Cultural Intermediaries and the Media Industry

Cultural Intermediaries

What is a cultural intermediary?

- Cultural intermediaries mediate between the production and the consumption of goods.
- Thus they play a role in informing consumers about products that have been produced e.g. advertisement of a new product which means that advertising and the advertising industries are cultural intermediaries.
- They also play a role in ascribing symbolic associations with products.
- It is not just advertising and marketing organisations that are cultural intermediaries.
- We can think of PR organisations and PR people that promote politicians for certain celebrities.
- We can therefore think of a cultural intermediary as having some connection between consumers or the public, and the product or person (or thing) being promoted.
- They have a role in linking these two together.
- The reason we can also include accountants etc. is that actually financial and economic constraints might determine who/what is promoted and how.
- Hence, we can think of account managers – those with control of the ‘purse strings’ in this way.

The meaning of the term political economy:

The term obviously marries the discipline of economics to that of politics.

An economic analysis of the media shows that in a capitalist society the culture industry will be governed by the four key rules of capitalist economics:

| The mass production and distribution of commodities |
| Capital intensive technology |
| Highly specialized division of labour |
| Maximization of profit |

However politics is about making collective decisions about the best way of organizing society in future.

Thus when we speak of the political economy of the media we are not only concerned with the recognition of economic realities but also with questions about whose interest these realities serve and what is desirable and beneficial to the community as a whole.

The media theorist Noam Chomsky identifies three basic models of the political economy organization of the media that are available

State-controlled: that has operated in western Europe and in the old Eastern block.
Corporate Oligopoly that is usual in capitalist democracies such as the USA.

Democratic Communications based on the concept of participatory democracy and which is largely untried.

**The State-controlled Media**

This model of media control has taken two forms and both are currently in decline.

The first is the direct state control of the media in totalitarian societies such as the old Eastern Block.

The second form of state control is that which is applied to broadcasting media in capitalist democracies alongside the free enterprise approach in other areas of the media.

This second model was pioneered in Britain with the BBC and has operated in other British Commonwealth countries such as Australia and Canada and western European countries such as France and Germany.

In its heyday and formative period between the 1920s and the 1950s the BBC was the sole broadcaster of radio and television.

In this period it successfully married the economic and political aspects of media organization.

In economic terms it utilized the existing potential for production of broadcast media: employing performers and technicians and providing a product to a new market (audience).

But the BBC also succeeded in the political objective of providing a public service: to inform and entertain.

**The Capitalist Oligopoly**

If the British Broadcasting Corporation provided the model for public service broadcasting established by the state, the model of capitalist oligopoly is American in origin and is now virtually global in its dominance.

In the USA broadcasting was always essentially in private hands, notwithstanding the weak attempts of the Federal state to regulate it.

This has meant a multitude of small-scale privately owned radio and TV stations and a tendency toward monopoly by a few large networks such as CBS and NBC.

Since the American model is the one that has been adopted in the great majority of nation-states around the world the tendency to monopoly has gone global.

The global tendency to multi-channel broadcasting also splits the audience and means that stations rely on cheap imports (Where the four channel arrangement in Britain had married the existing levels of production to audience and resources.)
These developments have resulted in the vertical selling (or dumping) of the products of the American culture industry worldwide and therefore in cultural Americanization.

At the same time the tendency to monopoly has meant that we are now witness corporate control of the various branches of the culture industry on a new scale, with single businesses owning TV, newspapers, film, sports clubs and producing T-shirts as well.

What are the consequences of the dominance of the Corporate Oligopoly model in terms of the objectivity and truthfulness of the world-view we are able to form from our experience of the media controlled by these companies?

**The Propaganda Model**

Noam Chomsky argues that existing arrangement of the media in capitalist democracies amount to an alliance of state and big business to produce a limited and particular view of the world that fits the interests of the big corporations.

There are a number of reasons for this.

**Official sources are given more weight**

Government organizations are the only ones able to provide information on a scale adequate to the needs of the media.

(The Pentagon’s public information service employees thousands of people, publishes hundreds of magazines, operates hundreds of radio stations and dozens of TV stations).

In effect state organizations subsidize the media by reducing their running costs.

It is important for journalists not to alienate useful official contacts by the content of their reporting.

Media ‘experts’ are recruited from the state: retired generals etc and invariably give the preferred view.

**Big business pays for the media.**

The very fact that the (privately owned) media are selling audience for advertising to big business means that they convey a world-view consistent with that of the corporate world.

At a personal level, taking the wrong position can also cost a journalist his or her career.

But there are plenty of examples of media companies that have lost financial backing as a direct result of producing reports critical of business.

But usually media producers would anticipate causing offence and censor themselves.

It is difficult to challenge the accepted world-view in the media.

It is intrinsically difficult to argue against the accepted world-view in a short interview, because this will require complex argument and evidence.
(Anyone can go on the TV and assert that terrorism is wicked without any problem but if you were to try to point out that it also has complex political and economic roots you would have a problem.)

To make a non-standard argument you will have to meet much more exacting standards of evidence.

**American Global Hegemony**

The mass media sustains the ‘necessary illusions’ by which the economic and political elite in the US and its clients and allies elsewhere, justify their manipulation of the economic and political life around the globe.

The US constitution was always designed to give power to the elite and the appearance of democracy to the masses.

The elite makes the decisions according to its interests and represents its actions in mythical terms of necessary illusions designed to manipulate the masses.

One of the key aspects of these illusions is the notion of ‘containment’: that US foreign policy is designed to contain threats to democracy.

In practise this has meant US intervention in order to manage the world economy according to the interests of American big business, often by eliminating movements of ordinary people around the world to improve their lot.

For forty years the threat that justified containment was the communism now it is global terrorism.

**Conclusions**

Rupert Murdoch has argued for the further de-regulation of British TV on the basis that public service broadcasting is based on a pompous and patronising view of what is good for the public view and that the market should be allowed a completely free hand.

See the key points from the Leveson report in relation to debates about regulation.

However the discussion of the political economy of the media demonstrates that television, like other media, is a cultural and political force as well as economic and that we need to make conscious and collective choices.

Perhaps we should then maintain public service broadcasting, or be even more radical and move toward the model of democratic communications, in which the media are put under the control of ordinary people and not state or corporate interests.