

CHAPTER 5

Media and Ideology

Most media scholars believe that media texts articulate coherent, if shifting, ways of seeing the world. These texts help to define our world and provide models for appropriate behavior and attitudes. How, for example, do media products depict the “appropriate” roles of men and women, parents and children, or bosses and workers? What defines “success,” and how is it achieved? What qualifies as “criminal activity,” and what are the sources of crime and social disorder? What are the underlying messages in media content, and whose interests do these messages serve? These are, fundamentally, questions about media and ideology.

Most ideological analyses of mass media products focus on the content of the messages—the stories they tell about the past and the present—rather than the “effects” of such stories. In this chapter, then, we focus primarily on media messages. Part Four of this book will turn to the relationship between media messages and their audiences.

What Is Ideology?

Ideology is a decidedly complicated term with different implications depending on the context in which it is used. In everyday language, it can be an insult to charge someone with being “ideological,” since this label suggests rigidity in the face of overwhelming evidence contradicting one’s beliefs. When Marxists speak of “ideology,” they often mean belief systems that help justify the actions of those in power by distorting and misrepresenting reality. When we talk about ideology, then, we need to be careful to specify what we mean by the term.

When scholars examine media products to uncover their “ideology,” they are interested in the underlying images of society they provide. In this context, an ideology is basically a system of meaning that helps define and explain the world and that makes value judgments about that

world. Ideology is related to concepts such as *worldview*, *belief system*, and *values*, but it is broader than those terms. It refers not only to the beliefs held about the world but also to the basic ways in which the world is defined. Ideology, then, is not just about politics; it has a broader and more fundamental connotation.

When we examine the ideology of media, we are not so much interested in the specific activities depicted in a single newspaper, movie, or hit song as in the broader system of meaning of which these depictions are a part. For ideological analysis, the key is the fit between the images and words in a specific media text and ways of thinking about, even defining, social and cultural issues.

As we will explore in the next chapter, media scholars are often interested in assessing how media content compares to the “real world.” Scholars are interested in the images of, say, women, or African Americans—and how these images may change over time—because they contribute to the ways we understand the roles of these groups in society. In this case, the question is not whether such media images are “realistic” depictions because analysts of ideology generally perceive the definition of the “real” as, itself, an ideological construction. Which aspects of whose “reality” do we define as the most real? Those that are the most visible? The most common? The most powerful? Instead of assessing the images and making some judgment about levels of realness, ideological analysis asks what these messages tell us about ourselves and our society.

Politicians have long perceived mass media, both news and entertainment forms, as sites for the dissemination of ideology. That is one reason why media are so frequently the subjects of political debate. Indeed, prominent politicians routinely identify mass media as a facilitator, and sometimes a source, of social problems. For example, on the campaign trail in 2000, presidential candidate George W. Bush suggested that “dark dungeons of evil on the Internet” were partly to blame for school violence (Kornblut and Scales, 2000). And after the tragic shootings at Colorado’s Columbine High School in 1999, politicians from across the political spectrum focused on violent video games as one of the causes of the violence. Throughout the partisan debate in 1998 over President Clinton’s impeachment, Democrats blamed the news media for blowing the scandal out of proportion, and Republicans criticized journalists for vilifying the Independent Counsel. And as the Internet expands, politicians continue to condemn the availability of sexually explicit material online and argue that unregulated speech and imagery on the Internet pose a threat to children’s safety and well-being. In addition, in the wake of the April 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, President Clinton identified extremists on talk radio as purveyors of

hatred, implying that these radio hosts were disseminating a worldview that condoned violence. In 1995, then-Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole focused his attention on the entertainment industry, condemning what he identified as the rampant sex, violence, and general antifamily tone of popular television, movies, and music. And former Secretary of Education William Bennett made a media splash in 1995 with his attack on media giant Time Warner for its distribution of "gangsta" rap.

Virtually all forms of mass media—radio, television, movies, music, and the Internet—are standard targets, attacked by politicians from different political perspectives who have little doubt that the media are ideological, selling certain messages and worldviews. Given that these kinds of media criticism are often well received, there is good reason to believe that large numbers of the public also perceive the media as purveyors of ideology—even if they don't use the term. Media sell both products and ideas, both personalities and worldviews; the notion that mass media products and cultural values are fundamentally intertwined has gained broad public acceptance.

"Dominant Ideology" Versus Cultural Contradictions

Even though mass media texts can be understood in ideological terms, as forms of communication that privilege certain sets of ideas and neglect or undermine others, unambiguous descriptions of media ideology remain problematic. Research on the ideology of media has included a debate between those who argue that media promote the worldview of the powerful—the "dominant ideology"—and those who argue that mass media texts include more contradictory messages, both expressing the "dominant ideology" and at least partially challenging worldviews.

We prefer to think of media texts as sites where cultural contests over meaning are waged rather than as providers of some univocal articulation of ideology. In other words, different ideological perspectives, representing different interests with unequal power, engage in a kind of struggle within media texts. Some ideas will have the advantage—because, for example, they are perceived as popular or build on familiar media images—and others will be barely visible, lurking around the margins of media for discovery by those who look carefully. For those engaged in the promotion of particular ideas, including such diverse groups as politicians, corporate actors, citizen activists, and religious groups, media are among the primary contemporary battlegrounds.

Media, in fact, are at the center of what James Davison Hunter (1991) has called the "culture wars" in contemporary American society, in which fundamental issues of morality are being fought. Hunter stresses the

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ways in which media—advertising, news, letters to the editor, and opinion commentary—provide the principal forms of public discourse by which cultural warfare is waged. The morality of abortion, homosexuality, or capital punishment is debated, often in very polarized terms, in the mass media, as cultural conservatives and cultural progressives alike use various media technologies to promote their positions.

But the media are not simply conduits for carrying competing messages; they are more than just the battlefield on which cultural warfare takes place. Much of the substance of the contemporary culture wars is about the acceptability of the images that the mass media disseminate. These struggles over morality and values often focus on the implications of our popular media images and the apparent lessons they teach about society. When Eminem's album *The Marshall Mathers LP*, was nominated for Album of the Year in 2001, controversy raged over the rapper's angry and violent lyrics and his depictions of women, gays, and lesbians. Other prominent examples include the contest over the meaning of religion in films such as *Priest*, which depicted a priest struggling with his sexuality; *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which included dream sequences of Jesus having sex; and the short-lived television program *Nothing Sacred*, which showed a Catholic priest sometimes questioning church doctrine as he addressed issues in his urban parish. Other examples include the controversies surrounding the lives of two female television characters—Murphy Brown's decision to become a single mother and Ellen's coming out as a lesbian; the broadcast by PBS of the documentary *Tongues Untied*, which explored the experience of black gay men; and the battles over the use of "obscene" language in rap and heavy metal music. These media battles often become quite fierce, with some voices calling for outright censorship, others defending free speech, and still others worrying about the consequences of cultural struggles that seem to represent a war of absolutes, with no possibility of compromise.

One of the principal reasons why media images often become so controversial is that they are believed to promote ideas that are objectionable. In short, few critics are concerned about media texts that promote perspectives they support. Ideological analysis, then, often goes hand in hand with political advocacy, as critics use their detection of distorted messages to make their own ideological points. As a result, exploring the ideologies of mass media can be very tricky.

The most sophisticated ideological analysis examines the stories the media tell as well as the potential contradictions within media texts, that is, the places where alternative perspectives might reside or where ideological conflict is built into the text. Ideological analysis, therefore, is not simply reduced to political criticism, whereby the critic loudly

denounces the “bad” ideas in the media. Nor, in our view, is analysis particularly useful if it focuses on the ideology of one specific media text without making links to broader sets of media images. It may be interesting to ruminate over the underlying ideology of a popular movie such as *Forrest Gump*. (Is it a nostalgic valorization of white men in the days before multiculturalism, or a populist story of the feats of an underdog?) However, this inquiry will move from party conversation to serious analysis only if we think more carefully about the patterns of images in media texts, rather than analyzing one film in isolation. At its best, ideological analysis provides a window onto the broader ideological debates going on in society. It allows us to see what kinds of ideas circulate through media texts, how they are constructed, how they change over time, and when they are being challenged.

Ideology as Normalization

What are the stakes in these battles over the ideology of media? From one standpoint, media texts can be seen as key sites where basic social norms are articulated. The media give us pictures of social interaction and social institutions that, by their sheer repetition on a daily basis, can play important roles in shaping broad social definitions. In essence, the accumulation of media images suggests what is “normal” and what is “deviant.” This articulation is accomplished, in large part, by the fact that popular media, particularly television and mass advertising, have a tendency to display a remarkably narrow range of behaviors and lifestyles, marginalizing or neglecting people who are “different” from the mass-mediated norm. When such difference is highlighted by, for example, television talk shows that routinely include people who are otherwise invisible in the mass media—cross-dressers, squatters, or strippers—the media can become part of a spectacle of the bizarre.

Despite the likelihood of their having very different political stances, those who are concerned about media depictions of premarital sex have the same underlying concern as those who criticize the dominating images of the upper-middle-class family. In both cases, the fear is that media images *normalize* specific social relations, making certain ways of behaving seem unexceptional. If media texts can normalize behaviors, they can also set limits on the range of acceptable ideas. The ideological work lies in the *patterns* within media texts. Ideas and attitudes that are routinely included in media become part of the legitimate public debate about issues. Ideas that are excluded from the popular media or appear in the media only to be ridiculed have little legitimacy. They are outside the range of acceptable ideas. The ideological influence of media can be seen in the absences and exclusions just as much as in the content of the messages.

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Media professionals generally have little patience with the argument that the media are purveyors of ideology. Instead of seeing media as places where behaviors are normalized and boundaries are created, those in the industry tend to argue that the images they produce and distribute simply reflect the norms and ideas of the public. This is not ideology, but simply a mirror that reflects the basic consensus about how things are. Since, as we saw in Chapter 2, mass media are commercially organized to attract audiences for profit, there is good reason to believe that popularity will be more important to media producers than a commitment to any specific ideology. However, our investigation of the ideology of media does not mean that producers are consciously trying to sell certain ways of thinking and being. Ideology is not only produced by committed ideologues. As we will see, we can find ideology in our everyday lives, in our definition of common sense, and in the construction of a consensus.

Theoretical Roots of Ideological Analysis

The analysis of ideology can be traced back to the works of Marx and, especially, to twentieth-century European Marxism. The analysis has evolved over time, maintaining some elements of its Marxist origin while developing more complexity and nuance.

Early Marxist Origins

For early Marxists, the discussion of ideology was connected to the concept of “false consciousness.” Ideology was seen as a powerful mechanism of social control whereby members of the ruling class imposed their worldview, which represented their interests, on members of subordinate classes. In such a system, the subordinate classes who accepted the basic ideology of the ruling class were said to have false consciousness because their worldview served the interests of others. For Marx and early Marxists, social revolution depended on the working class breaking free of the ideas of the ruling class—moving beyond their false consciousness—and developing a “revolutionary” consciousness that represented their material interests as workers. This new way of thinking would then stand in opposition to the ruling ideology, which promoted the economic interests of the capitalist class.

In this context, ideology was understood to involve having ideas that were “false” because they did not match one’s objective class interests. One of the ways capitalists ruled industrial society was by imposing on the working class a worldview that served the interests of capitalists yet pretended to describe the experiences of all humankind. Ideology, then,

was about mystification, the masking of interests, and the conflation of the particular and the universal. Moreover, ideology could be understood in straightforward economic-class terms. Capitalists had a class interest in the accumulation of capital through the exploitation of labor. Their ideology, which celebrated individualism and the free market, was a result of their economic interests. Workers had a class interest in fundamentally changing the conditions of their work and restructuring the social relations of production; this could be accomplished by a social revolution. Any system of ideas that did not recognize these economic realities, according to an early school of Marxism, was the result of the ideological power of capitalists. Ideological analysis, from this perspective, meant identifying the ways working people's ideas failed to reflect their class interests; in essence, it was about pointing out how consciousness was "false" and in need of correction.

The critique of ideology has evolved a great deal from its connections to the concept of false consciousness, but it still maintains some of the basic outlines of the early Marxist model. Ideological analysis is still concerned about questions of power and the ways in which systems of meaning—ideologies—are part of the process of wielding power. And ideological analysis continues to focus on the question of domination and the ways certain groups fight to have their specific interests accepted as the general interests of a society. But the contemporary study of ideology is more theoretically sophisticated, paying attention to the ongoing nature of ideological struggles and to how people negotiate with, and even oppose, the ideologies of the powerful. Ideas are not simply "false," and the connection between ideas and economic interest is not necessarily straightforward. In fact, much of the contemporary study of ideology has moved away from a focus on economic-class relations toward a more dynamic conceptualization of the terrain of culture.

Hegemony

The key theoretical concept that animates much of the contemporary study of the ideology of media is *hegemony*. Drawn from the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971), an Italian Marxist who wrote in the 1920s and 1930s, the notion of hegemony connects questions of culture, power, and ideology. In short, Gramsci argued that ruling groups can maintain their power through force, consent, or a combination of the two. Ruling by way of force requires the use of institutions such as the military and the police in an effort to physically coerce—or threaten coercion—so that people will remain obedient. There is no shortage of historical examples of societies in which the use of force and the threat of even

more severe forms of coercion have been the principal strategy of ruling. The military dictatorship is the most obvious example.

Gramsci (1971) noted, however, that power can be wielded at the level of culture or ideology, not just through the use of force. In liberal democratic societies such as the United States, force is not the primary means by which the powerful rule. Certainly there are important examples of the use of force—turn-of-the-century efforts to crush the labor movement, the incarceration of members of the Communist Party in the 1950s, the violence directed at the Black Panther Party in the 1960s. But these examples stand out because the use of physical force is not the routine strategy for maintaining social order. Instead, Gramsci's work suggests that power is wielded in a different arena—that of culture, in the realm of everyday life—where people essentially agree to current social arrangements.

Consent, then, is the key to understanding Gramsci's use of hegemony, which is exercised through a kind of "cultural leadership." Consent is something that is won; ruling groups in a society actively seek to have their worldview accepted by all members of society as the universal way of thinking. Institutions such as schools, religion, and the media help the powerful exercise this cultural leadership since they are the sites where we produce and reproduce ways of thinking about society.

Hegemony, though, is not simply about ideological domination, whereby the ideas of one group are imposed on another. Instead, the process is far subtler. Hegemony operates at the level of *common sense* in the assumptions we make about social life and on the terrain of things that we accept as "natural" or "the way things are." After all, what is common sense except for those things we think are so obvious that we need not critically evaluate them? Common sense is the way we describe things that "everybody knows," or at least should know, because such knowledge represents deeply held cultural beliefs. In fact, when we employ the rhetoric of common sense, it is usually to dismiss alternative approaches that go against our basic assumptions about how things work. Gramsci (1971) reminds us that one of the most effective ways of ruling is through the shaping of commonsense assumptions. What we take for granted exists in a realm that is uncontested, where there is neither a need nor room for questioning assumptions (Gamson et al., 1992).

Hegemony theorists remind us that commonsense assumptions, the taken for granted, are social constructions. They imply a particular understanding of the social world, and such visions have consequences. It is common sense, for example, that "you can't fight city hall" or that women are better nurturers than men or that "moderate" positions are more reasonable than "extreme" positions. When people adopt commonsense

assumptions—as they do with a wide range of ideas—they are also accepting a certain set of beliefs, or ideology, about social relations.

A similar dynamic applies to what we think of as “natural.” Nature is something that we define in opposition to culture since nature is perceived to be beyond human control. We generally think that the “natural” is not a social construction; nature is more enduring and stable than the creations of human societies. Thus, if social structures and social relationships are defined as natural, they take on a kind of permanency and legitimacy that elevates them to the realm of the uncontested. Think about the social relationships we call “natural” (or “unnatural”). Is it natural that some people are rich and some are poor, that people will not care about politics, or that people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds will prefer to live with their own groups? If these conditions are simply natural, then there is little reason to be concerned about economic inequality, political apathy, or residential segregation because they are not social problems but the natural order of things.

Let’s look at some more controversial claims about the natural. One of the principal underpinnings of racist ideology is the belief that one race is naturally superior to others. Sexism rests on the assumption that men and women, by nature, are suited to different and unequal tasks. And contemporary discussions of sexuality are filled with claims about the “natural” status of heterosexual relationships and the “unnatural” status of gay and lesbian relationships. These examples illustrate how claims about nature work in the service of ideology. If such claims are widely accepted—if they are seen as the outcome of nature instead of culture—then there may be legitimate reason for racial inequality, sexual discrimination, and the demonization of gays and lesbians since these relationships are the result of the natural order of things. What we think of as natural and normal, then, is a central part of the terrain of hegemony.

Hegemony, however, is not something that is permanent; it is neither “done” nor unalterable. Gramsci (1971) understood hegemony as a process that was always in the making. To effectively wield power through consent, ideological work through cultural leadership was an ongoing necessity. The terrain of common sense and the natural must be continually reinforced because people’s actual experiences will lead them to question dominant ideological assumptions. People are active agents, and modern society is full of contradictions; therefore, hegemony can never be complete or final. Some people will not accept the basic hegemonic worldview, some people may resist it, and changing historical conditions will make certain aspects of hegemonic ideology untenable. Ultimately, Gramsci saw hegemony as a daily struggle about our

underlying conceptions of the world, a struggle always subject to revision and opposition. Rulers, who try to maintain their power by defining the assumptions on which the society rests, work to bring stability and legitimacy and to incorporate potentially opposing forces into the basic ideological framework. In a striking example, images of rebellion from the 1960s have become incorporated into our democratic story and now are used to sell cars and clothing.

Sociologist Stuart Hall, the leading voice of British cultural studies, has provided a sophisticated analysis of how mass media institutions fit into this conception of hegemony. He argues that mass media are one of the principal sites where the cultural leadership, the work of hegemony, is exercised. Media are involved in what Hall calls "the politics of signification," in which the media produce images of the world that give events particular meanings. Media images do not simply reflect the world, they *re-present* it; instead of reproducing the "reality" of the world "out there," the media engage in practices that define reality. As Hall (1982) puts it, "Representation is a very different notion from that of reflection. It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping; not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of *making things mean*" (p. 64).

Media representations are intertwined with questions of power and ideology because the process of giving meaning to events suggests that, potentially, there are multiple definitions of reality. Media have, as Hall (1982) says, "the power to signify events in a particular way." The question, then, is, "What are the patterns by which events are represented?" This is fundamentally a question about ideology because it suggests that media are places where certain ideas are circulated as the truth, effectively marginalizing or dismissing competing truth claims. Many scholars argue that media generally adopt the dominant assumptions and draw on the commonsensical views of the world that everyone knows. As a result, media representations, while not fully closed, have the tendency to reproduce the basic stories and values that are the underpinnings of this hegemony.

Media are, without doubt, not simple agents of the powerful, and, as we will explore further in Chapter 8, the ideas of the powerful are not simply imposed on readers or viewers. Media are cultural sites where the ideas of the powerful are circulated and where they can be contested. As we move from a theoretical discussion of media, ideology, and hegemony to specific cases that illustrate the ideology of mass media products, we will see the complex ways in which media products are a part of larger ideological debates.

News Media and the Limits of Debate

For decades, Americans have debated the politics of the news media, with criticisms of the news coming with equal vigor from both sides of the political spectrum. The underlying assumption in this debate is that news media are, in fact, ideological; the selection of issues, stories, and sources is inescapably value laden. While media outlets fend off attacks from the political right that they are too liberal and attacks from the left that they are too conservative, journalists find themselves precisely where they want to be: in the middle. This middle ground serves as a haven for reporters, a place that is perceived as being without ideology. After all, if ideological criticism comes from both sides, then the news must not be ideological at all. Attacks from both sides make the center a defensible place.

Since we generally associate ideology with ideas that are perceived to be extreme, those in the middle are viewed not as ideological but as pragmatic. And since ideology is something to be avoided, the journalistic middle ground becomes safe. There is good reason for journalists to want to occupy this territory. It insulates them from criticism and gives the news legitimacy with a wide range of readers and viewers who see themselves as occupying some version of a middle ground.

However, the notion that the news reflects the "consensus" is itself ideological because news does the active work of defining that consensus. Once that consensus is defined, the claim that reporting is a mere reflection of an already existing consensus is blind to the ways such definitions work to solidify it. We might say the same thing about the journalistic center. The news does not so much occupy the middle ground as define what the middle ground is. In the process, news reporting effectively defends the legitimacy of this worldview, which is oriented to the reproduction of current social arrangements. In short, the middle ground is ideological precisely because it is a cultural site where commonsense assumptions are produced, reproduced, and circulated.

Elites and Insiders

A large body of scholarly literature has explored the ways in which news media produce ideological visions of the nation and the world. One of the principal findings of this research is that news focuses on powerful people and institutions and generally reflects established interests. Whether this makes news "liberal" or "conservative" is another matter; some claim "the establishment" is liberal, while others argue that it is conservative. In either case, our reading of the research literature suggests that news reaffirms the basic social order and the values and assumptions it is based on.

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In his widely cited work *Deciding What's News*, sociologist Herbert Gans (1979) found that two of the most prominent enduring values in the news are "social order" and "national leadership." This focus on order and leadership gives the news a view of society that is both moderate and supportive of the established hierarchy. As Gans notes,

With some oversimplification, it would be fair to say that the news supports the social order of public, business and professional, upper-middle-class, middle-aged, and white male sectors of society. . . . In short, when all other things are equal, the news pays most attention to and upholds the actions of elite individuals and elite institutions. (p. 61)

With its focus on elites, news presents images of the world that are significantly lacking in diversity. This has substantial consequences for the way the news depicts the political world. Politics, according to most major news media, is not about broad questions of power—who wields it, in what arenas, under what circumstances, with what consequences—nor is it a forum for wide-ranging debate and controversy about current events. Instead, politics is framed as an insider's debate, with only a privileged few invited to the table.

The "insider" nature of political news means that a small group of analysts are regular commentators and news sources, regardless of the wisdom of their previous commentary or of their prior actions when they occupied positions of power. To be—or to have been—an insider, with access to powerful circles, makes one a de facto "expert" as far as the news is concerned. As a result, individuals are qualified to comment on and analyze current events to the extent to which they are or have been insiders. The "debates" we see in the news, therefore, are often between insiders who share a common commitment to traditional politics, to the exclusion of those outside the constructed consensus.

The range of insiders invited to discuss issues is often so narrow that a host of unaddressed assumptions are implicit in their approach. For example, debating whether the United States should have used ground troops or relied solely on air power to drive Iraqi troops from Kuwait in 1991 ignores a variety of assumptions about the desirability of the use of military force in the first place. Debating President Clinton's 1993 "managed care" approach to health care reform versus Republican attempts to limit reform neglects other possible alternatives, such as a single-payer system. And news coverage of Social Security reform in the years between 1998 and 2001 focused primarily on the debate about whether, how, and to what degree Social Security funds should be invested in the stock

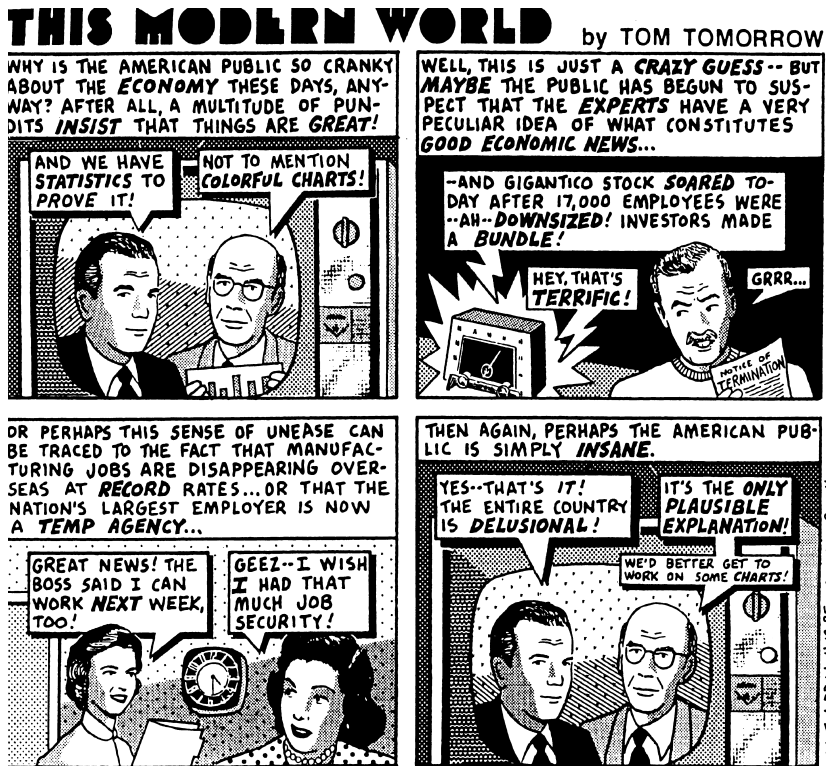
market, largely ignoring alternative reform plans. The result is that contrasting perspectives in the news frequently represent the differences—generally quite narrow—between establishment insiders. This approach to the news does little to inform the public of positions outside this limited range of opinion. More important, it implicitly denies that other positions should be taken seriously. Ultimately, one principal way the news is ideological is in drawing boundaries between what is acceptable—the conventional ideas of insiders—and what is not.

Economic News as Ideological Construct

News coverage of economic issues is remarkable in the way it reproduces a profoundly ideological view of the world. Most news coverage of the economy is by and about the business community (Croteau and Hoynes, 1994). While individuals can play a range of roles in economic life—worker, consumer, citizen, or investor—economic news focuses overwhelmingly on the activities and interests of investors. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon is the fact that virtually every newspaper has a Business section, while almost none has a Consumer or Labor section. As a result, economic news is largely business news, and business news is directed at corporate actors and investors.

In this kind of news, the ups and downs of the stock market are often the centerpiece, serving as an indicator of the economic health of the country. By equating economic health with the fortunes of investors, news tips its ideological hand. Such definitions fail to recognize that different groups of people can have different economic interests. Although a rise in the stock market is depicted as positive economic news for the country as a whole, there are clearly losers even when the market soars. For example, a rise in corporate profitability may be the result of an increase in productivity, which in turn may be accompanied by extensive layoffs. When business news programs cover corporate layoffs, stories often focus on the implications of such layoffs for stock performance and the talented pool of workers available for employers who are looking to hire. Even when news stories explore the complexities of the labor market, they generally pay little attention to the long-term consequences of changing employer-employee relations or the experiences of those workers who have been laid off.

Let's hypothetically turn the tables on economic news. What if coverage of the economy focused predominantly on the experiences and interests of workers, evaluating economic health from the standpoint of working conditions and highlighting the economic analysis of labor union officials? It would likely be labeled "anti-business" or "pro-labor" and be targeted by critics for its "biased" reporting. It would, in short, be

EXHIBIT 5.1 *The Ideology of Economic News*

Ideology operates by normalizing a particular perspective on the world. For example, a business—as opposed to worker—perspective permeates most news coverage of the economy.

Source: Tom Tomorrow © 4-12-95.

identified as providing a fundamentally ideological view of the economy (see Exhibit 5.1). It is striking, however, that the news media's emphasis on the corporate and investor perspective is generally accepted as the appropriate way to cover the economy. Indeed, the dominance of the business worldview in economic news coverage is so complete that it seems natural. We take it for granted, assuming that the economy equals corporate America and that economic health is equivalent to investor satisfaction. No conscious effort at manipulation is being made here, but it is a clear example of the ways media products draw on and reproduce a hegemonic ideology.

Movies, the Military, and Masculinity

One of the difficulties of ideological analysis of media products is that there is no singular "mass media." The term *mass media*, we should

reiterate, is plural, signifying the multiple organizations and technologies that make up our media environment. As a result, we have to be careful when we make generalizations about the ideological content of media, in large part because we are usually talking about a specific medium and perhaps even specific media texts. Another challenge for ideological analysis is that media texts are produced in specific historical contexts, responding to and helping frame the cultural currents of the day. Mass-mediated images are not static; they change in form and content in ways that are observable. Ideological analysis, therefore, needs to pay attention to the shifts in media images—sometimes subtle and sometimes quite dramatic—to allow for the dynamic nature of mass media.

If the study of media and ideology needs to be both historically specific and wary of overgeneralizing from single texts, what analytic strategies have proved useful? One of the most common approaches is to focus on specific types or “genres” of media, such as the television sitcom, the Hollywood horror film, or the romance novel. Because texts within the same genre adopt the same basic conventions, analysts can examine the underlying themes and ideas embedded within these conventional formats without worrying that any contradictions they might uncover are the result of the distinct modes of storytelling of different genres. The result is that most scholarly studies of media ideology are both quite specific about their subject matter and narrow in their claims, focusing on issues such as the messages about gender in the soap opera (Modleski, 1984) or the ideology of the American Dream in talk radio (Levin, 1987).

In addition, scholarly studies of media texts generally either focus on a specific historical period—for example, foreign policy news in the Reagan era (Herman and Chomsky, 1988)—or provide comparisons of one genre of media across several time periods—for example, best-selling books from the 1940s through the 1970s (Long, 1985). These analyses provide, on one hand, an understanding of how a specific medium displays a particular worldview or ideological conflict and, on the other hand, an understanding of how such stories about society change over time, in different historical contexts.

Two film genres, action-adventure and military/war films of the 1980s and early 1990s, are worth exploring for their underlying ideological orientation because of their popularity. With action-adventure movies such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Romancing the Stone* and military movies such as *Rambo* and *Top Gun* attracting large audiences—and inspiring sequels and seemingly endless imitators—scholars have used an ideological framework to understand the underlying messages in these films. What are these movies about, and why are they so attractive to American audiences? In other words, what are the ideologies of these films, and

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how do these ways of seeing the world fit within broader ideological currents? These questions help both to interpret the films and to locate their meanings in a social context.

Action-Adventure Films

Action-adventure films were among the most popular movies of the 1980s. The three Indiana Jones films, starring Harrison Ford, are the archetype of this genre, in which the male hero performs remarkable feats that require bravery and skill throughout a fast-paced 90-minute struggle with an evil villain. The hero ultimately emerges triumphant after several close calls, defeating the villain, saving the day, and usually winning the affection of the female lead. One version of this genre places the hero in faraway, exotic lands, making the villains and the action more unpredictable. But the basic story line can be found in films set in the United States, such as *Die Hard*, *Speed*, *Rush Hour*, and *Mission Impossible*. On one level, these kinds of movies can be thrilling, suspenseful (even though we know, deep down, that the hero will triumph), and even romantic as we watch the hero overcome new challenges and seemingly impossible odds on the road to an exciting and satisfying finish. However, if we dig below the surface of the action, we can explore the kinds of stories these movies tell and how the stories resonate with our contemporary social dilemmas.

Gina Marchetti (1989) has argued that the key to the ideology of this genre is the typical construction of the main characters, the hero and the villain, which leads to specific stories about the nature of good and evil, strength and weakness, and courage and cowardice. One underlying theme of the action-adventure genre is the drawing of rigid lines between “us” and “them,” with the villain representing the dangers of difference. There are, of course, many different versions of the central determinant of the in-group and the out-group. Nationality and ethnicity are frequent boundary markers, with white Americans (Michael Douglas, Bruce Willis) defeating dangerous foreigners. In other versions, civilized people triumph over the “primitive” (*Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*), or representatives of law and order defeat the deranged (*Speed*).

Ultimately, the hero effectively eliminates the danger represented by “the other”—the difference embodied by the villain—usually by killing the villain in a sensational climactic scene. Metaphorically speaking, social order is restored by the reassertion of the boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not, with the unacceptable doomed to a well-deserved death. The films go beyond xenophobic demonization of difference, however, by demonstrating the terms on which people who

are different can become part of mainstream society. The hero's local accomplices—such as Indiana Jones's child sidekick Short Round in *Temple of Doom*—demonstrate that it is possible to be incorporated into mainstream society. This is the flip side of the violent death of the villain: The difference represented by the friend or "buddy" can be tamed and made acceptable (Marchetti, 1989). Difference, then, must be either destroyed or domesticated by integrating the other into the hierarchical social relations of contemporary society, where the newly tamed other will likely reside near the bottom of the hierarchy. Ultimately, the action-adventure genre, with its focus on the personal triumph of the hero, is a tale about the power of the rugged male individual, a mythic figure in the ideology of the American Dream.

Vietnam Films

One particular 1980s version of the action-adventure genre was the "return to Vietnam" film, symbolized most clearly by the hit movie *Rambo*. In these films—which also include the *Missing in Action* trilogy and *Uncommon Valor*—the hero, a Vietnam veteran, returns to Vietnam a decade after the war to rescue American prisoners of war that the U.S. government has long since abandoned. In the process, the Vietnamese are demonized as brutal enemies who deserve the deaths that the heroes—most notably Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris—inflict on the captors as they liberate the prisoners.

The ideological work of these films is not very subtle, and given that they were popular during Ronald Reagan's presidency, their ideological resonance should not be surprising. In essence, these films provide a mass-mediated refighting of the war, in which Americans are both the good guys and the victors. The films serve as a kind of redemption for a country unable to accept defeat in Vietnam and still struggling with the shame of loss. If the United States did not win the Vietnam War on the battlefield, the movies allow its citizens to return in the world of film fantasy to alter the end of the story. In these stories, there is no longer shame or defeat but instead pride, triumph, and a reaffirmation of national strength. This outlook was, to be sure, part of the appeal of Ronald Reagan, whose campaign for president in 1980 called for a return to a sense of national pride, strength, and purpose that would move the nation beyond "the Vietnam syndrome."

The back-to-Vietnam films are, perhaps most fundamentally, part of the ideological project to overcome the Vietnam syndrome by providing a substitute victory. Susan Jeffords (1989) has argued that these films are about more than our national pride and the reinterpretation of defeat in

Vietnam. She makes a persuasive case that the return-to-Vietnam films are part of a larger process of "remasculinization" of American society, another key component of the ideology of the Reagan years, in which a masculinity defined by its toughness is reasserted in the face of the twin threats of the defeat in Vietnam and the growth of feminism.

These Vietnam films are, to Jeffords (1989), fundamentally about the definition of American "manhood" at a time when the traditional tough image had been challenged by the social movements of the 1960s and the defeat in Southeast Asia. The Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris characters—Rambo and Braddock—return to Vietnam in order to recapture their strength and power, all the while resisting and chastising the government for being too weak (read: "feminine") to undertake such a courageous mission. The "return" is as much about returning to a mythical past in which a strong America ruled the world and strong American men ruled their households as it is about rescuing POWs. Rambo and Braddock symbolize the desires of, and provide a mass-mediated and ideologically specific solution for, American men struggling with the changing social landscape of the 1980s.

Such popular media images are not simply innocent fantasies for our viewing entertainment. If we read these films in ideological terms, both the film texts themselves and their popularity tell us something about American culture and society in the 1980s. The masculine/military films of the time both reflected the fears and desires of American men and helped reproduce a new brand of toughness that became prevalent in the 1990s. The films were part of a political culture that created the conditions for the popular 1989 invasion of Panama and the even more popular 1991 war in the Persian Gulf, where TV news images did not differ much from those in the 1986 hit film *Top Gun*. Americans did overcome the "Vietnam syndrome" in the late 1980s, as symbolized by the willingness of the population to support military action in Panama, Iraq, and later in the "war against terrorism." Part of the ideological work necessary for that transformation was performed by popular Hollywood films.

Television, Popularity, and Ideology

While certain genres of popular films have been the subject of ideological analysis, it would be fair to say that the whole range of network television programming has been studied for its ideological content. In fact, ideological analysis of media is sometimes reduced to the study of television, just as claims about "the media" are often claims about televised images.

This state of affairs is not the result of some simple misunderstanding of terminology. Instead, such equations of media and television are

implicit arguments that television is the dominant form of media in the late twentieth century. (A single top-rated program is viewed by 15 to 20 million households, while a major newspaper chain such as Gannett reaches a combined total of nearly 8 million readers through its 90-plus newspapers.) Television occupies so much of our leisure time and seems to so routinely dominate the cultural landscape of the United States that claims about its preeminence among media technologies rarely seem overstated. From presidential politics to the O. J. Simpson trial, from war in the former Yugoslavia to the Los Angeles earthquake, ideas and images circulate most widely (and rather quickly) through television.

Television is more than just the most popular medium in terms of audience size. It also regularly comments on popular media. In fact, an astounding number of TV shows have been, at least in part, about the media. *Frasier* was about a psychiatrist turned talk-radio host; *WKRP in Cincinnati* and *NewsRadio* focused on rock and news radio stations, respectively; *Lou Grant* was about the workings of a big-city newspaper; *The Naked Truth* was about a tabloid newspaper photographer; *Just Shoot Me* was set in the office of a fashion magazine and *Suddenly Susan* star Brooke Shields played a magazine columnist; *Lois and Clark* featured the exploits of mild-mannered newspaper reporters; *Caroline in the City* starred a newspaper cartoonist; *Dave's World* was based on a (real!) newspaper columnist, while *Everybody Loves Raymond* starred a sportswriter; and one costar of *Mad About You* was a documentary filmmaker. A host of programs since the 1960s have been about television itself. The *Dick Van Dyke Show* was about a team of sitcom writers, the father in *Family Ties* was the manager of a public television station, the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* was about a TV news station, the *Larry Sanders Show* spoofed late-night talk shows, *Home Improvement* was about a cable TV program, *Murphy Brown* centered on the staff of a newsmagazine show, and *Sports Night* followed the daily routine at a cable television sports news program. In addition, talk shows and entertainment-oriented programs focus on the lives of media celebrities and the ins and outs of the television, film, and music worlds. With popular media as the subject and setting for so much programming, television is a virtual running commentary on the media world. Television is often so self-referential—or at least media centered—that the programs assume that viewers are deeply engaged with the culture of media, and the humor often requires a knowledge of the specific media reference.

As we will see in Part Four, the centrality of television in the media landscape has given audiences ample resources for interpreting televised messages. In short, our exposure to television and its self-referential “winking” about popular culture have made most of us rather skilled viewers who catch the references and know what they are all about.

Television and Reality

If television is as central to our mass-mediated culture as a broad range of scholars maintain, then the underlying ideas that television programs disseminate are of substantial social significance. What stories does television tell us about contemporary society? How does television define key social categories, depict major institutions, or portray different types of people? What is "normal" in the world of television, and what is "deviant"?

One reason why television is often considered to be so ideologically charged is that it relies, almost exclusively, on conventional "realist" forms of image construction that mask the workings of the camera. As a result, the family sitcom invites us to drop in at the home of our electronic neighbors, and the courtroom drama allows us to sit in on a trial. Most of us do not consciously mistake such families and courtrooms for "real life"; we would not confuse these televised images with our real neighbors, for example. Still, part of the allure of television is that it seems real; we routinely suspend disbelief while we are watching. The pleasures of television are a result of our ability to temporarily ignore our knowledge that there are no FBI agents named Mulder and Scully, no such thing as Klingons, and no newsmagazine show called *FYI*.

The ideological work of television, then, lies in the ways it defines and orders its pictures of "reality"—in its claims to reflect the humor and hardships of family life, the dangers of police work, the fun and confusion of "twenty-something" single life, or the drama of the courtroom. This reality is created and packaged by writers and producers with the goal of attracting a mass audience. The images are not simple reflections of an unproblematic reality but representations of a world that is not as orderly as a 30- or 60-minute program.

In striving for popularity, the television producers have often adopted the strategy of "least objectionable programming," whereby programs are intended to avoid controversy and remain politically bland. This approach is, itself, ideological; blandness favors certain images and stories and pushes others to the margins or off the air entirely. This is one reason why television programs, despite the widespread belief that Hollywood producers are committed liberals, have included so few gay and lesbian characters on prime time.

It is difficult, however, to make broad generalizations about the ideology of television programming beyond the observation that network executives want popularity without controversy. This formula for programs reaffirms the dominant norms of contemporary society. For a more nuanced understanding of how television programs are ideological

and how they respond to the often volatile social and political world, we need to look more carefully at a particular genre of programming. Ella Taylor's (1989) study of the changing image of the family on prime-time television from the 1950s through the 1980s provides a clear example of the ideological twists and turns of network television.

Television and the Changing American Family

Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, domestic life as represented by programs such as *Leave It to Beaver*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Father Knows Best*, along with zanier fare such as *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*, was predominantly white, middle class, happy, and secure. Network television presented the suburban family as the core of the modern, postscarcity society, a kind of suburban utopia where social problems were easily solved (or nonexistent), consensus ruled, and signs of racial, ethnic, or class differences or conflict were difficult to find. Taylor (1989) suggests that if, indeed, such families existed, they were precisely the people whom network advertisers sought. Still, this image of the postwar family—and the not-so-subtle suggestion that this was what a “normal” family looked like—was a particular story masked as a universal one. Certainly, these families were not typical American families, no matter how often they were served up as such.

The television family did not remain static, however; changing social conditions and new marketing strategies in the television industry helped create competing domestic images. The biggest change came in the 1970s, with what Taylor (1989) calls the “turn to relevance,” when the television family became a site where contemporary social and political issues were explored. The program that epitomized the new breed was Norman Lear's *All in the Family*, which was expected to flop yet became one of the most popular and profitable shows of the decade. The program revolved around the ongoing tension among a cast of diverse characters in their Queens, New York, home. On one side were Archie Bunker, a stereotypical white, working-class bigot, and his strong but decidedly unliberated wife, Edith. On the other side were Archie's feminist daughter, Gloria, and her husband, Michael, a sociology graduate student with leftist political views. From week to week, Archie and Michael argued over race relations, the proper role of women in society, American foreign policy, and even what kind of food to eat. Throughout the political debates, the main characters traded insults and vented their anger at each other while Archie waxed nostalgic over the good old days of the 1950s and Gloria and Michael looked nervously at their futures. Programs such as *The Jeffersons* and *Maude*, both *All in the Family*

spin-offs, as well as *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times*—among the most popular programs of the mid-1970s—may have been less acerbic than *All in the Family*, but they were all a far cry from the previous generation of conflict-free, white, middle-class family images.

By the middle of the 1970s, the image of the family was neither all white nor all middle class, and domestic life was no longer a utopia; instead, the family was depicted as a source of conflict and struggle as well as comfort and love. In short, social problems made their way into the television family. Taylor (1989) argues that the key to this change was the networks' desire, particularly at CBS, to target young, urban, highly educated viewers—an audience that was highly coveted by advertisers. The new image of the family, self-consciously "relevant" instead of bland and nostalgic, was perceived to be attractive to the youthful consumers who had lived through the social turbulence of the 1960s. But television's ideological change was slow and in many respects subtle. Nostalgic programs that presented the ideal middle-class family were also popular in the 1970s—*Happy Days* is a classic example.

At the same time that the television family was losing its blissful image in the 1970s, a new version of family appeared in the world of work. In programs such as *M*A*S*H*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Taxi*, and *Barney Miller*, the setting was not the home; instead, the programs revolved around the relationships between coworkers that Taylor (1989) calls a "work-family." In these programs, the workplace became a place where people found support, community, and loyalty and served as an often warm and fuzzy kind of family for people who were much more connected to their work than to their home lives. Taylor argues that the image of the work-family was popular precisely because of broad cultural anxiety about the changing boundaries between private life and public life in the 1970s, particularly for young professionals seeking prestige and success. Work-families, in essence, provided a picture of a safe haven from domestic conflicts in both the world of television and the experiences of viewers.

Given the growing rationalization of the American workplace in the 1970s, when more men and women came to work in large, bureaucratic organizations, finding images of the family in the workplace is surprising. Taylor (1989) argues that the popularity of the work-family programs tells us a great deal about the social role of television:

If we understand the television narrative as a commentary on, and resolution of, our troubles rather than a reflection of the real conditions of our lives, it becomes possible to read the television work-family as a critique of the alienating modern corporate world and

an affirmation of the possibility of community and cooperation amid the loose and fragmentary ties of association. (p. 153)

Of course, the neat and orderly resolution of social dilemmas is precisely the area in which television is ideological. In this case, network television presented images of domestic conflict but resolved them in the workplace through a professional, career-oriented ideology that reassured us that, despite change, everything would be okay. In the end, even as it incorporated conflict and relevance into its field of vision, television still gave viewers satisfying families and happy endings that affirmed the basic outlines of the American Dream.

In more recent years, conflicting visions of family life—from the nostalgic *Wonder Years* and the idyllic *Cosby Show* to the cynical *Married With Children* and the sober *Grace Under Fire*—have vied for viewer attention. In addition, a new 1990s kind of “family” image, the close-knit friendship circles depicted in hits such as *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, became a regular staple in prime time. And in a new twist, *Will and Grace*, which premiered in 1998, followed the lives of a couple—a gay man and a heterosexual woman. In 2001, several popular programs featured various types of African American families, including the upper-middle-class households on UPN’s *The Hughleys* and ABC’s *My Wife and Kids*, the humorous mother-daughter relationship on UPN’s *The Parkers*, and the close friendship circle on UPN’s *Girlfriends*. These new family images show that television programs and the ideology they circulate are far from static. In the midst of cultural conflict over the meaning of family in the 1990s, network television images are, themselves, part of the ongoing ideological contest to shape the definition of a proper family. Even here, of course, there are significant limits to television’s portrayals. For example, we rarely see interracial or gay and lesbian families in popular television. But such boundaries are not fixed; in fact, controversies about television often arise when these limits are challenged, even if only temporarily. Conflict and diversity, even in limited form, are part of the post-Cosby television family of the 1990s.

Rap Music as Ideological Critique?

We have seen that mass media can be analyzed in ideological terms, but media products are not ideologically uniform. They are both contradictory and subject to change. In short, there is no single ideology embedded within mass media texts. Even so, most mass media can be seen as sites where facets of the dominant version of the American story—an ideology that essentially sustains the current social order of our

capitalist/democratic society—are displayed, reworked, and sometimes contested. At the same time, conventional norms and mainstream values are generally reaffirmed, even if in slightly modified form, by those mass media texts—news, popular films, and network television—that seek a large audience. Thus, hegemony is constructed, perhaps challenged, and reasserted on a daily basis through the products of our mass media. But is it possible for widely circulating mass media texts to be oppositional or counterhegemonic? Can mass media provide challenges to the dominant ways of understanding the social world?

Tricia Rose (1994), in her study of the meanings of rap music in contemporary America, argues that rap should be understood as a mass-mediated critique of the underlying ideology of mainstream American society. Rap presents an alternative interpretation—a different story—of the ways power and authority are structured in contemporary society. Robin D. G. Kelley (1994) argues that some rap lyrics are “intended to convey a sense of social realism” that “loosely resembles a sort of street ethnography of racist institutions and social practices, but told more often than not in the first person” (p. 190).

Much of rap music is a critique of institutions such as the criminal justice system, the police, and the educational system, all of which are reinterpreted as sites that both exhibit and reproduce racial inequality. These alternative interpretations are not always explicit; often they are subtle, requiring a form of insider knowledge to fully understand what they are about. Rose (1994) suggests that rap

uses cloaked speech and disguised cultural codes to comment on and challenge aspects of current power inequalities. . . . Often rendering a nagging critique of various manifestations of power via jokes, stories, gestures, and song, rap’s social commentary enacts ideological insubordination. (p. 100)

While public attention focuses on the anger of “gangsta” rap, Rose (1994) points out that a much larger body of rap music acts in subtle and indirect ways to refuse dominant ideological assumptions about black youth, urban life, and racial inequality by articulating opposing interpretations of current social relations.

Rap’s ideological displacement of the conventional story with new stories is rooted in the inequalities of the social world. Rose (1994) argues that rap’s stories—its ways of understanding society in alternative, even oppositional ways—come from the life experiences of black urban youth. In essence, rap presents an ideological critique from below; it is a musical form that criticizes social institutions from the perspective of those who have comparatively little power in contemporary society.

At the same time, rap is full of ideological contradictions. While some politically radical male rappers critique the institutions of society as being racist, the lyrics and imagery of their music are often sexist and homophobic. They often depict women in degrading ways, including references to violence against women. So even as they are challenging the dominant ideology about race, some black male rappers generally accept and reinforce traditional ideological assumptions about gender roles and sexuality. The discourses within rap music, then, are not unambiguously oppositional in ideological terms.

Rose (1994) notes, however, that the alternative interpretations of social reality in rap lyrics, while partial and contradictory, only partly explain why rap can be understood as a form of ideological critique. Rap music, even that not expressly political in its lyrical content, is part of a broader struggle over the meaning of, and access to, public space. In short, the dominant discourse about rap—one frequently encountered in news media coverage of the rap scene—is connected to a broader discourse about the “spatial control of black people.” In the case of rap, the focus is on ways in which the culture of rap, particularly the gathering of large groups of black youth at concerts, is a threat to social order. Rose contends that the very existence of public rap events, at which black youth make claims to their right to occupy public space, is part of an ideological struggle in which the rap community refuses to accept the dominant interpretation of its “threat” to society. It is in such large gatherings, already politicized by the kind of resistance implied by the use of public space, that new forms of expression and new ideas have the potential to emerge. This fight for public space is at the center of what Rose calls rap’s “hidden politics.”

Rap, of course, is much more than a form of political expression, however contradictory, that circulates within the black community. It is also a highly profitable commercial industry. In fact, rap’s commercial success is due, in large part, to the fact that the music is popular among white suburban youth. Whites actually buy more rap and hip-hop music than blacks. This complicates the ideology of rap, making it difficult to simply accept the argument that rap can be “counterhegemonic,” a form of resistance to dominant ideological constructions. Such media messages are unlikely to be attractive to upper-middle-class white suburbanites or corporate record companies. Central to Rose’s (1994) argument is that the ideology of rap is often masked and is most accessible to those who know the black urban culture that forms its roots. Therefore, black youth may interpret the meaning of rap in ways very different from white youth, even though both may enjoy the music. As we will explore in Part Four, there is good reason to believe that the meanings of rap will be multiple and contested. Even so, we are still stuck with the dilemma posed by commercialization.

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Is it possible for corporate-produced, commercial mass media products to be fundamentally oppositional in ideological terms? Even rap music—with its critique of the police, schools, and mainstream media—is part of the corporate sector and, as such, is subject to the rules that govern the culture industry. In particular, this means that rap is a commercial product that is packaged and marketed to be sold to demographically specific sets of buyers. To the extent that the music does not sell, it will not be available in the mass market for very long; the musical packages and marketing strategies that do work will lure record companies into a strategy of imitation until profits dry up. In short, rap is as much a commercial commodity as it is an intervention in ideological contests.

As it did with the commercialized images of rebellion from the 1960s—Janis Joplin's tongue-in-cheek prayer for a Mercedes was used in ads for Mercedes-Benz cars, and an image of John Lennon and Yoko Ono helped to market Apple computers—the culture industry is capable of incorporating potentially oppositional forms of expression into the mainstream by turning them into commercial products subject to the rules of the market. By becoming a prominent commercial product that is now routinely used in national advertising campaigns, rap may have lost a good deal of its critical impact. Rap music is now about selling records and products as much as it is a forum for potentially oppositional expression. Still, incorporation into the marketplace is not likely to entirely empty a cultural form, such as rap, of its potential to provide ideological critique, particularly if that critique is disguised in the ways Rose (1994) suggests.

Ultimately, the example of rap music demonstrates the workings of hegemony. Mass media texts are contradictory; they can be oppositional, presenting ideological alternatives, even as they reproduce specific dominant ideological assumptions. But maintaining even this limited form of critique is difficult. Commercialization is part of the process through which the ideological struggle is waged; even critical media products have a tendency to be (at least partially) incorporated into mass, commercial products that accept the boundaries of mainstream definitions of social reality. This is, of course, an ongoing process, and incorporation is never total. But the media industry has proved to be remarkably resilient and innovative—it seems that virtually any form of expression can be tamed enough to be sold to a mass market.

Advertising and Consumer Culture

Each day, we are bombarded with advertisements in our homes, cars, and workplaces and on the street. As businesses seek new places to advertise

EXHIBIT 5.2 Advertising in Public Space



Advertisements occupy increasingly large amounts of public space. This photo shows a particularly striking example of ads towering over and moving within an urban setting. Ads also populate our daily landscape in less dramatic ways. In addition to the regular mass media, T-shirts, bumper stickers, grocery bags, junk mail, and many other sites all carry ads. Where have you seen advertisements today? (Photo by Serge Levey. Used with permission.)

their goods and services, ads can be found just about everywhere. Buses and subways have long been prime advertising spaces, catching the eyes of riders and passersby alike. At least one airline now sells ad space on the outside of its planes. Don't be surprised if you see an image of Bart Simpson on the side of a plane the next time you go to an airport! Television and radio have long been chock-full of ads. When you log onto the Internet, you will find that colorful advertisements are also part of the cyberspace experience. Ads surround sporting events, both on television and in sports arenas. They arrive in the mail and via fax. We wear advertising logos on our clothes and hum advertising jingles in the shower. In short, ads are so deeply embedded in our environment that we are likely to see, hear, and even smell them (in the form of magazine perfume ads) without thinking twice (see Exhibit 5.2).

What kinds of stories do advertisements tell about ourselves and our society? Certainly, on one level, ads are specific to their product or service. They tell us that if we drink a particular brand of beer, we will meet attractive women or that if we wear the right makeup, we will meet handsome men; if we purchase a certain automobile, we will gain prestige; if

we use specific cleansers, we will save time; and if we wear certain clothes, we will find adventure. Ads may also tell us that a particular item will save us money, that a specific service will make us healthier, or that a new product will make a great gift for a loved one. There is a wide range of specific messages in these ads, suggesting connections between products and lifestyles and between services and states of mind and presenting a host of information about prices, availability, and the like. We are not simply passive participants in all of this. We recognize advertising conventions and don't expect the connections depicted in ads—cosmetics and love, suits and success, for example—to be taken literally.

Despite the diversity of advertising messages and their frequent use of irony and humor, there is an underlying commonality to almost all advertisements: They are fundamentally about *selling*. They address their audiences as *consumers* and celebrate and take for granted the consumer-capitalist organization of society. This perspective is, of course, decidedly ideological. Ads tell us that happiness and satisfaction can be purchased, that each of us is first and foremost an individual consumption unit, and that market relations of buying and selling are the appropriate—perhaps the only—form of social relations outside the intimacy of the family. Sometimes even the intimacy of the family is seemingly up for sale. One recent commercial implied that a father could spend more quality time with his son if he bought a direct-TV satellite dish! Advertising presumes and promotes a culture of consumption, normalizing middle- or even upper-middle-class lifestyles and making buying power a measure of both virtue and freedom.

In the process, advertising elevates certain values—specifically, those associated with acquiring wealth and consuming goods—to an almost religious status. Moreover, advertising promotes a worldview that stresses the individual and the realm of private life, ignoring collective values and the terrain of the public world (Schudson, 1984). The values that advertising celebrates do not come out of thin air, but this does not make them any less ideological. Whether or not ads are successful at selling particular products—some ad campaigns succeed and others fail—the underlying message in advertising, which permeates our media culture, is the importance of the values of consumerism.

Selling Consumerism in the Early Twentieth Century

Stuart Ewen (1976) has explored the historical roots of what we now call consumer culture, tracing the role of early twentieth-century advertising in its creation. Turn-of-the-century capitalists, captains of industry, saw mass advertising as a means of shaping the consciousness of the

American population in a way that would give legitimacy and stability to the rapidly industrializing society. The key to this new consciousness was the creation of a new way of life based on the pleasures of consumption. Mass advertising emerged in the 1920s when leaders of the business community began to see the need for a coordinated ideological effort to complement their control of the workplace. Advertising would become the centerpiece of a program to sell not only products but also a new, American way of life in which consumption erased differences, integrated immigrants into the mainstream of American life, and made buying the equivalent of voting as a form of commitment to the democratic process.

From the start, then, advertising was more about creating consumers than selling individual products. If a mass production economy was to be profitable and if those who worked for long hours under difficult conditions in the factory were to be pacified, new needs and habits had to be stimulated. This was the job of advertising. Its early practitioners built on people's insecurities about their lives and their appearances to shape desires for new consumer products. Solutions to personal problems were to be found in the world of consumption, an early version of the currently prevalent attitude that views a day of shopping as a way to cheer up oneself. Ads suggested that new products such as mouthwash, hand lotion, and deodorant would protect people from embarrassment and give them a ticket to the modern world. Old habits and folkways—the traditions that recent immigrants brought to the United States—were to be discarded in favor of the new “American way,” participation in a consumer society. Ads sold consumerism as a gateway to social integration in twentieth-century America and as an ideology that would smooth over social conflicts—especially class conflict—and serve as a form of social cement.

One way advertising tried to sell a cross-class ideology of consumerism was through its focus on the realm of consumption and its neglect of production. The industrial workplace might be unsatisfying, even degrading, but advertising offered a world that was far removed from the drudgery of work, emphasizing the wonders of the consumer lifestyle. It was, after all, that lifestyle and associated worldview that ads were selling, regardless of whether people had the means to really live it. As Ewen (1976) puts it, while the ideology of consumerism

served to stimulate consumption among those who had the wherewithal and desire to consume, it also tried to provide a conception of the good life for those who did not. . . . In the broader context of a burgeoning commercial culture, the foremost political imperative was *what to dream*. (p. 108)

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Such dreams could be realized only by consuming goods, and even this was only a temporary realization, requiring continuous consumption in search of the lifestyle promoted by advertising. Our culture of consumption, then, is intimately connected to advertising, which helped create it and continues, in new forms, to sustain consumerism as a central part of contemporary American ideology.

Women's Magazines as Advertisements

The "women's magazine" is one medium that is particularly advertising oriented and consistently promotes the ideology of consumerism. Its emphasis on ads—which often seem to make up the bulk of the content—has led one critic to label this genre the "women's advertising magazine" (McCracken, 1993). Publications such as *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Redbook*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Modern Bride* include page after page of glossy ads featuring products targeted specifically at women.

More generally, the magazines promote the consumer lifestyle by showing how beauty, sexuality, career success, culinary skill, and social status can be *bought* in the consumer marketplace. Social problems, from the standpoint of consumer ideology, are redefined as personal problems that can be solved by purchasing the appropriate product. Women's magazines, in addressing a specific social group, identify women as a consumption category with special product needs. The magazines link an identity as a woman with a set of specific consumer behaviors, making the latter the prerequisite for the former. To be a "woman," then, is to know what to buy; the ad content in women's magazines both displays the specific products and celebrates the pleasures and needs of consumption.

But there is more to women's magazines than just the ads, even though a common reading strategy is to casually leaf through the pages, glancing at the ads and headlines. Ellen McCracken (1993) argues that the editorial content—the nonadvertising articles—is itself a form of "covert advertising" that promotes the same kind of consumer-oriented ideology. The most visible ad is the cover of the magazine. The standard image of the ideal woman on the cover suggests that purchase of the magazine will provide clues to how and what to buy in order to become the ideal woman. In addition, covers are often reproduced inside the magazine along with information about the products displayed, suggesting that the image depicted is one that can be purchased.

Even the "editorial advice" provided by women's magazines is a form of covert advertisement, selling the consumer ideology. Beauty advice, for example, routinely suggests the consumption of various forms of makeup as a way to achieve beauty. Such advice often identifies brand

names that are most effective—brands frequently promoted in ads in the same magazine. The regular “makeover” feature, in which an “average” woman is turned into a glamorous model look-alike, is, in essence, an endorsement of the beauty products advertised elsewhere in the magazine. Advice, then, really concerns appropriate consumption habits. Just as early ads identified newfound needs, the women’s magazine suggests what women need. In the end, women’s magazines use both direct and covert advertising to sell magazines and promote an ideology that celebrates the consumption of gender-specific products as a means to identity formation and personal satisfaction—the dream of the “good life.”

Advertising and the Globalization of Culture

The dreams that advertisements sell within the United States are also exported all around the globe. American-made ads for American brands—from Coca Cola to Levis—circulate through the growing global media culture. More generally, American media products, from television programming to Hollywood films, are consumed by a vast international audience. Both the ads and the programming serve as a kind of international promotional vehicle for the American way of life by focusing on the material abundance and consumer opportunities available in the United States.

While different products use different sales pitches and the entertainment media explore a range of themes set in various locations, most American media—especially those that are exported—share an underlying frame of reference that defines America by its combination of consumer capitalism and political freedom. Because media are owned and operated by profit-making companies, it should not be surprising that the cornucopia of images converges in the promotion of the benefits of a consumer society. Given the rapidly growing global economy, American-based companies see the international market as one of the keys to twenty-first-century success.

If advertisements and exported entertainment promote the American way of life, what exactly are they selling? After all, it is difficult to reduce the United States, a diverse and fragmented culture, to simple, unambiguous themes. The images on global display, like much domestic advertising, are about dreams. America is portrayed as a kind of dreamland where individuals can fulfill (or buy?) their desires. The images of the dreamland do not require a rigid uniformity, because central to the ideology on display are the notions of individuality and freedom, which merge into the concept of *consumer choice*. Dreams are fulfilled by individual consumers who make choices about what to buy: Coke, Pepsi, or

7 Up; Calvin Klein, The Gap, or Ralph Lauren; Nike or Reebok; Macintosh or IBM; Avis or Hertz. The route to happiness in this electronic dream-world is consuming the "right" product. Think about how happy the diners are in McDonald's commercials or how peaceful the world is in the Ralph Lauren magazine ads.

The world portrayed in television programs such as *Friends* or *The West Wing* and on MTV similarly displays images of attractive people living comfortable lives surrounded by contemporary consumer goods. Both advertisements and entertainment media promote a commitment to the latest styles—for example, in clothes, cars, leisure activities, and food—that requires not just consumption but continuous consumption to keep up with stylistic changes. The focus on style is directed particularly at youth, who are increasingly the most coveted market and who are particularly avid media users. The international advertising, television, and music scenes have helped generate an emerging cross-national, global youth culture in which teens in different countries adopt similar styles in clothes and appearance; consume the same soda, cigarettes, and fast food; and listen to and play the same kind of music. The international teen market may cross national boundaries, but, with the help of American media products, youth style is based to a great degree on American images and consumer goods.

American media products may be the most prominent in global circulation, but they are not the only media images out there. Various European and Japanese companies also produce media and advertising for an international market, often in concert with U.S.-based companies. Herbert Schiller (1992), one of the early critics of the export of American mass media, argues that globally circulating media images all promote a similar ideology, regardless of their national origin. While the use of mass media as a tool for marketing lifestyles may have had its origins in the United States, it has become a global phenomenon. Although global media images may display national cultural differences as part of the sales pitch, they highlight difference as part of the promotion of the value of consuming and acquiring things. Ironically, cultural differences in global media images—such as multicultural images in American media—attract audiences for the promotion of a consumerist ideology that most fundamentally aims to bring different cultures together into an increasingly homogeneous, international consumer culture. If "we are the world," as the 1980s hit song for famine relief asserted, it is because we all buy, or dream about buying, the same things.

Culture has become increasingly global, with media images circulating across national boundaries. At the same time, U.S. media images display more difference than they did a generation ago. But what messages

do U.S. media images present about the status of Americans and the status of foreigners in this global culture? This question fundamentally addresses ideology.

In his study of advertising images of foreigners, William O'Barr (1994) argues that the ideological analysis of ads requires us to look at what he calls the "secondary discourses" within the advertisements. As opposed to the primary discourse, which concerns the specific qualities of the advertised product, secondary discourses are those ideas about social relationships that are embedded within the ads. The ideology of advertising images, from this perspective, is to be found in the ways the images convey messages about social life at the same time that they try to promote a specific product. Context, setting, characteristics of the principal actors, and the interaction between actors within the ad are central to these secondary discourses.

In contemporary print ads, according to O'Barr (1994), there are three main categories of ads that feature images of foreigners: travel ads, product endorsements, and international business ads. The foreigners within travel ads are depicted as the "other"—different from the "us" that the ad is targeting—and the ads suggest that these others are available for the entertainment of American tourists. Implicit both within the images of local people dancing, painting, and smiling with American tourists and within the ad copy that invites tourists as "honored guests" or offers to "open both our homes and hearts" to visitors is a message that foreign lands are in the business of serving American visitors. Such images, by offering satisfaction from local people who aim to please, suggest that the needs and desires of Americans are the key to the potential relationship. The pattern in travel ads is unambiguous; the American tourist dominates the relationship with foreign cultures, particularly when the ads promote travel to Third World countries.

Product advertisements that draw on images of foreigners make connections between the advertised commodity and associations we have with foreign lands. O'Barr (1994) suggests that images that, for example, link lingerie to Africa through the use of a black model in apparently "primitive" clothing or that connect perfume to China or India by associating the product with Chinese art and characters or the Taj Mahal tell us stories about these foreign societies. The irony is that the products—in this case the lingerie or perfume—have nothing to do with societies in Africa, China, or India; the images of "others" are used to promote products made and used in the West.

Why, then, do ads draw on such images? O'Barr (1994) argues that the images of foreign lands are intended to suggest that the products are exotic or romantic. In so doing, they suggest that Africans, Chinese, or

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Indians are different from Americans, often depicting them as more primitive and, particularly, more sexual. These associations are intended to make the products attractive while simultaneously reaffirming that foreigners are fundamentally different.

Images of foreigners in ads for travel and products highlight difference, depicting an "other" who is subordinate to, but a source of pleasure for, American tourists and consumers. The ideology underlying these images about the place of the United States in the contemporary global order differs little from the messages in earlier ad images of foreigners. But the globalization of the economy has produced a new ad image of the foreigner: the potential business partner.

When the issue is international business, ad images no longer suggest difference, which might be an obstacle to conducting business. Instead, images of foreigners in international business ads emphasize that Americans and foreigners share a perspective and have a common set of goals. Foreign businesspeople are depicted not as "others"—as an exotic or threatening "them"—but as people just like us. These ads are directed at a much more limited audience—international businesspeople—than are the travel or product ads. Business ads, however, do suggest that there is an alternative to the depiction of foreigners as others, even if it is now limited to the global corporate community.

The most widely circulating images of "otherness" in advertising convey messages about foreigners from a distinctly American point of view and suggest that there are fundamental differences between "us" and "them," that we have power in our relationships with "them," and that "they" are available to stimulate, entertain, and serve "us." Media in a global culture may provide more images of foreign people and lands—and international business ads suggest that new kinds of images are emerging—but the underlying message in advertisements about *who we are* and *who they are* draws on age-old assumptions about the relationship between powerful Americans and subordinate foreigners.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the content of mass media by adopting an ideological approach. We have reviewed the underlying theoretical frameworks of ideological analysis and examined several specific cases to detect ideology at work in mass media. As our examples suggest, there is no singular ideology that is promoted by popular media. Researchers who study the ideology of media are interested in the underlying stories about society that the media tell, the range of values that the media legitimize, and the kinds of behaviors that are deemed normal. Most popular

media promote, often in subtle and even contradictory ways, perspectives that support our basic social arrangements and endorse the legitimacy of social institutions, marginalizing attitudes and behaviors that are considered to be out of the "mainstream."

Media images can and sometimes do challenge this mainstream, status quo-oriented ideology by providing a critique of contemporary social organization and norms, but commercialization makes it difficult for media to maintain a critical voice. The search for popularity, wider distribution, and profitability tends to dull the critical edges of media imagery, pushing media back toward more mainstream (and marketable) ideologies. There are, to be sure, media that consistently promote alternative ideological perspectives. Local weekly newspapers, journals of opinion, public access television, and independent films are often quite self-conscious about providing perspectives that differ from the dominant popular media. These alternatives, however, remain on the margins of the media scene, reaching small audiences and lacking the capital to mount a serious challenge to the dominant media.

In this chapter, we have explored the ideology of various media texts, examining the underlying perspectives within the images that confront us every day. As we examine media content, we need to look even more specifically at the ways that mass media represent the social world. In Chapter 6, we turn our attention to the relationship between media images and social inequality.

