

# Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes



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# The Meaning and Function of Journalistic Ideology

Helle Sjøvaag

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Journalistic ideology is often seen as a question of the distance between ideals and realities. According to the ideal, journalism's social contract entails the critical investigation of political, economic and social systems of power, on behalf of citizens and in the interests of an enlightened public sphere. In reality, journalism is heavily criticised for failing to fulfil this ideal. The news media stand accused of toeing the corporate line, of simplifying important issues and of promoting the status quo. Journalism's ideology can be summarised as the content of the argument that the profession is important in a political, social and cultural sense – that we need journalism. This ideological argumentation can be found everywhere in what journalists do, in the practices of the news institution and in the encounters between media professionals and their surroundings. Ideology, as Slavoj Žižek explains, is all around us – something we cannot escape or step out of – but a system of meaning that we perform with full knowledge of our own performances (Žižek, 1989: 30-31). This chapter argues that journalism's professional ideology does not primarily work to support the dominant ideology or the hegemony of the ruling classes. It primarily works to sustain journalism as an institution within the social and political system.

## 2. IDEOLOGY IN SOCIAL THEORY

The Critical Marxists, universally recognised as a dominant force in media studies, have always seen ideology as something political. The term was coined in 1796 by the French philosopher Destutt de Tracy to describe 'the science of ideas'. Napoleon's paranoia in respect of the French ideologists resulted in a successful dethroning of the term, ushering in its current

meaning as the ideas themselves, or as “*a body of ideas which are alleged to be erroneous and divorced from the practical realities of political life*”, as John B. Thompson describes the process (Thompson, 1990: 32). Marx’s historical materialism later frames ideology as having a systematic role in the maintenance of the dominant social order, seeing consciousness itself as something that is conditioned by material circumstances. Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology* from 1846 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. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance (Marx and Engels, 1968: 21).*

Marx here lays the foundations for the further perception in social research of ideology being predominantly linked to the economic conditions of production, with resources and with power. Marx’s legacy also ensures that ideology is seen as something that is oppressive, as an inhibitor of social change. Despite the influence of the sociology of knowledge and postmodern attempts to neutralise the concept later, somehow the connection between ideology and domination remains present in social theory through its permeable connection to the political.

The so-called ‘end of ideology’ debate that resulted from Daniel Bell’s attempt to divorce the concept from its political basis in his 1960 book *The End of Ideology* did not bring an end to academic attention to ideology as a system of beliefs, ideas and values with political ramifications. To Bell, this meant an end to the belief that social change could be achieved from the ground – the belief that ideologies could be transformed into revolutions (Bell, 1960: 395–400). Instead, theoretical discussions of the concept grew increasingly disparate towards the end of the 1990s, among which one of the more fruitful perspectives is offered by Louis Althusser and his 1971 essay on Ideological State Apparatuses.

Althusser explains that the superstructural level of society consists of two kinds of state apparatus – where one is the Repressive State Apparatus that controls society through violence or the threat of violence, and the other is the Ideological State Apparatus that expresses the ruling ideology. Althusser designates the media as one of the social institutions that feeds the public daily doses of ideology. He explains that ideology only

exists by constituting subjects as subjects, by 'hailing' individuals into the category of subject. Once we are there, everything we do is ideological to the extent that we can either conform or not conform. Either we follow the rules and are left in peace as our behaviours reproduce the dominant order, or we break the rules and suffer the consequences imposed by the Repressive State Apparatuses – the police and the law – in order to correct our behaviours. No matter what we do, our concrete material behaviours cannot help but recognise the ruling ideology as true (Althusser, 1971: 164-169).

Althusser says that "*ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence*" (ibid: 153). But ideology does not correspond to reality; it creates an illusion. His central thesis, therefore, is that "*there is no ideology except by the subject and for the subject*" (ibid: 160), meaning that it is the category and function of the subject that make ideology possible. Our ideas are embedded into our actions, our actions are inserted into practices, and our ritualised practices are located within what Althusser calls the material existence of ideological apparatuses – or institutions. Hence, institutions contribute to reproducing the relations of production.

Stuart Hall explains how this type of ideological production takes place within the media institution. His classic 1982 text *The Rediscovery of 'ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies* traces how the media came to be seen as a contributor in the structuring of reality and in the construction of meaning. Here, the media are seen as making a social order that is favourable to dominant groups seem natural and unchangeable. Hall says the defining mechanisms of the ideological can be found in how the media make certain things appear as universal and natural, in how the media limit the range of perspectives on the world, and in how the media manage to attain legitimacy for this portrait of reality (Hall, 1982: 133). Ideological power is the power to signify things in a particular way, especially when it comes to controversial or conflicting issues or events. This signification becomes the setting for a struggle, because this is the level where social understanding, and hence consent, is created. The media are seen as the venue for this struggle, and therefore as an instrument of social control. Hall thus breaks ideology free from a necessary class relation and instead links it to dominance through cultural leadership.

This assumption, that the media are an instrument of social control, is criticised by John B. Thompson as a simplified conception of the overall

role of the mass media in relations of power and domination. Thompson himself defines ideology as “*meaning in the service of power*” (Thompson, 1990: 7). He says that symbolic forms, under which we can include media messages, are not ideological in themselves but through how they are understood in the specific social contexts that contribute to reproducing our conceptions of who we are. Thompson goes on to analyse ideology both in the production and in the reception of media messages. Like most academics linking ideology to the role of journalism and the mass media, his treatment focuses on how the media contribute to the dissemination of the ideological content of cultural forms.

A slightly updated version of this view can be found in the works of Teun van Dijk and his discourse perspective on ideology, primarily published in his 1998 book *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Ideologies, in his view, are organised social beliefs or world-views that form the socio-cognitive representations of the self-serving beliefs of groups in the context of social struggle. Ideologies thus characterise the mental dimensions of society. Moreover, says van Dijk, discourses are the crucial components in forming and reproducing these ideologies. The ideological goals of journalism are described as informing the public and acting as a watchdog. Van Dijk says that “*these are ideological goals, because we know that many journalists hardly do this*” (van Dijk 1998: 70). From here, he concludes that the media play a role in the production of dominant elite ideologies. Hence, the routines of the media, the actors in the news, the events reported and the institutional arrangements that form part of news making. The content of programming, all the professional practices of the institution, illustrate the ideological condition of the news business as “*biased towards the reproduction of a limited set of dominant, elite ideologies*” (ibid: 188).

This is certainly true; we can look to the media to find ideologies. It is perfectly appropriate to assert that the media support the dominant ideology, and that we can look to the media’s content and production routines to find it, but this stops short of investigating the ideology behind this ideological maintenance. The attention to the role and function of the media as upholding some sort of stable order – whether it is a political, a material or a symbolic order – is interesting enough, but it fails to account for how journalism and the news media spread their own ideology. Most of this research is focused on analysing ideology *through* the media rather than the ideology *of* the media. This perspective largely reduces journalism and communication institutions to mere technology.



Within the critical tradition, the media are seen as a system where the production of cultural form infuses products with ideological meaning, but where the institution itself is not considered as ideological. Nor is the institution's own communication considered to have an ideological content intent on maintaining its own conditions. This can be explained by the fact that the ideology of journalism largely coincides with what we often think of as the 'dominant ideology'. The function of journalistic ideology is to sustain a system in which journalism remains an important social, cultural and political institution. Althusser (1971) therefore makes a good point when he emphasises that the function of ideology is to reproduce the conditions of its production. This element of self-sustainment is the key to understanding journalistic ideology.

### 3. THE SOCIAL CONTRACT OF THE PRESS

The issue of journalism's professional ideology can be approached by analysing its core ideal, specifically the notion of 'the social contract of the press'. This ideal could be seen as the backbone of the professional ideology, or at least this could be said to be the case in the Nordic countries, and is probably true for many journalistic cultures in Europe, if not the world. Simplified, 'the social contract of the press' means journalism has an obligation to provide citizens with the information they need. It remains the primary justification for the power and privileges of the journalistic institution and can be found in many professional codes of ethics. Here, the relevant question is the conceptual link between the social contract as journalistic ideology, and the social contract as a political-philosophical concept derived from the contractarian philosophy that began primarily with Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Most analyses that concern the social contract of the press directly tie the concept to journalism's democratic role in providing citizens with the information they need to make informed decisions when electing governments and participating in public debate between elections (Strömbäck, 2005: 332). The democratic aspect is again connected with notions of journalistic responsibility towards the citizenry, and with ethical performance standards. The Norwegian journalism researcher Odd Raaum, for instance, writes about contractual aspects of journalistic professionalism in his discussion of the emancipation of Norwegian journalism from the political party system, and observes that the contract entails a mission that makes journalism a counterweight to the three formal branches of state power (Raaum, 1999: 34-36).

Taking the semantic relationship between the social contract of the press and the original political-philosophical social contract as a starting point, the word 'contract' here implies a contractual agreement based on the reciprocal exchange of rights and obligations between contractual partners. In the original political social contract, man ventured into an agreement in which the total personal freedom that existed in the imagined 'state of nature' was exchanged for the safety provided by state institutions. Hobbes called the state of nature a perpetual state of war – an intolerable situation that man resolved by establishing legal institutions – ordaining them with sanctioning powers (Hobbes, 1968 [1651]). The political social contract therefore means that citizens have a duty to obey the law, while enjoying the right to state protection. Reciprocally, the state is obliged to protect us, and has the right to enforce the common law. But, as Immanuel Kant points out, the legislative authority has no way of making or enforcing the law justly if it receives no feedback on how its laws are working. This is why we need freedom of expression and freedom of publication to ensure that governments receive the relevant information they need to uphold their part of the contract. Kant's description of the social contract therefore clearly contains some notion of publicism, the democratic function that is today maintained by journalism. He says that

*Thus the citizen must, with the approval of the ruler, be entitled to make public his opinion on whatever of the ruler's measures seem to him to constitute an injustice against the commonwealth. [...] Thus freedom of the pen is the only safeguard of the rights of the people, [...] To try to deny the citizen this freedom [...] means withholding from the ruler all knowledge of those matters which, if he knew about them, he would himself rectify (Kant, 1990 [1793]: 135; italics in the original).*

The original social contract is an agreement between the citizenry and the state that is based on a mixture of the liberal principles of freedom of expression and freedom of ownership (Hobbesian principles), and the republican ideas of the morality of the state embedded in notions such as sovereignty and the common will (Rousseau's legacy). These principles form the basis of the exchange of rights and obligations within the contract. Within this exchange, journalism regards itself as a separate partner. The institution of journalism sees itself as a third contractual partner, contributing to the upholding of the original and political social contract that keeps the fabric of society from unravelling. Journalists see their obligations under this contract as that of providing information to citizens about the affairs of the state, to which citizens react politically in turn, making the social contract a triangle of contractual exchanges in which obliga-

tions between the people, the press and the state remain balanced<sup>1</sup>. This is journalism's ideological position. The support for such a position is that the contract between the people and the state is impossible in our large and complex societies without a communicating intermediary – the press.

#### 4. THE SOCIOLOGY OF JOURNALISTIC IDEOLOGY

The American scholar Herbert Altschull adopts a rather welcoming and benign approach to journalistic ideology, in that he sees the ideals of the press as a contributor in providing a service to society. In his historical investigation into the ideals behind American journalism (1990), Altschull proposes that the ideology of the journalistic field is rooted in the ideas that have shaped the formation of our societies on a political-philosophical level. This approach assumes that journalism is part of society, and that social and political institutions interact in symbiotic ways. Hence, ideas, values and beliefs do not appear out of nowhere. Ideals that serve as boundary- maintaining properties for journalism can also serve a *positive* function in society. The reason why journalistic ideology works as effectively as it does, and it is effective when we consider the wide access of journalists to the political, economic and cultural arenas, is that the ideals of the press also have a wider social and democratic use as tenets in the original political social contract. Journalistic ideology is sustainable precisely because of this fact. Not only do we need journalism to sustain democracy, we actually need journalistic ideology. Furthermore, we need journalists to believe in the ideological position of journalism.

James Ettema and Theodore Glasser (1998) explain how this common moral ground works, by analysing what they call the paradox of the disengaged conscience in American investigative journalism. The central question for them is how journalists can seem to make news judgements without also making moral judgements. Ettema and Glasser say that the job of the investigative journalist is to report moral, legal and social transgressions. In order to identify such transgressions correctly, journalists and audiences need to operate on the same moral ground, sharing an appreciation of what is considered right and wrong in society. Transgressions are identified based on this shared morality, and reported through what they call an objectification of moral standards. This is a process that makes value judgements appear as news judgements, where value judgements are presented as empirically verifiable facts (Ettema and Glasser,

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1 For a detailed outline of this relationship, see Sjøvaag, H. (2010)

1998). Their analysis explains the extent to which journalism is guided by moral principles, and demonstrates how journalistic ideology is the result of a moral coexistence between journalism as an institution and the larger social and political order.

## 5. THE JOURNALISTIC FALLACY

There are, however, also some problems with this perspective. Once we understand how journalistic ideology can actually have a benign effect on democracy, and not just a hegemonic repressive effect on the masses, we should not overlook the possibilities offered by this perspective to also remaining critical of the journalistic institution.

The process by which journalism comes to see itself as a separate contractual partner is explained by the Norwegian media scholar Martin Eide as a fallacy – a process that turns journalism from a vocation into an ideology. Eide explains that, as journalism develops as a craft, its position and its power are strengthened both internally within the profession and externally in relation to the outside world. This evolution is referred to as an instrumentalist expansion of the media logic that can be recognised in four particular points. First, in the journalistic self-perception as being powerful in the position of ‘defender of the common man’; second, in an expansion of the service ideology, where audiences are increasingly addressed as clients, consumers and rights-holders, rather than as citizens; third, in what he calls an impresario-instrumentalism, where journalism resorts to performing the technical function of staging conflicts rather than explaining them; and fourth, in how the professional ideology overlooks the negative consequences of its own power (Eide, 2004: 35-52).

This journalistic logic is also expanding to other fields. Not only are the news media a battleground where various sources vie for legitimacy, but thinking journalistically also becomes increasingly important outside the media sphere. Because of this expansion of the media consciousness, journalism is reduced to an instrumental question – a merely technical issue with pragmatic solutions. It is in this context that Eide maintains that we are dealing with a journalistic fallacy. The problem with this instrumentalism, he says, is that journalism itself perceives this situation as a manifestation of the increased autonomy of the profession. The journalistic fallacy is thus a transgression – an elevation of a journalistic logic to the measure of all things, and the promotion of craft to ideology (ibid: 57). This analysis demonstrates the extensiveness of journalism as ideology,

and clarifies the extent to which it serves to enforce the boundaries of the journalistic profession (see also Eide, 2007).

Journalistic ideology can thus be described as a self-sustaining entity. The function of journalistic ideology is to maintain the system in which it can remain a powerful political and cultural force. Therefore, the professional ideology primarily works not to support the dominant ideology or the hegemony of the ruling classes, but to sustain journalism as an institution within the social and political system. The fact that the ideology that sustains the journalistic institution also sustains the ruling classes is therefore arbitrary to the extent that ideology, in Žižek's conceptualisation, is, in any case, inescapable.

Žižek opposes the naïve consciousness thesis that we need to be stripped of our ideologies in order for us to see the world as it really is. This Critical Marxist position, says Žižek, tells us that ideology creates a discrepancy between what people are really doing and what they think they are doing. Žižek says the Marxist project to unmask this discrepancy is outdated (Žižek, 1994: 3-8). Instead he tries to break down the notion that ideology is the same as illusion or false representation by explaining that we cannot step outside ideology. In fact he claims that even if we manage to remove our ideological spectacles to attempt to see the world as it really is, reality "*cannot reproduce itself without the ideological mystification*" (Žižek, 1989: 28).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The professional ideology of the press is rooted in the fact that news is not only a public service but that it is also, and perhaps primarily, a *business*. This makes journalistic ideology highly compatible with the dominant ideology because they both rest on the essential ideals embedded in the original social contract, which is based on a mixture of negative liberties – freedom of speech and freedom of commerce – and on the morality of the democratic order in a broader sense. The news media ideology - which essentially says that journalism is important for the democratic system - therefore not only serves the journalistic classes but also the structure that surrounds the media. Journalistic ideology is thus an expression of the journalistic self-perception as a separate partner in the social contract. The critical analyses that uncover how the news media support the dominant hegemony by framing gays as deviants and women as inferior may be said to expose the dominant ideology, but they cannot be said to expose journalistic ideology. The dominant ideal sustaining the professional

ideology of the news media is not to support the status quo, but to tear it down, to be subversive, to topple governments, to expose corruption, greed, violence and the abuse of power. This is the foundation of the journalistic social contract ideal, and the expression of journalistic ideology.

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