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Media Conglomeration, Automation, and Alienation: A Marxist Critique

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Abstract

The rise of the so-called "digital age" in the twenty-first century absorbs individuals' livelihoods and disconnects them from the natural world. Over time, modern society has adapted to digital news and entertainment media's unremitting chokehold on daily life. What enabled this change and how does the corporate structure of digital news and entertainment media impact the everyday worker? The contemporary American digital news and entertainment media market is almost exclusively regulated by five major corporations: AT&T, The Walt Disney Corporation, NewsCorp, Paramount Global (formerly Viacom CBS), and Comcast. Although the titles and rank of these corporations have changed over time, their ownership has stayed consistent. Through corporate conglomeration and horizontal and vertical integration, the major five media corporations vie for control over the media marketplace. Those in positions of power seldom experience the effects of their decision-making; instead, the worker, producing intellectual or material commodities, fails to truly experience the creative realization of their labor. Instead, the worker's labor is the property of the corporation for which they work. Media workers are alienated from the product of their labor, as it belongs to the owners of the means of production. Mass media stakeholders, as owners of the means of production, maintain structural control over the dominant social ideology, reflected in the economy, government, and media. Media workers, beholden to mass media stakeholders, are unable to realize their full creative capacity, as they are confined to the restrictions set forth by the capitalist media economy.

1. Introduction

The American media market has grown substantially over the course of the twenty-first century. What was once dominated by print media, radio, and cable television has expanded to a vast media landscape which makes use of digital technologies to challenge traditional forms of media. Yet, the media landscape feels eerily monotonous. Between 1983 and 2004, the number of mass media corporations at the top of the market fell from fifty to five.[1] The aims of the big five—AT&T, The Walt Disney Corporation, NewsCorp, Paramount Global (formerly Viacom CBS), and Comcast—are broadly similar: to control the dominant social ideology promoted by media and consumed by a public audience. Cross-sector ownership allows for more market dominance, and thus more leverage with politicians who determine media regulation. The acclaimed journalist and media critic Ben Bagdikian writes, "the fewer the owning corporations, the larger each one's share of the annual harvest of the billions of consumer dollars."[2] Further, Bagdikian contends, "[media

[1] Bagdikian Ben H. 2004. *The New Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press, pg. 16.

[2] Ibid, pg. 30.

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conglomeration] is, tragically, a self-feeding process: the larger the media corporation, the greater its political influence, which produces a still larger media corporation with still greater political power."[3] Through vertical and horizontal integration, the big five and their thousands of subsidiaries capitalized on each other's individual strengths to increase their combined control of the media market. Media conglomerates impose productivity expectations and creative stipulations that workers in the digital media space cannot achieve without being objectified and alienated from the product of their work. Zooming in from the industry at large down to the individual media worker, this investigation analyzes the current mass media structure through the lens of Classical Marxism and critical theory. An examination of the history of media conglomeration and its impact on the media market is followed by a Classical Marxist critique, drawing on the concepts of alienation, technological automation, and the base-superstructure dynamic.

The term "alienation" refers to the levels of separation between a worker and the eventual product of their work. Under capitalism, a wage or salaried employee creates a product for sale on the free market; the product no longer belongs to the individual who created it and is thus something *alien* to them. Alienation takes place in all sectors of the capitalist economy, but due to the high levels of competition for market dominance and subjectivity of creative content, media workers' labor is more prone to exploitation by corporate administrators.

Furthermore, the theory of technological automation refers to the emancipatory power of technology. Technological automation is the most developed form of "fixed capital."[4] Capitalism requires that individuals have an income source to procure goods and services which reproduce their daily life, but technological automation threatens that requirement in the realm of digital media. Software tools such as artificial intelligence mimic human capabilities, thus threatening to displace jobs in the digital media market. This could be of particular interest to media conglomerates, which seek to maximize profit and minimize expenditures.

Marx's concept of the base-superstructure dynamic encapsulates the social stratification involved in the production of media content. Traditionally used to describe the reciprocal relationship between the economic base of society and its ideological superstructure, I employ this concept to define the relationship between money, power, and influence in the media market. "Direct knowledge workers" produce content that is disseminated and consumed through the media, while "indirect knowledge workers" create and reproduce the conditions that enable this process. In other words, direct knowledge workers are media workers (i.e., employees of media conglomerates), while indirect knowledge workers are the owners of the means of production (i.e., shareholders, executives, directorial board members) who determine the ideological content produced by direct knowledge workers.

Combined, the three frameworks described above are used as the analytical lens for considering how media workers relate to the work they produce within the confines of the corporate media structure.

2. The Big Five

2.1. Historical Context

The first of the major five media corporations is AT&T. Currently, AT&T's most notable subsidiary

[3] Ibid, pg. 17.

[4] Fixed capital is defined as a type of investment which generates profit. For example, a t-shirt company needs to invest in a screen printer to transfer designs onto the shirts themselves. In this scenario, fixed capital is the screen printer, as it costs money to procure, but generates money once operable.

companies are Time Warner, CNN, and HBO.[5] Until the rise of mobile technology, Time Warner was the dominant name in media ownership. In 2000, Time Warner and America Online (AOL) merged to combine AOL's emerging internet market with Time Warner's traditional print and television media. This initial merger synergized the media industry; together their strength was greater than individually. As Bagdikian describes, "Time Warner had by this time a large quantity of media products from magazines to movies, and AOL had the best pipeline through which to send this 'content."[6] After its initial merge with AOL, AT&T acquired Time Warner in 2016, further developing AT&T's cross-platform content creation and distribution capabilities.

The second of the major five media corporations is the Walt Disney Corporation. In 1995, Disney merged with ABC/Capital Cities. Disney purchased ABC/Capital Cities for approximately 19 billion dollars; the move came with an interest in mitigating market competition, though the companies claim it was done to enhance consumers' access to diverse content.[7] In addition to news media, ABC/Capital Cities managed several other subsidiary corporations and joint ventures, the most profitable of which was ESPN. Together, Disney brings name recognition and financial prowess while ABC/Capital Cities touts a geographically diverse network of cable television and telecommunications investments.

News Corp is the third of the five major media corporations, and the only one with a clear political association, although it is not formally documented. News Corp currently owns Fox Network, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Post*, Harper Collins Publishing and more. The architect of News Corp, Rupert Murdoch, was a Marxist at university before inheriting his father's European media empire. Murdoch successfully ran numerous British and Austrian mass media ventures before expanding to the United States. Murdoch's first American acquisition was the formerly left-leaning newspaper, the *New York Post*, which now leans conservative.[8] News Corp, under Murdoch's direction, used horizontal integration to diversify its audience demographic and overall reach. Horizontal integration refers to the lateral acquisition of disparate businesses within the same market segment. In 1987, News Corp took possession of Harper & Row, which later joined forces with the Scottish publisher William Collins.[9][10] Between the procurement of Harper & Row and William Collins, News Corp also attained Triangle Publications Inc., which includes *Seventeen Magazine*, *TV Guide*, and *Daily Racing Forum*.[11] News Corp went on to expand internationally by obtaining *Star TV* from China.[12] It wasn't until 1996 that News Corp officially launched Fox News Network as a 24-hour news channel to supplement the entertainment division, which they took complete ownership of in 2005.[13] To streamline the dissemination process, News Corp took partial ownership of

[5] "AT&T to Acquire Time Warner," AT&T, October 22, 2016, https://about.att.com/story/att_to_acquire_time_warner.html.
[6] Bagdikian Ben H. 2004. *The New Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press, pg. 31.
[7] Fabrikant, Geraldine. "The Media Business: The Merger; Walt Disney to Acquire ABC in $19 Billion Deal to Build a Giant for Entertainment." *The New York Times*. August 1, 1995.

[8] Bagdikian Ben H. 2004. *The New Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press, pg. 41.
[9] Rosenthal, Thomas B. 1987. "Murdoch to Buy Harper & Row for $300 Million : Media Baron's Purchase of Book Publisher Will Leave Few Independents in Field - Los Angeles Times." *Los Angeles Times*, March 31, 1987. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-03-31-fi-1385-story.html.
[10] Unknown. 1989. "Murdoch Takes Over Collins for $721 Million - Los Angeles Times." *Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 1989. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-01-07-fi-259-story.html.
[11] *The New York Times*. 1988. "THE MEDIA BUSINESS; Murdoch Agrees to Buy TV Guide In a $3 Billion Sale by Annenberg - The New York Times," August 8, 1988. https://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/08/business/media-business-murdoch-agrees-buy-tv-guide-3-billion-sale-annenberg.html.
[12] Shenon, Philip. 1993. "THE MEDIA BUSINESS; Star TV Extends Murdoch's Reach - The New York Times." *The New York Times*, August 23, 1993.
[13] Mifflin, Lawrie. 1996. "Fox Presents Its Lineup for News Channel - The New York Times." *The New York Times*, September 5, 1996. https://www.nytimes.com/1996/09/05/arts/fox-presents-its-lineup-for-news-channel.html.

DirecTV Group (formerly controlled by Hughes Electronics) in 2003. Bagdikian writes that through this strategic move, "Murdoch realized he could use DirecTV to put himself on both sides of bargaining tables. He is a tough and patient negotiator and can use earlier acquisitions of his own cluster of Fox sports channels plus DirecTV to get his own price for carrying schedules of big sports teams and special events."[14]

The fourth of the five major media corporations is Viacom CBS, which has recently rebranded as Paramount Global.[15] Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) was initially nothing more than a disorganized set of television and radio stations. Just before CBS went bankrupt prior to WWII, it was picked up by father-son duo William and Sam Paley. Sam Paley revolutionized CBS' reach by extending the network overseas during WWII which earned CBS a reputation for reliable and relevant news. Viacom purchased CBS in the 1990s, rebranding as 'Viacom CBS' and diverting its focus on the film distribution industry. Viacom CBS hoped the addition of CBS would diversify the company's portfolio. The company has now rebranded for a third time, changing its name to "Paramount Global." Paramount Global has a stake in broadcast news, television entertainment, and digital streaming with their new platform, Paramount+.

The fifth and final major media corporation is Comcast, which also owns NBC Universal, Telemundo, and Universal Studios.[16] Comcast has been the dominant cable and internet service provider since the turn of the century, but it has since expanded into the digital streaming market after its merger with NBC Universal (also affiliated with the industrial conglomerate, General Electric) in 2011. The conglomerate has since attained DreamWorks Animation as an additional subsidiary investment. Comcast maintains control over numerous telecommunications channels through cable infrastructure (with the help of General Electric), news, entertainment, digital streaming, and film production.

2.2. Impact on Industry

One of the primary critiques of media conglomeration is the impact it has on content relevancy, which translates to matters of market production and consumption through advertising. Maintaining a diverse portfolio provides media conglomerates a chance to advertise across their platforms, creating a cohesive brand image. Media scholar David Croteau describes how "broadcast networks now routinely [incorporate] entertainment, celebrities, human interest, and other light fare into their broadcasts."[17] Media conglomeration has blurred the line between fact and fiction. The popularity of entertainment media is financially advantageous for media conglomerates because it provides a larger audience for commercial advertisements. Consequently, the majority of the big five media conglomerates possess subsidiary ventures in digital streaming, where they can charge consumers extra to eliminate ads, benefiting the conglomerates' bottom line by encouraging greater consumer investment.

Media conglomerates expand their influence through vertical and horizontal integration. As defined in reference to News Corp's acquisitions, horizontal integration "refers to the process by which one company buys different forms of media."[18] Alternatively, vertical integration in the

[14] Bagdikian, Ben H. 2004. *The New Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press. Pg. 37

[15] ViacomCBS Staff, "Viacomcbs Unveils New Company Name, Global Content Slate and International Expansion Plans for Paramount+ at Investor Event: Paramount," Paramount (Paramount/Viacom CBS, February 15, 2022), https://www.paramount.com/press/viacomcbs-unveils-new-company-name-global-content-slate-and-international-expansion-plans-for-paramount-at-investor-event.

[16] "Comcast Company Timeline." Comcast. Comcast / NBCUniversal, July 11, 2022. https://corporate.comcast.com/press/timeline#:~:text=2011,transaction%20to%20form%20NBCUniversal%2C%20LLC.

[17] Croteau, David and William. Hoynes. 2014. *Media/society: Industries, Images, and Audiences.* Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE Publications, pg. 44.

[18] Ibid, pg. 42.

media industry refers to when "one owner acquires all aspects of production and distribution."[19] In the context of media conglomeration, horizontal integration provides media companies with greater reach over separate industries while vertical integration allows for the monopolization of specific media products.

3. Marxist Critique

3.1. Alienation of the Worker

When media companies conglomerate, they strip previously independent media corporations, and subsequently the employees carrying out media creation, of individuality in favor of the acquiring company's creative ideals. The act of conglomeration is "alienating" in the terms devised by Karl Marx. Marx contends that a worker is alienated from the product of their labor because they are not producing it for their individual consumption. Rather, their labor is an instrument in the greater process of commodity production, with the goal of capital accumulation.[20] Marx developed his notion of labor alienation and objectification in the context of the Industrial Revolution, though it can now be used as a framework for analyzing the relationship between media ownership, media workers, and media products.

In Marx's time, the introduction of factory production, which sought to meet increasing consumer demands, separated factory workers from the product of their labor. Similarly, as demand for media increased with the introduction of new technology, the need for market variation resulted in the corporate media conglomerates we see today. Instead of producing a good for their own consumption, observational enjoyment, or creative expression, the factory worker produced a commodity for its exchange-value in a capitalist economy. Formerly independent media corporations generated content for the sake of graphic and technological innovation, while the current structure does so for the sole purpose of increasing corporate profit margins. Factory workers received a wage as compensation for their productive power, which did not reflect the exchange-value of the product when sold in the free market. Today, employees of corporate media conglomerates likewise receive a wage or salary which pales in comparison to the overall profit their work generates.

Under a capitalist structure, media workers are alienated from the product of their labor through various degrees of separation produced by the capitalist market, ultimately stripping them of creative fulfilment that would otherwise be attained if the media artifact were produced independent of a corporation. For example, interns often work similar or longer hours than their superiors, but due to lack of experience, they are paid far less—if at all. This rationale is often accepted within the confines of a capitalist economy. But when considering this dynamic within Marx's conception of the product to labor relationship, interns (a low-tier media worker) are never compensated for the full value of their work. Imagine that an intern working at an animation studio produces a short promotional video. That video is then used to market the animation company's new children's movie. Instead of being paid directly for the level of audience engagement with the promotional video (either through cable television views, digital streaming views, or social media engagement) the intern is paid an hourly wage. During their tenure with the media corporation, the sum of this hourly wage amounts to a small percentage of the overall profit the intern generated through their work on the video. The degrees of separation generated through the hierarchical compensation structure of large media conglomerates alienates the media worker from

[19] Ibid, pg. 40.

[20] Marx, Karl. 2007. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Translated by Martin Milligan. Dover Books on Western Philosophy. New York, NY: Dover Publications.

the product of their work and disincentivizes genuine creativity.

The individual alienation of media workers is compounded by the mutual relationship between media conglomerates and the American political system. Media conglomerates benefit from lenient corporate legislation, allowing for further cross-sector dominance. Cross-sector dominance and the accumulation of subsidiaries increases opportunities for the exploitation of media labor.

3.2. Production Automation

Production automation, as Marx conceives of it, is a consequence of machine technology replacing innate human exertion. As Marx describes in the *Grundrisse*, "in machinery as an automatic system, the means of labour is transformed as regards its use value, i.e. as regards its material existence, into an existence suitable for fixed capital in general; and the form in which it was assimilated as a direct means of labor into the production process of capital is transformed into one imposed by capital and in accordance with it."[21] Under capitalist conditions, machinery exists because of capital and for the regenerative use of capital. The machine possesses many of the same characteristics as humans, replacing the media worker's skill and labor power. Marx associated automated machinery with "fixed capital" in its most developed form. Fixed capital has the capacity to emancipate the media worker from the confines of wage labor so long as it reproduces daily life for the worker. Under capitalist conditions, daily life is solely reproduced by the wages earned through labor. Technological automation alienates the media worker because automation *replaces* the need for human labor. Alternatively, under socialist conditions, automation *frees* the worker from the confines of work because workers' subsistence is produced by machinery. It is only through a change in the social structure (i.e., from capitalism towards socialism) that automation reproduces daily life.

The transition from print media towards digital media enabled the rise of information and communications technology (ICTs), reducing the desirability of print media. Corporate conglomeration in the media, whether through vertical or horizontal integration (or both), streamlines the production process of digital media. At the same time, these strategies allow corporations to reduce their labor force and lay off non-essential and duplicate workers. Production efficiency is financially beneficial for the media corporation, but not for the media worker. Conglomeration is another means of production automation. In the media sphere, automation refers to the application of IT software to replace repetitive and generative tasks, resulting in increasingly less human labor to achieve the same output. Conglomeration increases media automation by combining two separate labor forces from the merging media corporations, thus putting more responsibility on the remaining media workers to produce the desired good or service in optimal time.

According to Kumar Thangavelsamy, an expert in management science at XIM University in Bhubaneswar, India, "in the information age, the effect of automation on the relationship between capital and labor is such that there is a danger of many low-end information workers losing their jobs and even if they have jobs, those jobs will be ones that foster alienation."[22] As Thangavelsamy describes, media automation results in the loss of low-wage media jobs, thus increasing the gap between the owners of the means of production (shareholders) and the knowledge workers carrying out the owners' labor (low and mid-level employees). When utilizing media automation, the owners of the

[21] Marx, Karl, and David McLellan. *The Grundrisse*. First U.S. edition. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971. Print. pg. 132-133

[22] Kumar, T., & Jena, L. K. (2020). Capital vs. Digital Labor in the Post-industrial Information Age: A Marxist Analysis. *Emerging Economy Studies*, 6(1), 50–60. https://doi.org/10.1177/2394901520907707

means of production redirect the capital that would have been used for wages towards business operations, infrastructural development, or as dividends for the owners of the means of production.

Additionally, media conglomeration furthers the employment hierarchy by establishing one single authoritative body for what was once two separate media corporations. In the information age, the hierarchy created by media conglomeration and automation creates two separate types of information workers: the "routine worker" and the "creative worker." The routine worker facilitates the back-end software development while the creative worker cultivates the desired set of knowledge for the routine worker to engage with.[23] Management theorist Peter Drucker writes:

> Knowledge itself has become a means of production. Hence, workers who work with their knowledge will own the means of production, namely their own knowledge... though on an overall basis, all labor force faces insecurity in the information age, a minority of information professionals are able to relatively benefit more from capitalism of the information age while the majority finds that their position has become very vulnerable.[24]

Only the creative worker benefits from the automation and conglomeration process because they have a sense of self-direction and agency over the product of their labor. Alternatively, the routine worker—whose position is most vulnerable to automized outsourcing—does not choose what product they produce. The routine workers' skillset is enlisted as an instrumental tool for producing the product. Their labor is thus objectified, and they become alienated from the product of said labor.

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

3.3. Noam Chomsky's Propaganda Model

In the text *Manufacturing Consent* by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, these authors describe how the United States government uses media as a propaganda machine. The relationship between the big five media corporations and the United States government informs the regulatory structure of the media and delineates its importance within the globalized economy. There are five primary components to Chomsky and Herman's model:

> (1) [T]he size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) "flak" as a means of disciplining the media; and (5) "anticommunism" as a national religion and control mechanism.[25]

Media is the conduit connecting the ruler to the ruled. The government and stock market are both "rulers" in this dynamic, working together to maintain control over the means of media production and its eventual products. The big five media conglomerates are all publicly traded on the securities market, while the largest stockholders of each company remain the originating families that once maintained full control of the business. This stronghold is increasingly challenged by "improving market opportunities for selling media properties,"[26] spurred by the deregulation of legislation that formerly limited the concentration and conglomeration of media entities.

Outside of ownership itself, the media conglomerates maintain directorial boards that

[25] Herman, Edward S and Noam. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media.* New York, Pantheon Books, 1988. Pg. 1
[26] Ibid. pg. 8

contribute to corporate decision-making. Chomsky and Herman note that:

> active corporate executives and bankers together account for a little over half the total of the outside directors of ten media giants; and the lawyers and corporate-banker retirees (who account for nine of the thirteen under "Retired") push the corporate total to about two-thirds of the outside-director aggregate.[27]

Figure 1 below highlights the link between market stakeholders and media manipulators. In 1986, directorial board membership also included former politicians and members of the council on foreign relations, further demonstrating the connections between mass media and the United States government.

TABLE 1-3

AFFILIATIONS OF THE OUTSIDE DIRECTORS OF TEN LARGE MEDIA COMPANIES (OR THEIR PARENTS) IN 1986*

PRIMARY AFFILIATION	NUMBER	PERCENT
Corporate executive	39	41.1
Lawyer	8	8.'
Retired (former corporate executive or banker)	13 (9)	13.7 (9.5)
Banker	8	8.'
Consultant	•	'.2
Nonprofit organization	15	15.8
Other	8	8.'
Total	95	100.0
OTHER RELATIONSHIPS		
Other directorships (bank directorships)	255 (36)	
Former government officials	15	
Member of Council on Foreign Relations	20	

* Dow Jones & Co.; Washington Post; New York Times; Time, Inc.; CBS; Times-Mirror; Capital Cities; General Electric; Gannett; and Knight-Ridder.

Figure 1. Table 1–3: "Affiliations of the outside directors of ten large media companies (or their parents) in 1986."[28]

Additionally, Chomsky and Herman describe the fact that media giants procure much of their financing through commercial banks and investors, who also advise on stock ventures. In return, these financial institutions remain some of the largest stockholders of media conglomerates outside of the originating families. The stock market is the great binding factor, incentivized by the prospect of financial gain, which unites the government and media decision-makers. The government and stock market both maintain a vested interest in the content disseminated through media channels and recognize it as a financial asset.

3.4. The Ruling Class Ideology

One of the focuses of Marxist theory is social stratification. Marx asserts that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class, which is the ruling *material force* of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual force*."[29] Marx maintains that the values of the ruling class are the dominant ideological values of all classes in a given society. The ruling class has the most access to the means of material (and thus intellectual) production, which provide them the power to decide what knowledge to distribute to the masses and how to distribute it. The ruling class is beholden to nothing and nobody; they sit at the top of the social ladder, exercising hegemonic control over all other classes by manipulating the means of production. It is evident that the mechanisms of economic control over the media in a capitalist society (vertical and horizontal integration, corporate conglomeration, directorial board membership, stock block ownership, etc.) are the primary tools enabling the dissemination of ruling class ideology. The overlap between media stakeholders, the government, and the primary distributors of wealth within the economy (banks, owners of large corporations) make up the ruling elite.

The class dynamic between the ruling class

[27] Ibid. pg. 10

[28] Ibid. pg. 11

[29] Marx Karl Friedrich Engels and C. J Arthur. 1972. *The German Ideology. Art One : With Selections from Parts Two and Three Together with Marx's "Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy"*. New York: International. Pg. 64-66.

and the ruled is defined through their social roles as direct and indirect knowledge workers; as one writer notes, “there are direct knowledge workers (either employed as wage labour in firms or outsourced, self-employed labour) that produce knowledge goods and services that are sold as commodities on the market (...) and indirect knowledge workers that produce and reproduce the social conditions of the existence of capital and wage labour.”[30] In this sense, the ruling class *are* indirect knowledge workers and the ruled (or working class) *are* direct knowledge workers.[31]

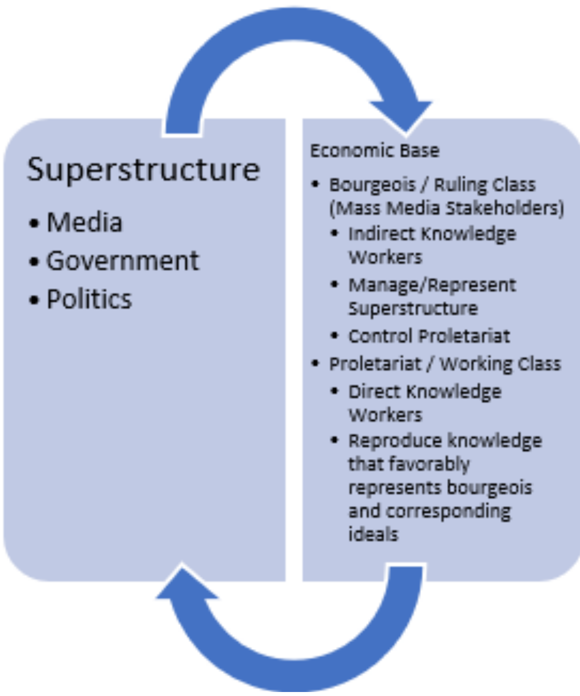

Figure 2. Marxist superstructure and base within mass media.[32]

Direct knowledge workers reify the ideals set by indirect knowledge workers, who, as owners of the means of production, are stakeholders in decisions pertaining to the regulation of the superstructure. Indirect knowledge workers contribute to decision-making across each sector of the superstructure. An example of this is the directorial board membership of mass media corporations. Mass media corporations have boards of directors who oversee business decision making. These boards are made up of members of the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class, representing the ideological interests of the owners of the means of production. Under a capitalist structure, the interests of the media then become the interests of the bourgeoisie. Those who work for the media then reiterate bourgeois values because the superstructure reflects them.

3.5. Repression & The Illusion of Choice Within the Superstructure

In the text *The Containment of Social Change in Industrial Society,* Marxist social theorist Herbert Marcuse describes the falsity of our supposed “technological society.” According to Marcuse, a true “technological society” efficiently and rationally utilizes its available resources while producing the minimum amount of tangible and intangible waste. Conversely, modern capitalist society is the *opposite* of a “technological society”; it subverts civilian autonomy “by the blocking, by the arrest, and by the perversion of technological rationality—or, in one word, by the use of technology as an instrument of repression, an instrument of domination.”[33] Outside of the traditional psychoanalytic definition of repression, Marcuse contends that repression must consider past, present, and *potential* repression of the individual, as represented by the labor opportunities available to them. Citizens of the twenty-first century who utilize digital media are repressed through the technological domination of media conglomerates and the ruling elites who ideologically inform the beliefs disseminated

[30] Fuchs, Christian. “Class, Knowledge and New Media.” *Media, Culture & Society 32*, no. 1 (2010): 141–150. Pg. 141.
[31] Tokos, Lauren. “Marxist Superstructure & Base within Mass Media.” *Media Conglomeration and Automation: A Marxist Critique.* The Ethics of Enterprise and Exchange. Fall 2022.
[32] This diagram specifically leaves out aspects of the original superstructure/base diagram to emphasize the media’s role within the traditional model.

[33] Marcuse, Herbert, and Douglas Kellner. *Towards a Critical Theory of Society*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

through the superstructure, thus enabling media conglomeration. Individuals utilize media platforms, which are predominantly owned by the same five companies, who compete with one another—and buy one another out—to ideologically manipulate the masses. To media conglomerates, individuals are merely consumers who, by using their platform, generate tangible and intangible capital for the company. In turn, the individual "[a]ppears to be increasingly powerless, confronted with the technological and political apparatus which this society has built up."[34]

Technological developments enabled the rise of industrial society which promoted consumerism through the capitalist economic structure. Consumerism is thus promoted through the media via advertising, providing individuals with the illusion of choice and opportunity. As Marcuse describes, "[t]he irrational in this society appears as rational because people indeed have more comforts, and more fun. Domination appears as freedom because people indeed have the choice of prefabricated goods and prefabricated candidates."[35]

4. Concluding Remarks

The digital media landscape we navigate today is primarily dominated by five media conglomerates: AT&T, The Walt Disney Corporation, NewsCorp, Paramount Global (formerly Viacom CBS), and Comcast. Although they once operated as a few amongst many, these conglomerates and their thousands of subsidiary companies own and operate much of the digital news media, television entertainment, and streaming services we use daily. American media legislation enabled the rise of these conglomerates through lenient legislation towards horizontal and vertical integration efforts. Political influences on the media industry impact the corporate structure, and more specifically, employees within media corporations who carry out media labor.

Using Marx's framework of labor alienation, employees of media conglomerates are *alienated* from the creative work they do—whether it be videography, animation, copy writing, etc.—as their work is produced for a media conglomerate. Marxist theory contends that for a worker to realize their full human capacity, they must create a product for their own consumption, creative expression, or observational enjoyment. When employees of media conglomerates produce content for public consumption, they do so for the sake of compensation. This compensation is ultimately disproportionate to the profit margin generated by the content's dissemination within a capitalist economy. Media conglomeration strips individual employees of their capacity to create by defining success by what sells rather than what is most creatively fulfilling.

Media conglomeration perpetuates social stratification through corporate hierarchy, directorial board membership, and the need to increase shareholder value. The hierarchical corporate structure enables wage disparity between creative producers and the true value of the content they produce. Although corporate media employees generate value for their employer, they are paid a wage or salary that is disproportionate to the profit gained by the product of their labor. Shareholders, as owners of the means of production, profit from the labor of low and mid-level employees and ideologically control the type of content that the company—and by proxy, the low and mid-level employees carrying out this work—produces. The owners of the means of production unilaterally control the dissemination of ideas across media conglomerates through directorial board ownership. As Chomsky and Hermann identify, directorial boards are tasked with aiding in long-term decision making at media conglomerates;

[34] Ibid. pg. 84.
[35] Ibid. pg. 86.

the decision-making body is comprised of owners of the means of production in other market sectors, and sometimes the same market sector. Together, media executives and directorial board members control the dominant ideology that is circulated through the media.

Despite the overarching structural domination of media conglomeration, consumers have the choice to decide the type of content they consume and the source of content they support. Consumers are changemakers. With enough pushback against corporate conglomeration in the media industry, consumers *can* change the structure of the market. Although the scope of this research is particular to the media industry, corporate conglomeration takes place in many sectors of the free market economy. Consumers have the power to educate themselves on the philosophical considerations associated with conglomeration and *choose* if it is worth supporting.

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