

Power struggles in society

Society



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Mills, Schudson, and Gitlin show different approaches to society and the role of mass media. Each approach helps illustrate a different focus on society. They each hold special relevance in a discussion of the history of societal beliefs. The Mass Society refers to the overall belief C. Wright Mills held in relation to the type of society he believed we live in.

Mills began *The Power Elite* with a bold statement saying, "The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by the everyday words in which they live, yet even in these rounds of job, family, and neighborhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern" (Mills, 1956, p. 3). This opening sentence helps describe the attitude and beliefs of the entire book. A "power elite" exists in a society that is made up of three spheres. They are divided into economy, political, and military, with the same group of people interchanging between the three.

This large group of elite is at the top making all the decisions, while the masses are at the bottom, unaware of the process that molds public opinion. Masses within this view of society are irrelevant and do not have any type of influence. The media functions as an entertainment source, keeping the masses entertained while the elite is taking care of all the important matters. It helps keep the reality and truth of the world obscured from the masses.

Mills explained what the media does for the masses as "they distract him and obscure his chance to understand himself or his world, by fastening his attention upon artificial frenzies that are revolved within the program framework, usually by violent action or by what is called humor" (Mills, p. 315). This helps illuminate how the mass media guides, tries to control, and manipulates the masses. Mills describes the effect of mass media as "a sort

of psychological illiteracy" to the extent that we " often do not believe what we see before us until we read about it in the paper or hear about it on the radio" (Mills, p. 311).

The masses " standards of credulity, standards of reality, tend to be set by these media rather than by 'the masses' own fragmentary experience" (Mills p. 311). Mass media's role helps prevent the questioning of the elite. " Families and churches and schools adapt to modern life; governments and armies and corporations shape it; and, as they do so, they turn these lesser institutions into means for their ends" (Mills, p. 6). The family into which someone was born or marries into helps improve or decrease their social status. The school where one is educated or the church where one worships also plays a major role in the social standing.

Schools teach skills to the masses that enable them to function in society. Institutions shape life and the masses adapt to what institutions create. The masses in the theory are very disorganized and not connected to others. An excellent way to describe to masses can be shown by watching The Twilight Zone movie. It is a state of total confusion for everyone, with each doing their own thing. The elite enjoy the state of confusion with the masses, because they are able to control the major decisions that must be made. They determine the policies and the people enlist in them.

In the mass society, the elite control the policies and ways of thinking for the confused masses. Schudson approaches the nature of society in a much different way, through the idea of the democratic society. In Discovering the News, he discussed " an even distribution of income" and described the 1800's as " more people acquired wealth and political power 'bringing' with

them a zeal for equal opportunity that led to the expansion of public education" (Schudson, 1978, p. 44). When looking at society as a whole, you have them socially, economically, and politically integrated. Economic development was promoted and shared by many rather than few" (Schudson, p. 45). The press does not cause, but picks up elements, reflects, and builds from a democratic society. " The democratization of economic life brought with it attitudes that stressed economic gain to the exclusion of social aims; business practice more regularly began to reward strictly economic ties over broader ones" (Schudson, p. 46). Schudson believed that society was grounded in the perception of society, with the middle class dominating and developing.

Media's relationship with its audience helped sustain them, but it did not create the worldview. The media cannot be proven to have many effects on society, and the ones that exist have to do with advertising as a cultural institution. Advertising functions more as a way of celebrating products and buying. It functions to remind and refocus as it orients people to the world and let them know that others share the same views. Advertising reminds us of things in society and reinforces some social trends. The trends and cultural symbols make us aware while reminding us of what we already know.

Objectivity occurred in writings as a response to a problem, not as a correct way to see the world. " As our minds become deeply aware of their own subjectivism, we find a zest in objective method that is not otherwise there" (Schudson, p. 151). Objectivity developed in response to crisis, when journalism became so overwhelmed with subjectivity. There are three views

in reference to objectivity. " The first view, then, holds that form conceals content in the news story. A second position is that form constitutes content, that the form of the news story incorporates its own bias.

A third sees the form of a news story, not as a literacy form, but as a social form tightly constrained by the routines of new gathering" (Schudson, pp. 184-185). The " moral wars" in journalism showed each class held differing beliefs on what was acceptable. The Times wrote a speech by Reverend Dr. W. H. P. Faunce saying: " The press engages in a fearful struggle, one class against another. On one side stands the reputable papers and on the other, is what calls itself the new journalism, but which is in reality as old as sin itself" (Schudson, p. 114).

Class conflict was the main reason for problems inside the newspaper industry. Different societal classes produced different types of newspapers. Schudson tracks the middle class because he feels it is the most important. He said the press emerged to serve the middle class audience. Schudson said the political aspects of society went from public to private. Reality was public, but became more concerned with what the individual was thinking instead of what everyone was thinking. Voting was one area effected by this new political and reality change.

People began to vote in secrecy, such as in the separate voting booth presently used. This new secrecy allowed people to make decisions on their own instead of relying on others. Gitlin discusses how many aspects of society are the result of hegemony, defined as " the name given to a ruling class's domination through ideology, through the shaping of popular consent" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 9). " Hegemony is a historical process in which one

picture of the world is systematically preferred over others, usually through practical routines and at times through extraordinary measures" (Gitlin, p. 57). Society is maintained by hegemony instead of class structure. This type of society is possible because it has a common reality, shared language, common cultural forms like mass media, shared government, common education and religion, and common transportation. Hegemony says we live in a society where all ideas are not treated equally. As a result, we are predisposed to accept some views and slower to accept others. It is not a conspiracy theory but it holds that everyone is doing their job. The ideas of the dominant in society are being told.

If someone outside the dominate group feels their idea is right, they must do something out of the ordinary to get attention. The dominate class is not particularly the elite or the middle class, but it is the group whose ideas are most important to be heard in society. We grow up in a world that already has meaning; we must therefore decide where we belong. In return, society produces the kind of people it needs. Many people spend their lives trying to figure out where to belong. The routines of journalists are the main way standardized frames are put into reporting. These routines are structured in the ways journalists are socialized from childhood, and then trained, recruited, assigned, edited, rewarded, and promoted on the job; they decisively shape the ways in which news is defined, events are considered newsworthy, and 'objectivity' is secured" (Gitlin, pp. 11-12). People think the world is being reported, but it is actually being created. Mills, Schudson, and Gitlin share few beliefs in relation to the nature of society. Each believes that

separate social classes exist and that each class relates to society in a much different way.

They also agree that problems do occur within society and its current division, but at that point their beliefs begin to diverge. Mills and Gitlin are the most similar among the three. They both believe there is a separation between one dominate class and the masses. Mills believes the one dominate is the elite and Gitlin does not feel it is any particular social class. Schudson, on the other hand, believes there are separate classes with the middle the most important. The most persuasive is a combination of Schudson and Gitlin. Different times make the separation on which is most important.

Schudson is correct in saying the media and society play off each other. Things which occur in society would not be made as important without the media stressing its importance and society tuning in to hear the details. Gitlin is also very true in his beliefs of hegemony with a ruling class being dominate over society. The world in which we live is very centered around the fact that one group's ideas are heard through the media more often than that of others. The nature of society is explained differently when looking at Mills, Schudson, and Gitlin. Each person is very persuasive in the views they express.

There are also weaknesses that exist in some of the views. Gitlin's hegemony comes across as the most persuasive of the ideas. It can explain most things in society that the other two cannot. Society is complex in every way, but hegemony helps make it more simple to understand. References Gitlin, Todd. (1980). *The Whole World Is Watching*. Berkeley: University of California

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