellectual roles. A more suitable image of an early twenty-first century intellectual worker is an employee of the Fox network who is working as part of a team creating, packaging and distributing ideas through a global (largely electronic) information network. Intellectual work is increasingly concentrated within organizational sites where creative
people are employed to generate ideas. Some sites have more influence (and hence status) than others. Gramsci (1971) argued that ideas produced in such sites are ideological when they fit the hegemonic needs of the ruling order. Intellectuals are significantly implicated in the creation of social power relationships through the way in which political and economic power elites form symbiotic relationships with intellectuals – a relationship discussed by Berger (1977). Berger used the analogy of Aztec temples to describe how ruling elites sacrifice people for their dreams, and how intellectuals (like Aztec priests) are deeply complicit in such sacrifices: ‘The Great pyramid at Cholula provides a metaphorical paradigm for the relations amongst theory, power, and the victims of both – the intellectuals who define reality, the power wielders who shape the world to conform to their definitions, and the others who are called upon to suffer in consequence of both enterprises’ (Berger, 1977: 22).

Because of the capacity intellectuals have to both set and tweak the parameters of social meaning, there is a growing status attached to many media-intellectual roles and, as a result, a significant competition for such jobs (because they are perceived as ‘influential’ or ‘powerful’). One consequence of this has been the emergence of sets of ‘professional standards’ and ‘licensing’ arrangements for such professions, and these are generally tied to accessing tertiary education. This in turn has led to a new growth industry in the form of tertiary-level communication programmes. Meaning-making has increasingly become a function of people working within institutionalized sites who were recruited from a training system specifically designed for the mass-production of professional communicators. The consequent proliferation of an education/training industry (linked to licensed professionalism) potentially becomes a mechanism for limiting/controlling both media and education content by effectively reducing the range of coding possibilities. The mass-production of intellectuals, who are needed to staff the proliferating communicative machinery, can easily lead to discursive closure and standardized banality thanks to a ‘cloning-process’ which can, in turn, lead to (globalized) intellectual copy-catism and trendiness among those staffing the new communication networks. Members of the Frankfurt School, such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1979) and Marcuse (1964b), were among those theorists who worried about the possibilities for producing intellectual one-dimensionality as a result of industrializing meaning-production.

Of concern to the Frankfurt School theorists was the way in which twentieth-century intellectuals had their creativity channelled (restricted?)
and had any ‘oppositional’ ideas curtailed by their need to work within an institutionalized media industry. The argument was that, once employed, intellectuals found themselves (necessarily?) ‘tamed’ by the patronage relationship into which they were embedded. The Frankfurt School produced its theories towards the middle of the twentieth century. One can only speculate how concerned they would have been to witness the banalities and discursive closures that characterized information-flows of the late twentieth century. Other theorists, such as Gramsci, while recognizing the potential for such control and conformity, did not see intellectual work as necessarily always ‘closed’. Instead, Gramsci (1971) recognized the possibility for struggle and turmoil even within an institutionalized meaning-making machinery. Hence, closure could never be universal or permanent. In a similar vein, Enzensberger (1974) noted that the products of the culture industry were always going to be contradictory because this industry relied upon the one element that was ultimately untamable – namely, human creativity.

Overall, the trend has been for the processes of Western meaning-making and circulation to become increasingly organized, institutionalized and commoditized throughout the course of the twentieth century. Many meanings continue to emerge from ad hoc human creativity and interaction. However, the twentieth century saw the numbers of professional communicators increase. These professionals were employed in the task of deliberately constructing meaning. Hence, an ever-expanding percentage of the meanings available to Westerners became the result of the conscious construction and professional manipulation of communicative variables, rather than ad hoc mutations in meaning. The meanings we are exposed to are less and less likely to be the outcome of chance and are ever-more likely to be the products of intellectuals who have been trained in particular coding processes, practices and worldviews. Employers now select ‘appropriately’ trained communication professionals. These intellectuals plan the meanings we encounter, and generally do this as employees. This has important consequences for meaning-production because employees are not usually in a position to question seriously the wishes of their employers. Therefore, the greater the volume of institutionalized social meaning, the more one can expect to find employer pressure impacting on the available meaning-stock.
Institutionalizing meaning production – the media

The nineteenth century saw the beginnings of the industrialization of Western meaning-making. The process began with newspapers. Although newspapers originated in fifteenth-century Flemish and German states, these were not the highly institutionalized, mass circulation media that arose in the wake of the industrial revolution. The nineteenth century brought with it a number of developments which, when combined, generated the conditions for the creation of a new type of communication, initially in the Anglo-world, but soon spreading elsewhere. The invention of ways to produce cheap paper and ink, the rotary printing press and typesetting machines generated the necessary technology for mass-produced newspapers. The industrial revolution also led to the creation of large cities, growing literacy rates and improved road and rail transport, which provided expanding markets for mass newspapers. Then came advertising, which made it possible to sell newspapers cheaply – the mass circulation ‘penny press’ was born. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Americans invented the ‘Corporation’ as an organizational form – a form that soon came to underpin the culture industry as well. From this confluence of variables grew the mass media – an industrialized production and distribution of meaning. A new set of practices (and discourses about meaning-making), which still formed the basic underpinning of newspaper, magazine, film, radio and television practices at the end of the twentieth century, emerged from this industrial crucible. (Educational practices were similarly industrialized and massified.) Only with the arrival of digital electronic networking during the 1990s did these practices show any signs of modification.

At heart, this industrialized form of communication involved institutionalizing intellectuals. Intellectuals came to work within organizations where the organizing principles were hierarchical and mechanistic, and where factories geared towards mass production were the model. The nature of meaning-making was altered by this process of institutionalization. If Figure 1.2 represents pre-industrial communication, Figure 1.3 represents the effects of industrialization on meaning-making.

![Figure 1.2 Unmediated communication](image)

---

**Figure 1.2 Unmediated communication**
In Figure 1.2 communication involves a process of sharing. Meaning flows back and forth between the communicator and the recipient; in fact the roles of communicator and recipient are interchangeable. Meaning emerges out of the interchange. The medium merely facilitates the process of exchange. But in Figure 1.3 the communicator works within a communication institution – the organizational form of the medium becomes a central part of the communication process and the communicator becomes a functionary of the culture industry. Importantly, the communicator and medium are ‘collapsed’ into one another. From the point of view of the audience/recipient, any distinction between communicator and medium becomes unimportant – s/he is now seen as part of an organizational entity: the media. In a sense the communicator (and his/her meaning) has been de-personalized; his/her individual identity and individually-held ideas have become much less important than in the mode of communication illustrated in Figure 1.3. In Figure 1.3, recipients consume meaning, and when consuming a product of the culture industry it is the ‘collective’ identity of the organization that is perceived. The final product is the outcome of the work of innumerable employees of the organization, making it very difficult to identify the opinions or work of a single author. So, rather than an author (as another human being), we find institutionalized roles (driven by institutional needs and practices). Such an institutionalized intellectual necessarily makes meaning within a set of externally derived ‘organizational’ rules which governs and controls him/her. The space for individual creativity is greatly curtailed by the requirement to conform to organizational needs, hierarchies and practices. Further, institutionalized communication changes the recipient’s role within the communication process from a partner in making meaning.
(in Figure 1.2) to a passive audience (in Figure 1.3). The flow of messages becomes one-way, there being little scope for feedback within industrialized communication. Simultaneously, the capacity to deliver messages is greatly enhanced, with the industrialization of communication dramatically increasing the range and potency of message delivery.

By the end of the twentieth century the mass media’s reach became virtually ubiquitous in the industrial (and post-industrial) world. It is now difficult to find a ‘space’ where one can step outside the reach of one or other media form. So the mass media simultaneously increases the reach of professional communicators, while dramatically narrowing the role of recipients, turning recipients into passive receivers of meanings made by others. For those working within the culture industry, this has led to the reconceptualization of audiences as mass recipients to be ‘targeted’ as anonymous ‘public(s)’. Communicators effectively ‘de-personalize’ those to whom they deliver messages. Instead of being addressed as another human being, they become mere constructs (such as ‘the public’) to be reached via the techniques of professional communicators. Hence the ‘human’ quality of messages was reduced at the same time as its strength and potency was enhanced by industrialization (see Van Schoor, 1986: 115–20).

At heart, industrializing communicative processes (beginning with newspapers, but reaching its zenith with television) led to mass communication, which is inherently top-down and manipulative. Industrialization reduced the spaces for ‘ordinary’ people (non-professional communicators) to engage in meaning-making as anything other than audiences. Ultimately, mass communication is structured to be top-down and uni-directional, unlike popular communication which allows for multi-directional and bottom-up communication (White, 1980). Much of the Frankfurt School’s concern about the culture industry was due to its recognition that mass communication lent itself to such (top-down) rhetoric, manipulation and control. For the Frankfurt School, industrializing communication created two (interrelated) negative side-effects: it increased opportunities for manipulating/controlling communication while reducing the space(s) for dialogical communication. The Frankfurt School saw this as producing ‘mass society’ – a society in which, it believed, the majority of people passively consumed (and so were effectively manipulated by) mass-produced meanings. From this (mass media-induced) passivity grew a ‘one-dimensional’ society. This one-dimensionality was seen as the ‘natural’ outcome of a significantly narrowed range of voices/opinions that were distributed widely and
loudly by the mass media – that is an industrialized ‘megaphone-effect’ tended to ‘silence’ (or at least radically curtail) those voices that the mass media did not deem it fit to distribute.

Seen from another angle, the mass media can be viewed as having become agenda-setters. As Cohen said, the media ‘may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about’ (1963: 13). It has been argued that in industrial societies the mass media have come to set the agenda for the bulk of the population, with most people only tending to think about that which the media places on the (social) agenda for discussion. If this position is accepted, it means that only a relatively small group of professional communicators (working within the culture industry) are actively involved in the decision-making processes which ultimately set the communicative agendas for the ‘masses’. So industrialized meaning-making seems to imply a ‘narrowing’ of communicative options.

But the 1990s saw sections of the culture industry begin reorganizing as they adjusted to the possibilities offered by new information technologies – essentially post-Fordist logics have entered the culture industry. An important result has been the proliferation of niche medias. Theoretically this creates the possibility for winding back the ‘mass media’ because commercialized media no longer have to conform to mass production logics in order to be profitable (a development that would no doubt please social critics like the Frankfurt School). However, to date, post-Fordizing the culture industry has not fundamentally challenged the industrial logic underpinning media production, or altered the top-down nature of the communication emerging from this industry. It has simply seen the (single) mass audience fragmented, which means media professionals become specialists in targeting media niches. This actually increases the scope for professional communicators to manipulate audiences more effectively.

The new media technologies hold out many possibilities for the growth of truly alternative (dialogical, non ‘top-down’) communicative forms that could fundamentally challenge the uni-dimensionality of twentieth-century industrialized culture. But to date, this has not occurred, and it is the global media corporations which have most successfully colonized the spaces offered by the new technologies; the resultant ‘post-Fordizing’ culture industry, far from abandoning the logics of ‘industrial culture’, is merely modifying, improving and intensifying these logics.

If the Frankfurt School’s position is correct, industrialized communication reduces (but does not eliminate) spaces for bottom-up
struggle over meaning, while it enhances the possibilities for top-down control. It also suggests that mass media have considerable power to influence opinion. If correct, one would expect to find the emergence of struggles over the control of, and access to, the culture industry, as well as meaning-struggles between those professionals staffing the culture industry.

The struggle over meaning

Meaning(s) emerge out of relationships rooted in a particular place and time. Important dimensions of human relationships are the struggles taking place over power and dominance between competing individuals and groups. These (continually shifting) competitions impact on both the circulation and production of meaning. Ultimately, meaning(s) cannot be understood outside the power relationships and struggles of a specific context. For example, ‘affirmative action’ means one thing in the USA, where it describes a policy of increasing the representation of disempowered ethnic minorities in certain job categories, and a different thing in South Africa, where it refers to a race re-ranking exercise favouring the ethnic majority in power. Further, embedded within the meanings that are circulating are the legacies of past social interactions/relationships within that context. For example, in some contexts Catholicism is associated with the socio-economic elites and privilege; in other contexts with membership of the working class; in some, with ethnic subservience; in some with pro-communist struggle; and in others with anti-communist struggle.

At heart, all societies have dominant and dominated groups, and dominant groups necessarily prefer to remain dominant. Dominant groups have two mechanisms for creating and retaining dominance: using violence against those challenging their interests, or creating legitimacy for those social arrangements which grant them a dominant position. In general, the more legitimacy dominant groups have, the less violence (or threat of violence) they need to employ. In situations of serious de-legitimation, ruling groups generally use overt military violence against those who will not abide by their rules, for example, Malaysia in the 1960s, Vietnam in the 1950s–70s, South Africa in the 1980s, the Kurdish lands (Turkey) in the 1980s–90s, Ache (Indonesia) and Chechnya (Russia) in the 1990s. In ‘normal’ situations, ruling groups do not need to deploy much (overt) violence because they succeed in ‘criminalizing’ those who
will not ‘play by the rules’. This means getting most people in society to agree that the laws are ‘just’, so that when the police-courts-prison system is used against ‘criminals’, the ‘violence’ of this system is seen by most people as ‘legitimate’. Ruling groups generally employ a mix of violence and legitimacy to maintain their dominance, with legitimacy being seen as preferable to violence. For this reason, the processes of meaning-making and meaning-circulation are necessarily important instruments for those wishing to become or remain dominant. As Gramsci (1971) noted, a key element in building or retaining dominance involves the successful manipulation of meaning to gain the consent of the dominated. Dominant groups necessarily engage in the process of building hegemony, and central to this process is the work of intellectuals who consequently become implicated in the resultant struggles over meaning.

For Gramsci, there were two types of intellectual – traditional and organic. Traditional intellectuals are those adopting the ‘ivory-tower approach’ and holding themselves aloof from contemporary struggles. Organic intellectuals, on the other hand, grow organically from the ranks of the different groups in society. These intellectuals consequently produce ideas enmeshed with the aspirations of the groups to which they belong. (Within Gramsci’s cosmology, this did not imply that the consciousness of intellectuals was predetermined. Rather, intellectuals could choose the groups to which they attached themselves.) Importantly, for Gramsci, struggle necessarily occurred because there were always conflicts of interest between dominant groups (the ‘ruling classes’) and the dominated (the ‘subordinate classes’). Inherent in this Gramscian view is the idea that organic intellectuals are necessarily engaged in struggle, with some engaged in assisting the dominant group (or alliance of groups) and some whose meaning-making assists the dominated. By extension, for Gramsci, meanings are fluid because they are the outcome of a constant struggle between different sets of intellectuals. In general, socially-dominant groups are in an advantaged position within this struggle over meaning because they have greater resources to pay for the services of professional intellectuals. In this regard, the election of US presidents and legislators advantaged those with the resources to make large campaign donations (and so buy ‘future influence’ over the law-making process). Those able to afford the best consultants and communication spin doctors increase their chances of success by increasing the likelihood of placing their ideas on to the social agenda. Similarly, those who can afford the best legal teams are more likely to gain favourable court rulings (which also impacts on legal precedence). The capacity to buy intellectuals does not absolutely
predetermine the outcome of meaning-making. At most, it skews meaning-production in favour of those who are socially dominant/powerful at any point in time. But clearly, grappling with the nature and extent of this skewing of intellectual work is important for anyone trying to understand meanings in context.

Gramsci’s work on what intellectuals do is a valuable point of departure for any analysis of meaning-production. For Gramsci, intellectuals build hegemony. Hegemony is the creation and maintenance of the consent of dominated groups for their domination. According to Gramsci, this involves intellectuals engaging in three tasks. First, they help to build consent and legitimacy for a society’s dominant group(s). In part, this involves organizing support for the interests and goals of the dominant group(s). It also means getting the dominated to accept as ‘natural’ the leadership and moral codes of the dominant group(s). This legitimacy-making work is at its most obvious in the media and education systems. Secondly, intellectuals help organize alliances and compromises. This work is most visible within parliaments, where bargains are struck between different interests groups, deals are done and compromises are identified. Thirdly, intellectuals help strategically to ‘direct’ political (coercive) force. For Gramsci, violence underpins all hegemonies. It may not actually be necessary to use violence against most citizens but the threat of violence is necessarily omnipresent. An example is the enforcement of a legal code by the police and judicial system. For most citizens, understanding the consequences of breaking the law is enough to deter them from doing so. Intellectuals organize (and legitimate) these deterrent ‘forces’. A fourth intellectual task could be added to Gramsci’s list, namely the development of technocratic knowledge; that is intellectuals help to organize the economy as well as legitimate existing relations of production. Habermas (1971) argued that technocratic ideology, which naturalized ‘progress’ based upon technological development, had become central to the maintenance of Western societies.

There now exists a plethora of intellectuals carrying out the above tasks, with each of the above hegemonic roles having become institutionalized in Western society. The different hegemonic institutions – political, legal and ideological – each specialize in different ideological functions within the overall undertaking of inventing and circulating ‘appropriate’ meanings. Gramscians argue that intellectuals working for dominant social group(s) are engaged in producing the ‘dominant ideology’. By extension, it can be argued that at a particular place and time it is possible to identify a dominant discourse which ‘governs’ the
production and circulation of ideas within that context. This (‘governing’) dominant discourse serves the interests of the groups dominating that society at that moment in time. Foucault contends that this dominant discourse is institutionally encoded within the key institutions regulating social interactions.

Not everybody accepts the dominant discourse. At any moment there will be individuals and groups who are unconvinced by intellectuals labouring (consciously or unconsciously) on behalf of the socially dominant. Stuart Hall (1980) argues that such (‘oppositional’) people reject or re-negotiate the meanings generated by intellectuals when decoding these meanings. Further, there will be intellectuals working in opposition to the needs of the socially dominant. Examples of this have been anti-communist intellectuals in the Soviet Union, anti-apartheid intellectuals in South Africa and contemporary green intellectuals opposing globalization economics, genetic engineering and greenhouse emissions. Some oppositional organic intellectuals engage in deliberately and consciously working to develop and circulate ideas that are designed to undermine existing hegemonic discourses and/or are designed to promote the interests of oppositional groups (and those aspiring to overthrow existing dominant groups). Such intellectuals are engaged in counter-hegemonic work.

Ultimately, the pool of meanings within any context is the outcome of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic work and of the engagement/struggle between these competing sets of meanings. Our cultures are built from such struggles (Tomaselli, 1986) – from the processes of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic codings, from the decodings and re-codings (of intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike), and from the hybridizations and syntheses that take place along the way. To complicate matters further, spillages will occur from other cultures because cultural sign-systems (the pattern of codes and signs employed by a particular culture) cannot be isolated from one another. Sometimes such spillages are deliberately engineered by intellectuals as a part of their hegemonic battles, but many spillages are merely the result of the ease with which information and ideas can flow globally. Hence, struggles in one context can produce meaning shifts that inadvertently spill over into other contexts. For example, the discourse of multiculturalism was originally developed to deal with a set of North American social problems but spread through intellectual copy-cattism to contexts without such problems, such as Australia.

Importantly, the struggle over meaning need not be seen as a purely subjective phenomenon because meaning-shifts have material
consequences and visa versa. Valentin Volosinov (1973) pioneered the notion of a semiotic struggle which was simultaneously grounded in both a struggle over meaning and a struggle over material resources so that by changing the nature of meaning one could also change human interactions, social organization and the distribution of resources. Feminist successes in placing gender issues on the social agenda have, for example, altered human interactions, work practices and resource distribution in advanced Western societies. The converse is equally true from a Volosinovian perspective: changing material relationships shifts interactions, which then shifts signification. For example, the significant transfer of wealth into black hands in post-apartheid South Africa rapidly transformed many former pro-socialist ‘comrades’ into pro-‘free enterprise’ businesspeople. This interactivity between social/economic structures and consciousness/signification also interested Jürgen Habermas. For Habermas, the complex interpenetration of material and subjective actions and consciousness constitutes our ‘lifeworld’. But Volosinov’s view of this complexity included a concern with what might be termed ‘linguistic struggle’ – the struggle to construct and reconstruct societies, cultures and economic systems, in part, involves battles to attach, detach and re-attach meanings down to the smallest level of signification, namely, signs. But the resultant semiotic shifts change more than languages and worldviews (how we ‘see’ and ‘talk’ about the world): they can change the way we live. Our lifeworld is altered. This, in turn impacts on power relationships, which then influences the next round of hegemonic struggle and meaning-making.

Hegemonic work is consequently complex – there are constant shifts between competing interests and hence a constant mutability of human interactions. People are always being positioned and repositioned within these shifting relationships, which produce an infinite number of mutable decoding positions. So no possibility exists of ever producing a permanently stable set of dominant meanings. Instead, hegemonic work involves the never-ending task of dealing with challenges, ‘aberrant’ decodings, slippages, power shifts and ever-changing patterns of alliances between players. Meanings are thus only hegemonic in a temporal sense because, from the moment of their conception, they are under challenge. Despite this, there will always be some intellectuals trying to control (and stabilize) meaning. At issue here then becomes the question to what extent can meaning be controlled?
The control of meaning

There are broadly two perspectives on the control of meaning. One contends that the meanings we consume can be successfully controlled (and manipulated). Among the ‘control school’ would be those subscribing to the ‘bullet theory’ of propaganda, orthodox Marxists believing in class-determined ideology, and structuralists who believe we inhabit a ‘prison-house of language’. On the other hand, there are those who argue that meaning is not controllable because recipients actively ‘read, interpret and decode meanings for themselves. The latter set of approaches stresses active human creativity within the communication process and so inherently challenges the notion of gullible, passive recipients who are open to manipulation by professional communicators. The latter group – who will be looked at in more detail in Chapter 10 – includes David Morley (1992), John Fiske (1987) and the reception theorists (Holub, 1984). The two sets of perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is possible to conceive of individuals and groups attempting to control meaning-production and meaning-distribution and being successful in certain contexts, but unsuccessful in others. It is equally possible to conceive of varying degrees of active readership/decoding within different contexts which would challenge manipulative communication. Ultimately, for most people, there will probably be a continually shifting dialectic between being susceptible to manipulation/control and engagement in active decoding. This shifting dialectic is tied to contextually-based relational variables, changing group memberships and individual differences all of which determine a person’s propensity to be an active reader.

What seems clear is that there will always be some individuals or groups trying to control meaning. Underpinning this is a competition over resources (material, cultural and status). Our life-chances are set by the social parameters facilitating or hindering our access to such resources. Contexts differ with regard to how limited resources are, but in no context are there enough resources to satisfy all, and as long as there are insufficient resources to satisfy all, struggles will occur between groups and individuals. Central to the nature (and outcomes) of such struggles are the rules of governance in any context. From Gramscian and Foucaultian perspectives, a battle over meaning is centrally implicated in this, because the rules of engagement are set within meaning-structures. It would be strange not to find attempts to control the sites and processes of meaning-making and circulation – after all, any player managing control (or even temporary influence) of such sites/processes gains an
advantage over the other players. The belief that some have managed to
gain ‘control’ over meaning has generated concerns about ‘distorted’
communication and a ‘restricted’ communicative process.

The notion of ‘distorted communication’ necessarily assumes that
non-distorted communication can exist, because the concept implies
some corruption (of an ‘ideal’ form of communication) has occurred.
It also implies some human agency must be to blame for corrupting
the ideal, which raises the question: what drives such agents to distort
communication-flow? Explorations of this theme have ranged from
sophisticated theorizing – much of it associated with Marxist work on
the (mutating) concept of ‘ideology’ – through to simplistic conspiracy
theories of media control and ownership.

Another approach to the control of meaning explores the way
communication processes are restricted in some way. There are two broad
visions of such restriction: the ‘human condition’ and ‘human action’
views. The first involves believing that the restriction of communication
processes is a ‘natural’ human condition. This includes the French
structuralist school, initiated by Saussure, who believes that humans are
born into existing linguistic structures which then govern (‘restrict’) our
experiences and behaviour. For this category of thinkers, no ‘non-
restricted’ communication exists because we necessarily inhabit a pre-
ordained ‘prison-house of language’ from which there is no escape. This
linguistic ‘prison’ is not willfully or consciously constructed by anybody
and so cannot be challenged or altered. A modified version of the ‘prison-
house of language’ model was developed by Volosinov, who accepted that
linguistic structuring/restriction occurred naturally, but did not believe
that such structures were permanently fixed into place. Rather, he saw
human action as interfacing with natural linguistic structures so that such
structures could be shifted (and evolve).

The second view regards communicative restriction not as ‘natural’
but rather as produced by human agency. Such restriction is deliberate
when professional communicators consciously decide to manipulate
or censor communication-flows. However, restrictions need not be delib-
erate. Instead, they may occur due to, for example, communication
professionals (unconsciously) conforming to media practices which have
the effect of skewing or narrowing the flow of information. But in both
cases, the restricted communication can be challenged and altered because
humans can choose, or be taught, to behave differently. This has the effect
of undoing the restrictive practices. But as soon as one talks of ‘teaching’
people to behave differently, power relationships come into play – those
wishing to ‘re-educate’ people need first to acquire enough power to be able to have such an impact. This can occur by forming pressure groups and alliances of such groups, which then work to ‘pressurize’ discursive agencies (e.g. the media and educational institutions) to shift their discourses. This approach has been seen in North America and Australia where feminists, gays, greens and ethnic minorities mobilized enough power through the ‘rainbow coalitions’ of the 1980s to challenge and change dominant discourses. Alternatively, discourses can be changed by taking control of the state and using this control to change the dominant discourses in circulation. This approach has been seen in South Africa in the 1990s, where black nationalism replaced Afrikaner nationalism as the dominant discourse and where the new ruling elite is trying to ‘teach’ people to ‘see’ and behave differently.

A large body of work exists on distorted and restricted communication, albeit that some of this work – such as that associated with the concept of ‘ideology’ – is currently fashionable. However, even if unfashionable, it remains an intellectual resource worth exploring when considering ‘control’ over meaning-production. Neither ‘ideology’ nor ‘discourse’ are concepts to be sidestepped when exploring the issue of the control and manipulation of meaning.

‘Ideology’ is a multi-layered concept that has evolved and grown over the past two centuries. An especially useful exposition of the epistemology of this term has been provided by Jorge Larrain (1979). But if we are to find a broad ‘core’ meaning for ‘ideology’, it means sidestepping the richness that Larrain discussed. At its most simplistic, the Marxist and neo-marxist understanding of ‘ideology’ is concerned with the way in which some negative state of being and/or set of social contradictions are hidden from view. For Marxists, this negative state is ‘class exploitation’ which generates a set of social contradictions. Managing these contradictions (to prevent social turmoil) requires, in part, that the exploiters find ways to ensure that the exploited do not become aware of the extent or nature of their exploitation. ‘Ideology’ is thus a state of ‘unknowing’, in which some ‘truth’ is disguised/hidden by one or other distorted communicative process. This is based upon the Marxist (possibly unjustified) belief that they can identify an ‘ideal’ non-contradictory state of being or ‘truthful’ reality, where there is consequently no need to disguise contradictions. However, in Marx’s model, merely understanding the contradictions (‘reality’) will not overcome ‘ideology’ because there can be no communicative solution to social problems. ‘Ideology’ is not merely a set of (linguistic) ‘untruths’; rather,
it is a set of untruths necessitated by real social contradictions/problems. Within this model, ‘ideology’ (‘distorted communication’) cannot disappear until actual contradictions disappear – that is social ‘reality’ (and skewed power relationships) must be changed (not understood) to ‘overcome’ the reasons for ideological distortion. From this basic model has arisen a large body of work examining the nature, extent and mechanics of ‘ideological distortion’. A key issue arising from this model is whether a ‘non-ideological’ state is ever possible. For Marxists (at least up until Althusser), a Marxist re-ordering of society (and re-ordering of power relationships) would produce a ‘classless’ state in which ‘ideology’ would no longer be needed. So it became possible to conceive the ‘end of ideology’. It is possible to use much Marxist work on ‘ideology’ without necessarily assuming that the latter ‘ideal’ should, or can, be brought into being. Gramsci’s work, for example, makes it possible to conceptualize a perpetually-shifting struggle (over resources) leading to the ongoing need for (mutating) ideologies as ever-new sets of contradictions emerge. Marx’s ‘solution’ can be put aside without having to also abandon his basic conceptualization (of contextually-based social contradictions, derived from competition over resources, giving rise to a need to hide these contradictions through ideology). The Frankfurt School took this one stage further and saw ideology not just as the control of meaning, but as a mechanism for actually ‘taming’ or blocking social contradictions.

A key feature of the Marxist concept of ‘ideology’ – at least up until Althusser’s reformulation (1979) – was the notion that communicative distortion was not natural. Rather, distortion was regarded as the outcome of a need to disguise the negative social consequences (for some people) of human decision-making. In this regard, an important sub-concept within the Marxist conceptual repertoire was that of ‘fetish’, fetishness being seen to exist when social decisions (which produced a skewing in power relationships and wealth distribution) were made to appear ‘natural’ (i.e. ‘just the way things are’ rather than ‘human-made’, and hence changeable). For example, human relationships based on class differentials have been fetishized in Britain, and Americans have fetishized a particular form of democracy.

However, Althusser effectively redefined ‘ideology’ by recasting it within a semiological structural framework. This made ideology a ‘natural’ linguistic prison (from which there was no escape) instead of being seen as the outcome of a process for disguising contradictory social structures. In the process Althusser (inadvertently) opened the door to a host of post-structural challenges to structural thinking, including
Marxism and, by extension, to some core features of its notion of ideology. As ‘ideology’ went into decline as a fashionable concept (in the post-Althusserian world), so an alternative concept grew into prominence. This emergent concept – ‘discourse’ – offered a powerful tool for conceptualizing the process of ‘restricting’ communication.

Michel Foucault’s (1972) notion of a ‘discursive formation’ came at an opportune moment – just as deploying the concept ‘ideology’ became unfashionable because it was unencumbered by the Marxist baggage of needing an ‘ideal’ utopia against which to measure ‘distortion’. For those still interested in exploring how meaning-production might be ‘distorted’ or ‘restricted’, Foucault’s notion of ‘discursive formation’ offered an alternative to ‘ideology’. Foucault explores meaning-production through a concern with how authors make meaning. (In this regard, there are some interesting parallels with Gramsci’s work on intellectuals.) Foucault sees the author as an historical construction. Authors are constructed by their context – an author is someone occupying a ‘position’ within a meaning-making machinery and so is learning to behave and work in certain ways.

According to Foucault, societies create institutions (he looked at prisons, clinics and asylums). Each institution develops its own set of practices and discourses. Those working within such institutions have to learn the (interconnected) practices and discourses appropriate to that institutional site, with practices being the acceptable way of doing things and discourses constituting acceptable ‘language’ within that site. So a person is unlikely to be recruited into an institutional site unless s/he is able to demonstrate a ‘compatibility’ with the practices/discourses already operative therein and is unlikely to remain employed unless s/he conforms to the institutionally-embedded practices/discourses.

Hence, within Foucaultian cosmology, conformity is a key governing mechanism. This implies recognizing negative consequence(s) for failing to conform – presumably based upon some underlying power relationship(s). Importantly, Foucault’s cosmology does not necessitate seeing us as prisoners of ‘natural’ language structures. Rather, it allows space for ‘active’ human choice regarding conformity (or otherwise) to existing practices and discourses. But whether by choice or not, adherence to a discourse limits what one is able to say (and think?). According to Foucault, a discourse governs the knowledge and/or ideas that can appear. This is an idea not far removed from Saphir–Whorf’s hypothesis that a culture’s language shapes what people think and do (Kay & Kempton, 1984). Foucault explored the way in which discourses ‘constrained’ the
emergence of knowledge and concluded that there were three ways in which parameters were set: namely, discourses only allowed for certain ‘surfaces of emergence’, ‘authorities of delimitation’ and ‘grids of specification’. These set the ‘linguistic’ boundaries (or ‘organizing fields’) of what is acceptable. These organizing fields not only make certain ideas impossible and others possible, they actually make certain ideas inevitable. This Foucaultian idea overlaps with Thomas Kuhn’s (1974) views on how knowledge grows (within ‘normal’ science) precisely because certain questions necessarily suggest themselves to intellectuals working within a given paradigm. These questions are governed by the prevailing scientific discourse (paradigm) and the context within which intellectuals work. So, implicitly, the struggle to make new meaning is enmeshed within, and is constrained by, sets of power relationships within the ‘spaces’ where intellectuals work.

Foucault’s work on knowledge, prisons, clinics and asylums led to a conception of restricted communication based on the idea that discourses are made by authors occupying certain sites (within institutional arrangements). When looking at Western civilization, Foucault found authorship to be institutionalized. Institutions, in turn, imply codified practices; and practices govern the way authors can both ‘see’ and communicate about the world. The resultant discursive formations necessarily imply a curtailment of what humans can communicate about. This is consistent with the notion of knowledge being contextually-based, and hence residing within institutions that arise, grow and die in association with particular social needs. And these ‘needs’ are tied to power relationships that operate in a given context. So discourse – as a restrictive set of practices and meanings – becomes another way of conceptualizing the struggle either to manage or to overcome contextually-based social contradictions. There are some interesting overlaps between Foucault’s work on authorship and Gramsci’s work on intellectuals, with both recognizing the power implicit in the control of meaning-making.

Further, both Gramsci and Foucault recognize the contradictory nature of human existence, in which, although humans are free to act, it is a constrained freedom. Ultimately, then, Gramsci’s notion of ‘ideology’ and Foucault’s of ‘discourse’ conceptually overlap. Both recognize structural impediments to meaning-making. But within Foucault’s cosmology humans are not imprisoned within immutable (linguistic) structures. Rather, they make (and re-make) these structures. Similarly, within Gramsci’s cosmology intellectuals are not imprisoned within class structures. In both cosmologies it is possible to conceive of intellectuals...
as having a choice to act either as change-agents or as conservatives because, up to a point, intellectuals can choose between the institutional and discursive arrangements available within their context. Hence, fluidity and struggle are central to both the Gramscian and Foucaultian worldviews, given that intellectuals can choose how they relate to existing power relationships and that power relationships are themselves not fixed but mutate as struggles are won or lost.

Within these struggles, if intellectuals choose an uncritical acceptance of, and adherence to, existing dominant discursive practices, they function as conservatives. But Foucault’s notion of ‘discourse’ does not propose conservative intellectual ‘imprisonment’ as in the prison-house of language model. It is possible to read Foucault and Volosinov in tandem so as to conceptualize intellectuals not only engaged in the conservative practice(s) of discursive reproduction, but also possibly engaged in discursive struggle and reformulation.

What Foucault offers is a means for conceptualizing how discourse is a potentially powerful hegemonic tool for social control, because discursive formations have the power to exclude from discussion certain questions or issues. This forecloses ‘debate’ and so predetermines what conclusions may be reached. There are many instances of discourses automatically excluding alternative perspectives. For example, the ‘free enterprise’ discourse can block its adherents from grappling with the notion that capitalism may disadvantage some people with merit and undermine their capacity for achievement. Similarly, socialist discourses can block adherents from confronting the view that competition may generate achievement and wealth-generation, while state interventionism may promote dependence and undermine wealth-making. Nineteenth-century imperial discourse precluded its adherents from questioning the rectitude of colonialism and the violent subjugation of natives, just as the contemporary American discourse of ‘human rights’ precludes a serious examination of ‘other’ (non-Anglo-America) value systems and excludes debate on the deployment of US military violence against foreigners. Similarly, contemporary Western ‘political correctnesses’ prevents open examination and debate of a range of discursive closures concerning, for example, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and post-coloniality.

Discursive closure is at its most effective when intellectuals find ways to naturalize and stabilize the boundaries of the discourse. Stabilization is most effective when a system of discursive self-policing, which guards the discourse’s boundaries by creating mechanisms for excluding taboo terminology, is achieved. As groups (and/or individuals) vie for resources
(material, cultural and status) they will try to naturalize and stabilize those relationships that benefit them – that is those relationships that grant them maximum access to scarce resources. Within both a Gramscian and Foucaultian framework intellectuals become important allies (or employees) for any group or individual trying to achieve discursive closure on its own terms (i.e. excluding points of view that upset or challenge closure).

One advantage of Foucault’s perspective over Gramsci’s is that Foucault’s approach is able to conceptualize a variety of groups vying for closure, for example, groups based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, hereditary status or religious belief, whereas Gramsci was only concerned with class struggles. Within a Foucaultian framework, different interest groups can potentially all be simultaneously engaging in such discursive battles (for closure) within the same context. So discursive struggle is a necessarily messy and complex affair.

From a Foucaultian perspective it is also possible to view attempts at left-wing discursive closure, currently referred to as ‘political correctness’, as equally restrictive as those of the right (Manne, 1993). It also raises the possibility that in one context a discourse may be ‘progressive’ while in another the same discourse may be ‘restrictive’ and/or be a mechanism for discursive control (i.e. a mechanism to limit what may be discussed). For example, socialist discourse has been used to challenge exploitative social relations but has also been mobilized as a mechanism for discursive closure and repression (Bahro, 1981). Similarly, feminist discourse can be used both to challenge restrictive (patriarchal) social relationships or to close debate concerning power relationships that disadvantage some females relative to others. The discourse of multiculturalism can, in one context, empower minority groups but, in another context, serve the interests of the majority as a mechanism for co-opting and ‘pacifying’ the leaders of minority groups.

From a hegemonic point of view, discourses can serve two interrelated purposes: they can disguise social contradictions and/or promote the interests of one or other social group (or individual). Both purposes are enmeshed with power relationships; they either challenge existing power relationships or promote new relationships. Discourses will usually also hide their own complicity in furthering a particular set of social relationships, and hide the fact that they are themselves mutable constructs. A discourse will be at its most closed when it is so opaque that even its own intellectual practitioners accept its ‘naturalness’. It then becomes a ‘truthfulness’ not open to scrutiny.
The work of Frankfurt School members, like Adorno and Marcuse, is especially interesting when considering the possible social consequences of such discourse closures. The Frankfurt School became concerned that the mass media that proliferated during the first half of the twentieth century was encouraging a certain type of discursive closure which they regarded as socially dangerous. Members of the Frankfurt School believed that society was at its most healthy when active social dialogue existed. This required a working dialectic in which no perspective (thesis) would be allowed to go unchallenged. The Frankfurt School (dialectical) model was based upon the view that for every thesis there always existed an antithesis (a counter argument or position), and in a ‘healthy’ society, the airing of antithetical positions would be encouraged (see Jay, 1973). This involved not only accepting the inevitability of conflict (because of thesis–antithesis clashes), but also seeing such conflict as a social good – because from such conflicts new syntheses would emerge. For the Frankfurt School, as dialecticians, any synthesis (new idea) was necessarily superior to either the thesis and/or antithesis from which that synthesis had emerged. This is based upon a teleological worldview in which ‘rational’ progress is (unjustifiably) assumed to be the natural outcome of change. This worldview led Habermas to propose an ideal society based upon dialogical communication (to which all had equal access) – that is Habermas’s vision of democracy was built upon his ideal of wishing to facilitate ongoing dialectically-driven learning/change (Habermas, 1979: 186).

However, the Frankfurt School became concerned that twentieth-century industrialization of cultural production was inherently undialectical. The Frankfurt School argued that when intellectuals were industrialized they were locked into institutional arrangements and power relationships which had the effect of disallowing the airing of antithetical views. Views confirming the interests of those with power to control the media were widely circulated by these culture industries, while views that were fundamentally contradictory (antitheses) were curtailed. The result was that the social dialectic was stilled and replaced by what Marcuse (1964b) called a ‘one-dimensionality’ where conventionally dominant ‘theses’ went unchallenged. Foucault’s notion that discourses (as ‘organizing fields’) only allow for certain ‘surfaces of emergence’, ‘authorities of delimitation’ and ‘grids of specification’ thus has an interesting complementarity to the Frankfurt School’s view of the culture industry as a site for twentieth-century discursive closure.

Many members of the Frankfurt School – especially Adorno –
became intensely pessimistic because they came to believe that culture industry discursive closure was so complete that dialectical conflict was no longer possible. Their extreme pessimism was no doubt overstated. However, the Frankfurt School’s concerns cannot be entirely dismissed and decades after it produced its critique of the culture industry, many of the restrictive practices it attacked remain in evidence in the contemporary media. Of particular concern to Adorno and Horkheimer was the practice of creating ‘pseudo choice’, that is phenomena which were really quite similar (e.g. ten brands of soap powder or three political parties) were presented as being different. This generated the appearance of alternatives when no substantive choice was really available. So instead of the media facilitating consideration of (and conflict over) substantive alternatives (as in the dialectical model), they narrowed the options, presenting only a limited range of the full number of opinions/issues potentially available. The Frankfurt School saw patronage as responsible for this narrowing – it saw creative people/intellectuals as needing to work for one or other branch of the culture industry. This industry effectively acted as a form of patron. The resultant patronage relationships generated by the culture industry dramatically narrowed the discourses and practices available to intellectuals.

Noelle-Neumann (1973) developed an interpretation of the ‘narrowing process’ that complements the Frankfurt School’s vision, but she goes further. Noelle-Neumann’s idea of the narrowing process goes beyond the discursive pressures and patronage of the culture industry. She also looks at the wider pressures of social conformity. According to Noelle-Neumann, there is a tendency towards an ever-narrowing range of opinions due to the interaction of cultural industry practices and ‘public opinion’. She argues that when an issue first arises there will be many opinions about the topic. However, over time media practices produce a narrowing of opinions that are heard. This happens because media workers choose to advantage some opinions over others, in accordance with their own preferred discourses, patronage-pressures and other power relationships into which they are embedded. Pressures towards social conformity mean that members of the public who disagree with the dominant (media) interpretation progressively fall silent. As a result, counter-opinions (antitheses) are increasingly not heard. This, in turn, leads media workers to conclude that there are no opposition views to report. A ‘spiral of silence’ results, in which fewer and fewer of the full range of opinions are heard. If Noelle-Neumann is correct, the culture industry is centrally implicated in the process of discursive closure. This
raises two (interrelated) themes: (1) can one identify those exercising power within and over the culture industry so as to close social discourse?; (2) how do discourses themselves acquire the power structurally to lock alternative views out of the culture industry?

In addition to their work on undialectical communication as discursive closure, the members of the Frankfurt School were also concerned that the culture industry focused on trivia rather than substance. Presenting trivia makes it possible to avoid issues that might lead to real debate and conflict. Late twentieth-century examples of this trivialization-cum-distraction phenomenon were the (near-global) media frenzies surrounding the coverage of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and the Monica Lewinski affair. During the same era, the (global) Anglo culture industry displayed an extraordinary propensity to be content to mobilize uncritically the same narrowed range of discourses about conflicts in Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo or Timor. This had the effect of foreclosing debate on these complex issues. The way in which the bulk of Anglo intellectuals globally fell into line and simply recycled these late twentieth-century dominant discourses lends some credence to a continued basis for Adorno-type pessimism. And as the twenty-first century opens, any closure in discourses circulating among Anglo intellectuals is of global significance because of the way in which the post-Cold War New World Order is dominated by the USA and its Anglo allies. The emergent global media is effectively an Anglo-dominated system. This consequently gives Anglo intellectuals a disproportionate influence on the meanings circulating in all corners of the globe. For this reason, this book will overwhelmingly focus on Anglo meaning-making in both the core and peripheries of the emergent (Anglo) global system, starting with the machineries of this meaning-making process – the culture industry.