Marxist Theory of the Media or Theory of the Media by Marxists? Reconciling Adorno with Other Marxist Media Theorists

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Marxist Theory of the Media or Theory of the Media by Marxists? Reconciling Adorno with Other Marxist Media Theorists

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Abstract

Although Marx himself did not explicitly theorize the media, his postulations and adumbrations about the dialectics of cultural and ideological mediation have provided a robust springboard for a Marxist theory of the media. In this article, I briefly chronicle the trajectory of scholarship and research on the mass media using the Marxist paradigm and coalesce the disparate corpus of broad research traditions and paradigm shifts that have occurred within the Marxist critical tradition. I conclude by calling attention to the points of convergence between Theodor Adorno and other Marxist media theorists. I particularly show how Adorno reconciles the culturalist and political economic tendencies within the Marxist tradition of media theory. I argue that the time-honored distinction between the culturalist and political economic traditions in the taxonomies of Marxist media theory ignores Adorno’s contributions to media theory, which not only creatively reconcile these tendencies but also represents the closest approximation of how Marx himself would have theorized the media in late capitalism.

Keywords: Marxist media theory, Theodor Adorno, Political economy, Karl Marx, Cultural Studies

Introduction

When Enzensberger (1970) famously declared that “there is no Marxist theory of the media” (p.14), he was drawing a distinction between what Sholle (1988, p. 16) called the “Marxism of Marx” and what one might call the Marxism of Marxists. Although Marx himself did not explicitly theorize the media, his postulations and adumbrations about the dialectics of cultural and ideological mediation have provided a robust springboard for the flowering of what can legitimately be called a Marxist theory of the media. Since the 1990s, it has become customary to point to the fierce internal ideological dissension between culturalist and political economic approaches to Marxist media theory (Fuchs, 2014). In this article, I exhume some of Theodore Adorno’s obscure and largely forgotten works to argue...
that the ideological dissension between the two approaches ignores Adorno’s contributions to media theory, which not only creatively reconciles the culturalist and political economy tendencies, but also represents the closest approximation of how Marx himself would have theorized the media in late capitalism had he lived to this period.

In order to make this case, I compare seminal works of Marx and Engels with some of Adorno’s insightful but largely obscure writings to contend that Marx’s seminal passages are closer to Adorno’s theorization about the mass media than the most prominent Marxist media theorists.

As is by now obvious, this is not an empirical study; it is a theoretical reflection that seeks to locate common grounds between otherwise disparate strands of Marxist media theory using Adorno’s insights. The inspiration for this inquiry derives from the recognition that although Adorno has variously been described as the “chief architect” of the Frankfurt School’s influential theory of mass culture (see Andrae, 1979/2005, p. 34), he has served as no more than a poster child for reductionist and simplistic media theory, which a supposedly sophisticated theory of the media should rise above (Cook, 1996). His profound and thoughtful insights into the dynamics of mass mediation have been largely discounted in contemporary media theory. By exploring his generally ignored essays that theorize the media, I hope to recover Adorno from the oblivion he has been undeservedly thrown into and put him in conversation with other media theorists that preceded and succeeded him.

This work is significant because although there has been a decline in Marxist media scholarship since the 1980s (Fuchs & Mosco, 2012; Malmberg, 1996), it offers useful insights in explaining contemporary developments in the media industry, and can serve as a powerful methodological apparatus to study media content and media performance. This is especially true in the age of media consolidation, global economic crises, new anticorporate social movements, and the “role of mediatization, ICTs, and knowledge work in contemporary capitalism” (Fuchs, 2014, p. 40). Malmberg’s (1996) exhortation that Marxist critical theory “has not reached the end of its journey yet” is appropriate (p. 22). In a highly instructive survey of references to schools of thought and theories in mass communication research from 1956 to 2000, Bryant and Miron (2004) found that the Frankfurt School is the most frequently cited school of thought, while Marxism is the fourth most frequently cited theory. What Bryant and Miron failed to point out, however, is that the theories of the Frankfurt School—and those of Adorno in particular—tend to be cited as representative samples of allegedly unsophisticated and one-dimensional theorizing. This article hopes to correct this misconception.

In what follows, I lay out the epistemological template of Marxist media theory, fit various tendencies within the Marxian tradition, and show how Adorno’s postulations about the media harmonize and bring into pro-
productive conversation the diverse tendencies within Marxist media theory.

**Media Theory from the Marxism of Marx**

A useful starting point in the discussion of the Marxist critical tradition in media scholarship is Heraldt's (1979) assertion that the first systematic intellectual criticism of mass culture—and of the mass media—originated in Germany. The German tradition of scholarship was inspired by a philosophical orientation that is fundamentally rooted in skepticism concerning the tenets and consequences of the Enlightenment. This tradition found the press and its relationship to the state problematic. It noted that the dynamics and dialectics of the press’s operation were necessarily circumscribed by the social relations of productions of the reigning social formation. It therefore did not see the mass media as value-free. This is unlike early Anglo-American criticism of the media, which was largely empiricist and fixated with the problem of the freedom of the press from government control at the expense of critiquing the institutional and ideological structures that nurture the form and content of the media.

As pointed out earlier, even though Karl Marx did not specifically theorize the mass media, he and Frederick Engels provided the seminal philosophical foundations for a Marxist critical theory of the mass media in The German Ideology. In a classic formulation, Marx and Engels (1847/1938) assert that

> The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. . . . In so far, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they . . . among other things . . . regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch (p. 39).

This assertion provides the stepping-stone for a departure from the hitherto dominant theoretical orthodoxy about the functions of the media in capitalist society. In effect, it says that control over the production, processing, and dissemination of ideas is disproportionately concentrated in the hands of capitalist owners of the means of production; that their convictions, values, and points of view are privileged in everyday consciousness because the media interminably perpetrate and reinforce them; and lastly, that this domination plays a crucial role in maintaining, consolidating, and continually asserting the hegemony of the ruling class over subordinate groups in the society. These propositions raise several questions about the relationship between media ownership and control, about the dialectics by which dominant value systems are translated into cultural artifacts, and the extent to which members of the subordinate groups are affected by the dominant
ideas of the ruling class.

Marx provided a more advanced conceptualization of the legitimizing functions he ascribed to the "production and distribution of ideas," which can be taken to mean the media. Marx's (1859/1975) introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy provides a particularly instructive extension of his theory of cultural mediation:

In the social production of their existence, men enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production . . . . The totality of these relations of productions constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which corresponds definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. (p. 425)

In this passage, Marx postulated that the process of class control over the origination and dissemination of dominant consciousness in the society discussed in The German Ideology is not a mechanical process; rather, it is mediated by the abiding logic and dynamics of the capitalist socio-economic formation. Thus, any analysis of the process of cultural production, mediation, and negotiation needs to study not only the class substructure of social control, but also the general economic context within which this control is exercised. It is this schema that provides the theoretical foundation for the political economy tendency within the Marxist tradition of media scholarship, a tendency that resonates with some of Adorno's theorization of mass culture, as I will show later.

It is important to note, however, that contrary to the claims of vulgar Marxism, the relationship between the substructure of social control and the superstructure of domination is a dialectical one. As Engels (1897/1972) instructively pointed out in his September 21, 1890 letters to J. Bloch, there is a perpetual push and pull between the economic substructure of social control and the superstructural manifestation of this control. "More than this," he said, "neither Marx nor I have asserted." He continued:

Hence, if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure . . . also exercise their influence upon the course of historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents . . . the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary. (p. 294; emphasis in original)

This long quotation vitiates the potency of economic determinism. It calls attention to the possibility not only of a constant interchange between capi-
talism and the modes of consciousness it produces through its media but of the possibility, indeed the reality, of agency in the culture industry, a theme Gramsci and Adorno elaborated in their writings, as I shall show later. It is saying, in other words, that while the economic substructure of the capitalist social formation may be the determinant force in influencing the form and nature of consciousness, it is not always the dominant force. This background is important as we consider the various tendencies within Marxist media theory.

The Basic Theoretical Assumptions of Marxist Media Theory

Marxist media theory contends that mass media serve as apparatuses in a ceaseless process of ideological reproduction and legitimation on behalf of the ruling classes in the society. It posits that class stratification remains the fundamental structural characteristic of capitalist society; that the majority of people receive their information about the social structure, relations of production, frameworks to conceptualize reality, and so on from the mass media; and that control over this all-important flow of social imagery is the exclusive preserve of groups who occupy the upper end of the social scale in the society (Westergaard & Restler, 1975).

According to Hall (1982), the rise of Marxism in media scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s in Europe was the consequence of a general disillusionment with functionalist models of society. In communication theory, functionalism analyzed media use in terms of its knowledge acquisition function, which is influenced by social structures. Researchers who used the functionalist methodology in communication research were concerned with mass persuasion and propaganda through the media. But the weakness of functionalism was that it did not account for historical processes and the dynamics of social conflict, whereas Marxism presented valuable insights into class conflict (Bryant & Miron, 2004).

Macnamara (2003) posits that influential American political scientist Harold Lasswell and sociologist Charles R. Wright were the standard-bearers of the functionalist theory of mass media. Lasswell contended that the primary functions of the mass media revolved around four basic themes: searching the environment for news and information (news function); giving perspective and context to news (editorializing); entertaining (diversion function); and transmitting culture to future generations (socialization function). Charles Wright expanded Lasswell’s functionalist view of the mass media by pointing out the mass media have both manifest and latent functions, and that the mass media of communication also have “dysfunctions.”

At the time of European ascendency of neo-Marxism in media theory—primarily in the 1970s and early 1980s—the primary non-Marxist tradition was that of liberal pluralism (which had been the leading perspective
in the United States since the 1940s). Liberal pluralists view society as one that is composed of different loci of power, and contend that "countervailing forces" yield natural checks and balances in the cultural sphere (Newbold, Boyd-Barrett, & Van Den Bulek, 2002, p. 31). "Under pluralistic views," Newbold and his colleagues argue, "the power of the media was seen as limited and conditional, a power that was 'mediated' by an ever-extending range of factors" (p. 31). Thus they divest the mass media of the great power often ascribed to them and reduce them to no more than mere parts of a big whole.

Gurevitch, Bennett, Curran, and Woollacott (1982) point out that liberal pluralists see society as a "complex of competing groups and interests, none of them predominant all of the time" (p. 1). Media organizations are seen as units within a systemic whole, which enjoy a significant measure of independence from the state, political parties, and institutionalized pressure groups. Control of the media is said to be in the hands of an emergent crop of self-directed managerial elite who grant a considerable level of professional control to media practitioners. They note that pluralists believe that a fundamental, abiding synchronicity exists between media institutions and their audiences,

since in McQuail's words the 'relationship is generally entered into voluntarily and on apparently equal terms'... and audiences are seen as capable of manipulating the media in an infinite variety of ways according to their prior needs and dispositions, and as having access to what Halloran calls 'the plural values of society' enabling them to 'conform, accommodate, challenge or reject.'" (p. 1)

Marxists, however, view capitalist society as characterized by class domination. Mass media are seen as an important part of the ideological field of contest where various viewpoints jostle for prominence, although within the context of the dominance of certain classes. Ultimate control is increasingly concentrated in monopoly capital. Furthermore, media professionals, while enjoying the illusion of independence, are actually socialized into and internalize the norms of the dominant culture. According to Gurevitch et al. (1982), Marxist theorists maintain that the media, taken as a whole, transmit "interpretive frameworks consonant with the interests of the dominant classes, and media audiences, while sometimes negotiating and contesting these frameworks, lack ready access to alternative meaning systems that would enable them to reject the definitions offered by the media in favor of consistently oppositional definitions" (p. 1).

It is worth noting that Marxist critical theory of the media is not a monolithic epistemological construct. It has a wide variety of approaches and perspectives. Although there are several characterizations of the various tendencies within Marxist critical media theory, I have chosen to adopt and
adapt Dennis McQuail's influential taxonomy. McQuail (1987) identifies variants of Marxist critical theory to include the instrumentalist, hegemony, and political economy approaches to media theory. For taxonomical and ontological reasons, I have further subsumed the instrumentalist and hegemony approaches under the broad category of "culturalist" criticism in contradistinction to the political economy approach. The important distinction to note between the culturalist approaches to media theory and the political economy approach is that while the former are almost exclusively concerned with the superstructure of capitalism, the latter gives primacy to the economic substructure and insists that it is this substructure that circumscribes the media in capitalist society. I briefly explore these approaches.

The Instrumentalist Approach

The instrumentalist approach to media theory stresses the centrality of ownership as a source of control over the policies and operations of media outfits. This approach maintains that capitalists who own media outfits use them as ideological instruments for creating a congenial climate favorable to the advancement of both their economic self-interests and those of the broader capitalist class in the society. The most widely spread version of this instrumentalist conception of the relationship between the mass media and the capitalist society was formulated by Althusser, who contended that the mass media, along with the Church, schools, family, and other traditional agents of socialization, act as no more than mere ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) of the capitalist state. Ideology, he said, functions to represent individuals as subjects. It is through ISAs that people gain both a sense of identity and the means to negotiate reality (Lapsley & Westlake, 1988).

Althusser's notion of interpellation allowed Marxist media theorists to explain the political function of mass media texts. "As a pre-existing structure, the text interpellates the spectator, so constituting him or her as a subject" (Lapsley & Westlake, 1988, p. 12). According to this view, the subject (viewer, listener, reader) is constructed by the text, and the potency of media artifacts consisted in their ability to "position" the subject in a manner that makes it seem as if this positioning is a faithful reflection of everyday reality when, indeed, it is an invention of it.

Althusserian media theorists tended to see the text as the singular determinant of the subject's response (Lapsley & Westlake, 1988). They also treated the subject as "unified," whereas subsequent Marxist theories have posited, "a contradictory, de-centered subject displaced across the range of discourses in which he or she participates" (Curran, Gurevitch, & Wool-lacott, 1982, p. 25). Consequently, critics condemned this conspiratorial/
instrumentalist analysis of the media in capitalist society as reductionist, oversimplified, and theoretically deficient because it not only fails to study and analyze how ideology is produced in concrete terms, but it also ignores human agency in the consumption of media artifacts. The dissatisfaction with this model gave rise to the popularity of the hegemony school of thought.

The Hegemony Approach

The hegemony approach to analyzing the media sees the existence of a subtle ideological mediation in the intergenerational perpetuation of the dominance of the capitalist class rather than a direct conspiracy. The leading thinker of the hegemony school of thought is Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Like Althusser, Gramsci denounced economic determinism, insisting that there is no link between ideology and the economic substructure of society—a common assumption among traditional Marxist theorists. Gramsci also rejected crude materialism, offering a humanist version of Marxism, which focused on human subjectivity. Gramsci used the term *hegemony* to refer to the ability of the capitalist ruling class to impose moral and intellectual dominance over subordinate groups in the society and “build around its own project a new system of social alliances, a new ‘historic bloc’” (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1992, p.62). Hegemony here represents not only political and economic control, but also the ability of the dominant class to impose its own self-interested ordering of society’s reality and make those who are trampled by this reality to accept it as “common sense” and “natural,” what Adorno elegantly called the “abstract” character of domination by the “dictatorship of the self-appointed elite” (as cited in Cook, 1996, pp.6-7).

After his imprisonment by the Italian government, there was a slight transformation in Gramsci’s conception of hegemony. His notion of hegemony later combined notions of subtle force and consent, and rested on a particular set of beliefs and ideas that had broad appeal. He argued that central ideologies are seen as becoming most powerful when they are accepted as common sense, i.e., when they are not seen as ideologies at all. He posited that we can judge ideology to be effective if it is able to connect with the “common sense” of the people. The ruling class struggled to retain its hegemony over the proletariat by formally allowing contestation of ideas which, in reality, only reinforces the marginality of the ideas of the proletariat (Fiske, 1992).

Participatory mass media programs, such as call-in programs in the broadcast media or letters to the editor in the print media, are examples of incorporative strategies that pretend to accommodate alternative views. The discursive inclusivity that the Internet enabled, which has led to the explosion of citizen media, might be regarded as a sophisticated incorporative
strategy to give subordinate classes the illusion of power and choice (Kperogi, 2011). But Gramsci contends that because dissenting and oppositional views do not fit very easily into the prevailing frameworks of imagery and expression, they are heard and read by the mass audience as deviant, and as no more than crackles of background noise, which further pushes their points of view to the fringes and perpetrates the ruling classes' interests (Fiske, 1992).

**The Political Economy Approach**

Political economy critics of the media contend that the concentration of media power through the ownership and control of production and distribution of networks coupled with the logic of the prevailing economic system are more important in explaining media performance than ideology (Curran et al., 1982). Murdock and Golding (1977) opined that, “it is only by situating cultural products within the nexus of material interests which circumscribe their creation and distribution that their range and content can be fully explained” (p.33).

The central argument of the these theorists is that the most important control mechanism of media content in capitalist society is not a conspiratorial liaison between journalists and the ruling class, or a crudely overt proprietorial censorship of media content; it is the structure and dynamic of the capitalist economy which determine the organization and performance of the media. Media proprietors do not need to intervene or regulate media content since the abiding logic of the prevailing market structure ensures that only those who possess strong financial clout can survive in the market. Murdock (1982) called attention to the fact that the mass media in capitalist societies are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations that produce and distribute commodities.

In other words, the essence of a media artifact is its dual form as commodity and text. Media institutions, therefore, are both industrial production centers producing commodities and also ideological apparatuses in a continual process of ideological reproduction, negotiation, and legitimation. This agrees with Hartley’s (1982) assertion that mass media messages cannot be as ideologically neutral as functionalist and liberal pluralist theorists posit because their final content and form are determined as much by the politics and economics of production as they are by the inherently restrictive mechanisms that the capitalist system imposes on media content.

According to Hartley (1982), the dynamics of profit and accumulation are more powerful in imposing media censorship than the crude suppression of oppositional viewpoints by governments or media proprietors. That explains why the political economy approach to media criticism insists that any effort to scientifically grasp the dynamics of media systems in capitalist societies needs to take a close look at the role of advertisers in influenc-
ing media content, and at the concept of advertising in enshrining dominant value systems that reinforce the status quo.

Now, how does Adorno fit into these various approaches? In many important respects, Adorno is a central locus in the conversations between the various tendencies within Marxist media theory.

Adorno and Marxist Media Theory

Adorno was one of the founding members of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, which has the distinction of being the first significant systematic Marxist attempt to theorize the media after Marx himself. For decades, its variant of Marxist appropriation of the mass media predominated in Europe (Gurevitch et al., 1982). However, while the Frankfurt School is the most frequently cited school of thought in media theory (Bryant & Miron, 2004) and was instrumental in diffusing Marxist influences in the social sciences and philosophy (McLaughlin, 1999), it has often been criticized for being excessively cynical, and for reducing consumers of mass culture as unthinking cultural dupes who are fed on the staple of false consciousness in the service of dominant social groups (Bennett, 1982). On the basis of this, Janet Woollacott contends that the Frankfurt School's work "gives to the mass media and the culture industry a role of ideological dominance which destroys both bourgeois individualism and the revolutionary potential of the working class" (Woollacott, 1982, p. 105). This may largely be true of some of the theorists of the Frankfurt School.

However, what appears to be missing in the accounts of the Frankfurt School's theory of the media is Adorno's more sophisticated understanding of the media that engaged with and anticipated many developments in the media industry—and in media theory—after his death. In many important respects, Adorno's oeuvre on mass culture incorporates postulations that fit the frames of reference of, and reconciles, the culturalist and political economy perspectives of mass media theory. The epistemological rupture between the culturalist and political economy media theories arises precisely because of their differential appreciation of and attitude to what has been understood as Marx's original theory of economic determinism. The passage in The German Ideology cited earlier tends to be understood as the point of departure in Marx's construction of the theory of economic determinism, which allegedly emphasizes the primacy of economic factors in the production, distribution, and entrenchment of dominant consciousness to the exclusion of the superstructural manifestations of the capitalist social formation.

Culturalists derive the inspiration for their theory from a rejection of what they consider to be the reductionist, simplistic, even self-limiting, implications of surrendering to the notion that the economic substructure of the capitalist social formation determines the superstructure, which in-
cludes the media and the production of ideology. This “economistic” stance is understood to preclude agency and contestation at the superstructural realm of the capitalist social formation. The political economy media theorists, on the other hand, take off from this premise: that we can only explain the reality of the superstructure by examining the form and content of the economic substructure on which it rests. However, as we have seen from Marx’s extension of the theory of cultural mediation in his Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy and, more importantly, in Engels’ letter to J. Bloch, both the culturalist critics and the political economy theorists of the media grapple with only isolated parts of a large, interconnected whole. This is where Adorno’s contribution to media theory comes in. Adorno’s writings on media theory show sensitivity to the strengths and weaknesses of both the culturalist and political economy tendencies in media theory. In this sense, Adorno’s postulations are faithful to the original thoughts of Marx and Engels in more ways than he has often been given credit for.

In “Culture Industry Reconsidered” for instance, Adorno lays out many positions that resonate with culturalist critics of the mass media. In one noteworthy passage, Adorno (1991) wrote that “the very word mass-media” is “specially honed for the mass culture industry,” and that the mass media collectively do no more than re-echo “their master’s voice” (p. 99). This instrumentalist and conspiratorial conception of the role of mass media in capitalist society aligns not only with the views of Althusser, but also with those of Ralph Miliband (1973), who famously characterized journalists as mere “cultural workmen” for the capitalist social class. It is isolated remarks such as this that often render Adorno vulnerable to charges of reductionism.

However, he gives a more sophisticated account of the process of cultural arbitration through the mass media than this simplistic remark suggests. In the same essay, Adorno draws attention to what he called mass culture’s essence “as a form of omnipresent familiarization” (p.85), which institutes “a canon of synthetically produced modes of behavior” (p. 91). This insight into the dialectics by which dominant bourgeois forms are entrenched by the mass media is an extension of his original thoughts on what he calls the standardization of all forms of cultural expression in late capitalism. Standardization translates cultural artifacts, including media artifacts, into the realm of what Gramsci called “common sense.”

According to Adorno, standardization had as its accompaniment the technique of bestowing mass-produced commodities with a fictive aura of individuality, which he called pseudo-individuation. Applied to the mass media, standardization creates fixed formulae and time frames into which all news and entertainment are fitted so that the end of TV shows can actually often be predicted from their very beginning. In “How to Look at Television,” Adorno (1991) observed:
Every spectator of a television mystery knows with absolute certainty how it is going to end. Television is but superficially maintained and is unlikely to have a serious effect any more. On the contrary, the spectator feels on safe ground all the time. Everything appears 'predetermined.' (p. 161)

Later in the essay, he writes, "the outcomes of conflicts are predetermined and all conflicts are mere sham" (p. 163). This insight into the dynamics of mass-mediated messages in capitalist society recalls Murdock's (1982) important distinction between "allocatory and operational control" in capitalist media operation. Murdock (1982) points out that allocatory control of media is shared between private capital and the state. It sets the ground rules within which the media must operate. This includes the structure of media forms (such as the length of news stories, feature articles, sound bites, and so on), what Adorno would call standardization. Operational control, on the other hand, is the preserve of media personnel. It includes the latitude that journalists enjoy to choose the content of their news stories. Operational control in practice, however, internalizes the structural requirements of allocatory control so that media texts are produced within the constraints of reaching a particular type or size of audience/readers, or of editorial impartiality as interpreted and codified by the custodians of state—the concentrated expression of the ruling class.

So all disputes between media proprietors and journalists only arise when the latter feel their operational control, that is, their "professional autonomy" is being infringed upon. This means that as Murdock (1982) points out, the debate about control of the media takes place over the ambiguous terrain of where one form of control converges into another. It rarely digresses to the fundamental issue of whose interests the present distribution of allocatory control serves. Victor Mathews, chairman of the Fleet Holdings in the UK, once declared that, "By and large, the editors will have complete freedom as long as they have agreed with the policy I have laid down" (Halin, 1992, p. 39). Adorno (1991) prefigured these political economic critiques of the operations of the media in capitalist society in "How to Look at Television." There, he pointed out that to understand television messages, especially what he called the "hidden meaning of messages," it is more rewarding to look at the "objective requirement" of the artist's products "much more than his own urges of expression when he translates his own primary consciousness into reality" (p. 168). Adorno continued:

The fact that most products of mass media are not produced by one person but by collective collaboration...is one contributing factor to this generally prevailing condition. To study television shows in terms of the psychology of the authors would almost be tantamount to studying Ford cars in terms of the psychoanalysis of the late Mr. Ford. (p. 168)
In this passage, Adorno comes to terms with what later political economy critics of the media call the inherent restrictive mechanism of the media systems into which journalists are inexorably socialized. They institute this as a better way to appreciate media artifacts than an analysis of the personal dispositions of journalists, editors, publishers, and the personnel of state. This extends and refines his earlier statement about the media simply echoing “their master’s voice.” In “The Schema of Mass Culture,” Adorno (1991) refines this insight even further when he points to the subtle, barely perceptible but nonetheless ideologically powerful imbrication of advertising, media messages, and the purposive legitimation of bourgeois culture. In particular, he said, “we can distinguish three stages in the developing domination of needs: advertising, information and command. As a form of omnipresent familiarization mass culture dissolves these stages into one another” (p. 85). Here, Adorno implicates the mass media and advertising in hegemony construction in ways that at once recall Gramsci’s notion of hegemony construction and refine it.

Like Gramscian hegemony media theorists, and contrary to how his work has often been understood, Adorno did not believe that the consumers of mass media messages were helpless, unresisting cultural dupes into whom bourgeois ideology was injected like a social syringe, with dramatic and immediate effects. In “Free Time,” Adorno (1991) pointedly declared that it is inadmissible to posit that “the culture industry and consumer consciousness can be simply equated with one another” (p.195), and spoke of “symptoms of split consciousness.” Much like the later work of Stuart Hall and his contemporaries, Adorno recognized that while mass media artifacts are hopelessly formulaic and often invariably inscribed with what Hall (1980) terms the preferred reading, the personal social and economic realities of consumers mediate in their appropriation of this reading. Adorno (1991) concluded thus:

What the culture industry presents people with in their free time . . . is indeed consumed and accepted, but with a kind of reservation, in the same way that even the most naïve theatergoers do not simply take what they behold there for real. Perhaps one can even go further and say it is not quite believed in. It is obvious that the integration of consciousness and free time has not yet completely succeeded. (p. 196)

This position is completely at variance with the reductionism often ascribed to Adorno. In this quotation, Adorno fully comes to terms with human agency and of the capacity for readers to inflect, even rebel against, the preferred meanings enciphered into media texts by their originators. Adorno was also inspired by the discovery that there was indeed a “split consciousness” in the consumption of mass media messages to see poten-
tial for change. As he put it, “we can here glimpse a chance . . . which might just eventually help turn free time into freedom proper” (p. 197).

When one examines some of Adorno’s earlier postulations on mass culture and its appurtenances, it is evident how these writing provided the basis for characterizing him as a perpetually cynical theorist who over-dramatized the influence and consequences of mass-mediated messages. For instance, in “How to Look at Television,” Adorno argued that “The repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture tend to make for automated reactions and to weaken the forces of individual reaction” (p. 160). This clearly contradicts the insights he shared about the “symptoms of split consciousness” that he noticed in his empirical study of German consumers of mass-mediated messages. One notable thing about Adorno, though, is that toward the end of his life, he redefined and refined many of his views and theories of mass culture. Unfortunately, these later revisions receive scant attention from media studies scholars, leading to an often unfair evaluation of the total output of his scholarship.

As Cook (1996) noted, it is also customary for commentators to remark that Adorno had a break with Marx’s emphasis on the primacy of the economic sphere. If one believes this view, Adorno is supposed to have no affinity of any kind with political economy theorists of the media. But this is misleading. Cook (1996) attributes the notion of Adorno’s alleged rejection of economic determinism to commentators’ “somewhat questionable reading of Dialectic of Enlightenment” (p. 11). In his “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?” Adorno (1987), admits that “the dynamics of the system as a whole” demonstrates that “the control of economic processes is increasingly becoming a function of political power,” but he nevertheless insists that “there are compelling facts which cannot, in their turn, be adequately interpreted without invoking the key concept of ‘capitalism.’” Human beings are, as much as ever, ruled and dominated by the economic process” (p. 237; emphasis in original). This stance is an affirmation of Engels’ important clarification of the dialectical relationship between the economic substructure of capitalism and the superstructure of politics and ideology. The impulse to grapple with the notion that mass media artifacts are better understood in terms of the abiding logic of capitalism is also evident in much of Adorno’s writing on mass culture, where references to cultural products as commodities whose value can only be realized in the marketplace are persistent.

In “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” Adorno (1991) states that “cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer also commodities, they are commodities through and through” (p. 100). This “transformation of literature into commodity” (p. 100), as he perceptively calls the commodification of news, agrees with Murdock’s (1982) contention that media artifacts are not mere texts in the service of bourgeois ideology; they are also, more importantly, commodities whose value is only
realized in the market. Like the political economy theorists after him, Adorno argued that products of the culture industry were “enmeshed inextricably in capitalist modes of production, distribution and exchange” and that the “success of television, radio, and newspapers is predicated entirely on the ability of these media to attract an audience—itself a commodity sold to advertisers—to whom other commodities . . . can be sold” (Cook, 1996, p. 27). Although Adorno did not have an elaborate political economy theory of the media, his prefigurations provided the basis for the blossoming of contemporary versions of the political economy theory of the mass media as evidenced from the intellectual debts that leading scholars such as Graham Murdock, Peter Golding, and Nicholas Garnham owe to his work.

Conclusions

Far from being reductive and simplistic as most commentators are wont to say, Adorno’s theory of the media simultaneously adumbrates, converses with, and extends the frontiers of many of the dominant critical theories of the mass media today. Throughout his writings examined in this article, we see evidence of his reconciliation of culturalist and political economy tendencies, with echoes of The German Ideology and the elaboration of Engels in his letter to J. Bloch.

Adorno recognized that a political economy critique of the media does not necessarily preclude the media from being a site of ideological struggle, nor should a culturalist critique of the media downplay the important role that the nature and logic of the capitalist economic substructure plays in determining the compass and ideological complexion of the media in capitalist society. Like Marx and Engels before him, Adorno acknowledged that the determinant contradiction of contemporary society exists at the substructural realm of the architecture of the capitalist social formation while the dominant contradiction resides in the superstructure, but the determinant and the dominant are engaged in a perpetual dialogue. To emphasize one at the expense of the other is to do great disservice to the tradition of Marx and Engels. In reconciling the culturalist and political economic impulses in Marxist critical media theory, even though this reconciliation was largely unconscious, Adorno remained faithful to the original traditions of Marxism in more ways than is often acknowledged in contemporary commentaries.
References


Marxist theory of the media


