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| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Exploring the Relationship between Media and Culture: A Cultural Studies Perspective

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| **ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to explore the multiple layers that intervene in the relationship between media and culture. The authors argue that media products and messages have always been constructed to either serve the dominant elite's ideology, gain public consent, or consolidate racial and gender stereotypes. Media forms, types and genres are cultural filters or ideological paradigms targeting the audiences' Hedonist propensity for visual pleasure. In his book *Media Culture*, Douglas Kellner (1995) highlights the sinuous relationship between media and culture by stating that media culture has emerged whereby sounds and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life and help shape political views and social behavior. When we look at media from a cultural studies perspective, we become conscious of its sweeping impact on people's political views and identity. Noam Chomsky (1988) argues that media "manufactures consent", therefore confirming the manipulative facet of media culture through his five filters: *ownership*, *advertising*, *media elite*, *flak* and *common enemy*. With the increasing normalization of digital technology, "techno-culture" has taken on a more incisive turn by driving people to keep swinging between online and offline cultures. Through virtual and immersive actions, new cultural forms have been invented, namely e-society, cyber communities and cultural identities. Hence, by adopting a cultural studies perspective, this paper attempts to provide a theoretical framework for media culture by exploring the concepts of "techno-culture", Chomsky's and Herman's five filters, and cyberculture.

| **KEYWORDS**

Techno-Culture, media Five Filters, Media Culture, Cultural Identities.

| **ARTICLE INFORMATION**

1. Introduction

The relationship between media and culture has always been discussed, analysed, researched and debated in the academic arena. Media has never been viewed as a self-contained or discrete apparatus that operates outside its multimodal context. Informed critics and scholars have conscientiously endeavoured to examine the social and cultural artefacts that underpin media outlets and discourses which shape human thoughts, behaviours and cultural identities. Media studies theorists have gone far beyond the limited and atavistic approach which positions media outlets within the parochial scope of providing information, knowledge and entertainment. Such a superficial attitude would certainly fail to decipher the hidden messages that cut deep into media texts and are mostly nurtured by power relations. Media messages/texts are not "raw", "innocent", or "objective". They reflect ideologies, stereotypes, worldviews, biased attitudes, political agendas, and editorial lines of media makers and politicians, that is, people who own the means of production.

In this vein, Michel Foucault's power knowledge theory adequately fits into the dialogical relationship between media and culture. His insightful comments on the exercise of power through cultural constructs and social institutions have enormously benefitted the field of media studies and provided the lens from which to discern discursive practices that permeate media texts. Foucault (1978) has rightly pointed out that "Power is something exercised, put into action, in relationships" (p. 92). Indeed, media outlets and platforms are stages or arenas where power is smoothly infiltrated and exercised by people who control the media. In the

same line, Foucaul argues that "Power relations are multiple, local, and diffused through social relations" (p. 26). In this sense, media is reflexive of social relations that are animated and sustained by power relations. In theory, the ideal paradigm of media is to echo the voice of the masses, to promote cultural, racial and ethnic diversity, and to decry social hierarchies, racial prejudices and stereotypes. Conversely, the media apparatus has been systematically manipulated by the elite to diffuse power and "to control the thoughts and actions of others", which makes it appear as "a barrier to the kind of egalitarian social relations that are seen as a requisite for learning, knowledge sharing and innovation" (Heizmann & Olsson, 2015, p. 757).

It is, then, a self-evident truth that media is profoundly entangled in the dissemination of power relations that are constituents of human societies. It would be a sheer hallucination to dissociate media from its social, cultural and political determinants. Media is not only a technological system or network that attests to human ingenuity in crafting a kind of simulacrum of reality to appeal to people's instinctual seduction to visual pleasure. Simply put, media is a culture, a way of life, a normative practice, and a carrier of meanings, messages, discourses and tropes. Media is a shaping force that seeps into people's minds and psyche, reflecting, therefore, the people/society we are. In this context, we totally agree with Douglas Kellner (1995) when he pertinently confirms that media produces "the fabric of everyday life" (p. 1), which eloquently describes the sweeping and shaping power of media. In their turn, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) highlight the manipulative power of media culture in what they label "Manufacturing Consent" through media propagandistic structures and agendas that serve the interests of people in power, as it will be illustrated later.

To understand deeper why media is so implicated in shaping people's lives and cultures, it is imperative to refer to Marshal McLuhan's prophetic theory of media. In his groundbreaking book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), McLuhan argues that human consciousness, nervous system and senses have been extended by the media. In this sense, technology, machines, and automation are all extensions of ourselves; that is, media incarnates people's psychological, cultural, social, economic and political needs. Media is to be metaphorically interpreted as prosthetic to man, organically linked to his body, mind and psyche. We are all engulfed/ encapsulated within the interminable circuit of media power that has even become more drastic with the increasing normalization of and dependency on digital technology. We have gradually moved from the media broadcast age to post-broadcast era, where media culture and control have taken on a new dimension.

2. Media manipulative power in Herman's and Chomsky's Manufacturing Consent

Few would contest the manipulative power of media in people's everyday lives. A critical and insightful analysis of media texts would certainly enable researchers to discern the discursive messages that are constructed by media makers who are mostly complicit with the powerful elite's policies and agendas. Media outlets often operate as propagandistic machines that seek to disseminate the cultures and ideologies of the powerful and push the masses to consciously or unconsciously internalize and normalize these cultures in their daily lives. Because of the continuous and hegemonic intensity of media control, people's thoughts, behaviours and values are altogether mediated by media outlets that are consistently churning out compelling messages to lay grip on consumers and to frame them within the confines of "docile bodies". We argue that Michel Fucault's theory of the docile body is applicable to the inequitable relationship between media power and consumers. We conceive people's bodies and minds as texts upon which media makers inscribe their messages and make them (people) receptive to media power and control. In Foucault's theory, the docile body is pliable, malleable, capable of being "manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces" (Foucault, 1977, p. 137).

The rapid development of media culture in both form and content has drastically installed media dependency. People tend to exhibit an extraordinary dependence on media to satisfy a variety of social, cultural and/or psychological needs. Empirical research about media effects, namely *Uses and Gratification Theory,* has demonstrated that the more people depend on media, the more they become susceptible to its powerful messages. In effect, media has the potential to change and frame people's cognitive, affective and behavioural actions (Griffin, 1991, p. 359). Media is a mass communication machine that makes its shaping power easily predictable for individuals who have developed a certain vulnerability to media texts. People's potential to resist media power and agendas is quite limited, if not impossible. Media ubiquity, hegemony and magnitude are beyond proportions; people have become the byproducts of media artifacts; they have developed lust/rapacity for media culture that has reduced them to media mongers. The more we lavishly consume media texts, the more we become puppets deftly manoeuvred and controlled by media political and cultural policies. In this vein, we argue that "the belief that long dominated the scholarly community" and which holds that media has "minimal consequences" (Entman, 1989, p. 347) and exerts little influence is liable to be challenged given the unabating and enduring capacity of media to permeate people's daily life, especially digital technologies which have generated in Douglas Kellner's terms "techno-cultures". Since the rise of media studies as an established academic field of research, most theories concur with the postulate that media shaping power, influence and control stay uncontested (Steel, 2017). In other words, media outlets are institutions of power and social control. They do not only tell us how to think but also what to think about.

This is the very crux of Chomsky's and Herman's belief of media as a manufacturer of consent. They view media as a relentless machine that is systematically engaged in forging public opinion through the process of a propaganda model. People in power are fully conscious of the sweeping dominance of media culture and its enormous potential to exert a prompt and influential impact on people; this is the reason why powerful people seek to lay their grip on media outlets to serve their interests and to propagate their agendas and policies. Herman and Chomsky believe that media serve and propagandize on behalf of the powerful societal interests that control and finance them. The representatives of these interests have important agendas and principles that they want to advance, and they are well positioned to shape and constrain media policy. This is normally not accomplished by crude intervention by the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors' and working journalists' internalization of priorities and definitions of newsworthiness that conform to the institution's policy (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. xi).

It is, therefore, starkly evident that media makers are strictly working in favour of well-defined political agendas that structure media contents and shape peoples's attitudes and beliefs. Working journalists are manifestly expected to shape and constrain newsworthiness to these policies that are dictated by the people who finance and control media.

In fact, media critical theory has regularly focused on the shaping and manipulative power of media. For example, the Frankfurt School (with such figures as Adorno and Horkheimer) interprets media within the scope of "culture industry" that seeks to foster a "mass culture" as "a system of social control, manipulation, and ideology that serves to reproduce the existing system of corporate capitalism" (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. xxi). Media apparatus, according to this theory, is entangled in a system of "standardization" and "massification" to give legitimacy to existing ideologies and "integrate individuals in consumer capitalism" (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. xxi). The Frankfurt School was engaged in reflecting and theorizing on the key functions of media in disseminating commodity and consumer culture, which is a defining hallmark of capitalistic societies. In line with this theory,

> The technical and social relations that structured the mass media all over the world made it very easy for new consumerist lifestyles to become the dominant motif for these media, which became, in time, extraordinarily efficient vehicles for the broadcasting of the culture-ideology of consumerism globally. (Sklair, 2010, p. 138)

We believe, then, that the role of mass media in legitimizing, promoting and sustaining consumer culture is uncontested. Most media artefacts/texts instill individuals with the culture of consumerism through the relentless process of mass culture.

In his turn, the Birmingham School theorist Stuart Hall propounded the cultural theory of encoding and decoding to decipher media shaping power. Hall argued for the potential of media texts to embed dominant values and ideologies that seek to construct mass cultures. He lucidly identified media messages within the discursive formations of "the wider socio-cultural and political structure". For a message to have an effect on the audience, "it must be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (Hall et al., 1980, p. 119). What we can draw from Hall's theory is that media is replete with encoded discursive messages that find meanings in their socio-cultural context. Even though individuals are potentially capable of accepting, negotiating or rejecting dominant or preferred messages, we argue that whatever their position, individuals are determined by social and cultural structures that shape their views and attitudes. Hall had already concurred with this argument when he pointed out that.

> Any society/culture tends... to impose its classifications of the social and cultural political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*... The different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into *dominant or preferred meanings*. (Hall et al., 1980, p. 123).

Media does not only reflect these social and cultural hierarchies; it also sustains, normalizes and legitimizes them as discursive/power-based practices.

Media discursive practices are dexterously crafted and encoded to smoothly reach the audience's mind and psyche to gain their consent. As stated earlier, public consent is not a matter of direct intervention but rather the incorporation of techniques, codes and stratagems to induce audiences to take media discursive messages for granted and normalize them in their daily lives. Media power is not direct, ostensible or visible; it plays on people's thrust for visual pleasure to embed ideologies, stereotypes, and political and cultural agendas. Media expediency is without limits. Apparently, it claims democracy, diversity and the audience's self-gratification. But at its utmost core, media is animated by pragmatism, profitability, and cultural and racial prejudices that are replications of the social fabric and "dominant cultural order." Media technologies, conventions and norms "such as framing, editing or special effects" shape media texts and "construct representations" for audiences to take as social and cultural practices. (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. xxxii)

Herman and Chomsky (1988) subscribe to this critical engagement with media, cultural and political economy. They argue for the "structural factors" of "ownership and control" which underpin media texts and narratives. In effect, the media's dependence on ownership and funding is by far an uncontested fact; people who provide sources of funding control media policies to serve their interests. There are, in this sense, "mutual interests and relationships between the media and those who make the news and have the power to define it and explain what it means" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. xi). The construction of newsworthiness is determined by ideological and political factors that not only construct news but also provide the structures from which to define and interpret it. Media political ties are, indeed, flagrantly discernible, and they constitute a major support for media funding. The relationship between media political agenda and funding sources are so tight that in some cases, media institutions are "controlled by very wealthy people or by managers who are subject to sharp constraints by owners and other market- profit-oriented forces" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 14). Media professionals are not free agents; they are constrained by both media political agenda and owners who engage with their economic profit, as in the case of advertisers.

All that can be drawn from these powerful arguments is the media's potential to manufacture consent; for Herman and Chomsky, manufacturing consent is achieved through five filters that tailor media texts to dovetail with the cultural, political, and economic interests of people in power. The term 'filter' does lucidly conceptualize how media messages and narratives are not raw or objective materials; they are well crafted/forged to produce the expected feedback from audiences by shrinking them into docile bodies/consumers, as has been mentioned earlier. The five filters proposed by Herman and Chomsky, defined as a "propaganda model", are (1) media ownership, (2) advertising, (3) media elite, (4) flak and (5) common enemy. The two authors believe that these filters are interrelated and "reinforce one another" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 2). They overtly elucidate the process of newsworthiness, that is, how the "raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 2). The process of filtering media texts leaves no doubt that the world of media is staged; like Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) everything is craftily orchestrated to appear natural to audiences.

Media ownership refers to people who provide financial resources and funding to media companies. In fact, especially in capitalistic societies, media institutions are more akin to business enterprises and economic investments, which are a real challenge to media ethics. The so-called professional, let alone objective journalism, receded to a myth. Media is in the hands of people who own economic or political power "by virtue of their wealth and their strategic position in one of the great institutions of society. And they exercise the power of this strategic position..." (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 8). It is evident that the complicity between money and the political agenda determines the construction of newsworthiness; media texts, thus, participate in shaping public opinion and naturalizing the dominant policies or what Stuart Hall calls the dominant/hegemonic reading, which represents the views and ideologies of people in power.

Advertising is another fundamental component in the process of manufacturing consent. Most media companies, institutions, and enterprises would not survive without advertising revenues, which constitute a large portion of their entire income and budget. With the increasing dependency on advertising, media companies are forced to make ethical concessions and sell more and more spaces to advertisers that could seriously disparage media content. Herman and Chomsky have made it clear by confirming that: "*advertisers'* choices influence media prosperity and survival. The ad-based media receive an advertising subsidy." (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 14) By subsidizing media content, advertisers control the media and dictate their mercantilistic doctrine by propagating and normalizing the culture of consumerism. By allotting large spaces to advertisers, the media sell audiences to advertisers who do not only promote products and services; they more interestingly promote and inculcate cultures, values, ideologies and consumerist practices. Advertising has never been as powerful and hegemonic in manufacturing consent as recently, with the growing ubiquity of social media platforms, which are fraught with all types of ads that further disseminate the culture of consumer society.

The third filter propounded by Herman and Chomsky is media elite or "sourcing mass media news". Here comes the central function of news sourcing or raw materials provided by news purveyors who work with trade groups, business corporations and organizations. To ensure the claim of 'objectivity' and the flow of information, the media rely on these professional organizations to provide them with newsworthy stories that conform to the agenda of media companies. As pointed out by Herman and Chomsky, these "powerful sources regularly take advantage of media routines and dependency to 'manage' the media, to manipulate them into following a special agenda and framework" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 23). The claim of objectivity is mere simulacrum as long as all media makers are deeply entangled in a maze-like process of manipulation and agenda setting.

The two authors advance the term 'flak' which refers to "negative responses" to media content. Flak reflects the extent to which the media world is manipulative and strictly conforming to its well-crafted agenda. The "flak machines steadily attack the mass media" if this latter strays away from the interests of people in power. The producers of flak seek to correct media "deviations from the established line" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 28). What does this mean? It means that even in democratic nations, censorship

could operate by cutting off advertising subsidies, disallowing access to news and pushing the media makers who challenge power to the margin. The flak machine is in the hands of governments, corporations and people of power to ensure the manipulation of public consent.

The fifth filter in the process of manufacturing consent is "common enemy". Throughout the historical annals of media culture, Western media has always been engaged in constructing a common/potential enemy to serve the geo-political agenda. In the period of the Cold War, for example, American media outlets played a significant role in disseminating and instilling anti-communism feelings among the American public. The red-scare culture was manipulated as a "control mechanism" to elicit public consensus and to give legitimacy to the government's policies. In fact, media coverage of the world's hot spots often discloses a latent enemy, ideology or doctrine that is concomitant with the views and interests of people in power.

Herman's and Chomsky's theory of manufacturing consent is undoubtedly a critical breakthrough in the investigation of media culture/text. It is a plain fact that the media are systematically controlled and manipulated by the powerful elite that seeks to enforce its political, financial, cultural and ideological interests, which are, in our view, a threat to democracy that the media are paradoxically presumed to enhance. The media are, then, entrenched in what we would call latent propagandistic culture that does not overtly announce itself. It is achieved "through the ways in which issues are framed; emphasis and omission; privileging of certain sources, perspectives, information over possible alternatives and in the uses of language (verbal and visual) that assists these effects" (Foley, 2021, p. 2). Media technical, linguistic and visual codes are incorporated to embed the propaganda model that is inherent in the process of manufacturing consent.

3. Media and the Construction of "Techno-Culture" in Kellner's Media Culture
Douglas Kellner's cultural studies approach to media reflects how media culture is massively normalized as a shaping power in people's everyday lives. Kellner does not dissociate media studies from cultural studies for the practical reason of investigating the media within the scope of power relations and discursive practices that permeate media texts. Such a pertinent critical approach is needed to analyse, interpret and understand the power dynamics that structure the workings of the media apparatus. It has always been our conviction that media's intrinsic texture must be dismantled, interrogated and critiqued to decipher subliminal messages which could encapsulate ideologies, stereotypes, gender and racial tropes, and geo-political agendas that the media instill in people's consciousness through the routinzed act of watching and consuming media images. Examining the media through the lenses of cultural studies is imperative to learn the multiple cultural and social representations that intervene in the production of media content. The media have always been intertwined with people's cultures, beliefs and identities; cultural studies, as a political and pedagogical theory, address these concepts and issues that touch upon people's immediate concerns and preoccupations (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. x). Cultural Studies does not only provide hermeneutic access to media texts; it does more significantly interrogate the taken-for-granted discursive and power-based practices that infuse the media landscape.

Douglas Kellner's book *Media Culture* imposes itself as a practical trajectory in the study of media as a cultural, social and political apparatus. Kellner has been engaged in deconstructing media, political and cultural agendas that seek to shape and frame the very core fabric of everyday life. In the same line with Herman's and Chmosky's five filters, Kellner lucidly demonstrates how the media are orchestrated to serve the interests of people in power and give legitimacy to their political agenda. From the very beginning, Kellner emphatically argues that a "media culture has emerged in which images, sounds and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behaviour, and providing the materials out of which people forge their identities" (Kellner, Media Culture, 1995, p. 1). The role of media in forging people's cultures is an evident fact. We are continuously exposed to media shaping power through its multiple outlets and platforms that have pervaded our physical and conceptual spaces. Since the rise of postmodernism till the current digital age, societies have been defined in terms of their media culture. The media are not only reflexive of their societies, but they, according to Kellner, provide "the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of 'us' and 'them' (Kellner, Media Culture, 1995, p. 1). The media have been seriously and dominantly affecting people's lives in terms of class, race and cultural identities that are all determined by power relations and hegemonic/discursive practices, which are normalized by media contents as common cultures.

Some Media Studies critics, namely Stuart Hall, Colin Sparks and Douglas Kellner, to cite but few, relied heavily on the Marxist theories of Raymond Williams (1960) and Louis Althusser (1971) to examine how media texts are engaged in the transmission of ideology and the construction of individuals' "subject positions" (Scannell et al., 1992, p. 1). In this vein, people use the media to formulate cultural, ideological and political positions and views about themselves and the world around them. Media images/texts provide the registers (Scannell et al., 1992, p. 3) or repertoire, out of which popular and dominant cultures are disseminated and vested with legitimacy. It would be altogether inaccurate to minimize or deflate the central and defining role of media in contemporary societies, which are the byproducts of the media industry. "The media provide interpretations of the world around

us and offer resources for the forging of identities and imaginations... We live in media culture... a media society" (Hodkinson, 2017, p. 1). Most informed scholars interpret the media not as a discrete or separate entity but as an integral constituent of contemporary societies. Marshall McLuhan (1964) did prescient argue the growing dominance of media on human societies at a time when no one could have predicted today's people's dependence on media. In his groundbreaking/prophetic book *Understanding the Media*, McLuhan brilliantly suggests that the media are the extensions of man; that is, the media are organically correlated with people's senses. Media images/texts virtually reproduce the same sensory experiences that individuals live in their daily lives, providing them, therefore, with visual pleasure and creating a culture of media dependence in today's societies. McLuhan's pioneering theory is a milestone in the process of understanding media culture and critiquing its underlying political and ideological agenda.

Media, cultural and political agendas have taken a different turn with the rise of new technologies. The merging of media culture and technology has inspired Douglas Kellner to theorize on the concept of "Techno-Culture", which is a defining paradigm of contemporary societies. Kellner eloquently refers to media culture as "a form of techno-culture that merges culture and technology in new forms and configurations, producing new types of societies in which media and technology become organizing principles" (Kellner, Media Culture, 1995, p. 2). Technology is not to be viewed only as codes, techniques, digital systems and machinery; it is also a culture that shapes contemporary life and permeates media culture, which has been normalized as "high-tech culture". The fusion between media and technology has further empowered media images and texts to become fully immersed in the constructions of cultural identities, behaviours, lifestyles and worldviews. The impact of media on societies is beyond proportions, which led Kellner to assume that "society and culture are colonized by media culture" (Kellner, Media Culture, 1995, p. 3). The word "colonized" is a powerful metaphor that epitomizes the irreversible influences and ramifications of the media on everyday social and cultural fabric.

Kellner also attributes the ubiquity of media culture to the power of the image. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's media theory of simulacrum and simulation, he asserts that « image came to play a key role in the politics of the era, so too did it come to play a central role in the media culture of the period and in everyday life" (Kellner, Media Culture, 1995, p. 7). Media is an image-based culture that has been consolidated by new technologies. According to Baudrillard, reality has been mediated by representation and simulation, creating, then, a "hyperreality" (Smith & Clarke, 2015), not reality per se. People are constantly enmeshed by media images that have normalized visual culture. In this sense, media culture is a visual culture or, more accurately, an image-saturated culture. People assign more value to media images that provide them with self-gratification and lift them to a fantasy world. Media culture enhances "hyperreality" and provides the materials whereby people construct a world of simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994). Baudrillard eloquently comments on the impact of simulation on media culture:

> The media represent the world that is more real than reality that we can experience. People lose the ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy... They seek happiness and fulfilment through the simulacra of reality, e.g. media and avoid contact/interaction with the real world. (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2)

In line with this argument, few would contest the immeasurable impact of media simulacra in framing and constructing media culture. We live in a world where media images have become idolized and fetishized to the point they assume more reality than reality itself. In contemporary life, the politics and dynamics of representation have been subsumed by media texts that fabricate hyperreal images and provide the materials for "techno-culture".

In the same context, we find Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytical study of visual pleasure practically significant in understanding the power of media images in structuring people's consciousness. She refers to the pre-existing patterns that control "the ways of seeing and pleasure in looking" (Mulvey, 1996, p. 6). Humans are, by nature and culture, pre-disposed to take pleasure in looking and seeing because they seek psychological gratification. The media have always capitalized on this human instinctual lust for looking and seeing by creating the media image/picture-based culture. Mulvey rightly observes that media "satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking" (Mulvey, 1996, p. 8). Media culture is, then, a visual/image culture that seeks to disseminate the culture of consumerism and media dependence. People's fascination with images reinforces the underlying psychological, social and cultural factors that shape their cultural identities and make them "docile bodies" manipulated by media culture. This is why Kellner points out that "media culture has become a dominant force of socialization, with media images and celebrities replacing families, schools, producing new models of identification and resonant images of style, fashion, and behaviour (Kellner, Media Culture, 1995, p. 17). The lavish consumption of media images is a core-defining paradigm of contemporary societies where media plays a crucial role in shaping and constructing lifestyles and behaviours. Models, icons and celebrities are constructed by media culture and disseminated on media outlets for people to take as commodities to gratify the gaze/the pleasure of looking. Media culture has been engaged in "disseminating the advertising and images of high-consumption life-styles that help reproduce the

consumer society... it provides models for everyday life that replicate consumer ideals and personalities and sell personalities on commodity pleasures" (Kellner, Media Spectacle, 2003, p. vii).

4. Cyberculture: A New Paradigm Shift

The rise of new media has rapidly contributed to the normalization of cyberculture. In the post-broadcast age, the culture of the internet has pervaded contemporary life to become a semiotic signifier of "techno-culture" or cyberculture. New technologies are further participating in normalizing and perpetuating the culture of consumerism and human fascination with image/visual pleasure. Cultural studies do not respond to new technologies as separate technical systems and materials but as new cultural paradigms and patterns that structure the new information society and provide new concepts, definitions, platforms and ways of life. In this context, Pierre Lèvy (2001), one of the pioneers of cyberculture, argues that:

> With the spread of the Internet, new forms of knowledge and new forms of its distribution emerge. These new forms transform not only the ways we manipulate information but the society itself. Cyberculture is synonymous with change. It refers to the set of techniques (material and intellectual), practical habits, attitudes, ways of thinking and values that develop mutually with cyberspace.

Our conception of society and culture has been profoundly altered by cyberspace, the habitat of cyberculture. Traditional media outlets no longer fit in the new society; they have compellingly receded to give way to new digital platforms to which people have massively immigrated.

Societies are now defined through digital technologies that have generated digital cultures. Most offline activities and practices have progressively shifted online, which breed virtual spaces that transcend the limitations of offline life. This digital/online frenzy/rush reflects that societies are experiencing a technological, cultural and ontological transformation that has radically affected our conception of time, space, geography, community, society and identity, which have all been redefined as fluid, flexible and dynamic concepts. In fact, digital technology has 'infiltrated the real world'; it does not only transform society; it is society, as Castells and Cardoso rightly observe: "We know that technology does not determine society; it *is* society... I have conceptualized as the network society the social structure resulting from the interaction between the new technological paradigm and social organization at large" (Castells & Cardoso, 2005, p. 3). Technology is a society in the sense that the binary line between offline and online has become so tenuous that people are constantly stuck to their digital devices where the new society is constructed. Online virtual spaces/communities transcend borders or geography through the process of what Howard Rheingold (2000) calls the "Electronic Frontier". Thanks to the virtual spaces constructed by digital technologies, cultures, identities, images, and texts have the potential to flow freely in cyberspace, giving a global dimension to society and communication at large. In his comments on the impacts of new technologies on society, Douglas Kellner seeks to formulate a critical theory to: "adequately conceptualize the social and cultural effects of the new technologies which have more to do with the development of new social and cultural spaces, and perhaps a new public sphere" (Kellner, 2003, p. 1).

These social and cultural spaces are mediated by new technologies that have affected the public sphere and generated a new conception of society, that is, e-society. Although Kellner warns against technological determinism, technophilia and technophobia, we believe the debate over new technologies must not address people's attitudes and positions *vis-à-vis* technology but how technology is massively entangled in human life. Digital technology is now a normative practice that cannot be contested. People's dependence on their digital tools, especially in urban spaces, is another irrefutable evidence of the shaping power of new technologies. Of course, we cannot deny that digital technology is not immune to power relations and discursiveness, which are most related to the issue of democratizing media culture to narrow the technological gap or digital divide.

The concept of e-society or community is one of the most powerful paradigms of digital culture, which has contributed to the construction of "Techno-Cities". The culture of virtual/online communities is widely spread in contemporary societies where imagined communities invade public spaces and instill individuals with what could be called techno-dependence. The concept of social media has smoothly permeated people's minds and psyche to become a defining semiotic marker of the new society. Howard Rheingold's seminal work on virtual communities was a landmark in the development of new media critical theory. Rheingold conducted netnographic research on virtual communities to reflect and theorize on people's progressive shift from real to virtual communities. He was struck by the appeal that online communities have started to exert on people despite their virtual dimension:

> The idea of a community accessible only via my computer screen sounded cold to me at first, but I learned quickly that people can feel passionately about e-mail and computer conferences... I'm not alone in this emotional attachment to an apparently bloodless technological ritual. (Rheingold, 2000, p. 3)

These electronic 'social aggregations' have already been ritualized in contemporary societies, transforming the very core of the public sphere, society and community.

The virtualization of community is now accepted and practiced as a common or even mainstream culture. As advanced earlier, the dividing line between real and virtual is so blurred that the real permeates the virtual and vice versa. Real/offline cultures are subsumed by social media to take the form of techno-cultures. Digital cultures, in their turn, infiltrate real life to affect and shape people's behaviours, values and worldviews. People are so enmeshed by the magnetic appeal of social networks to the extent that they might lose contact with the physical world. Digital immersion, in this vein, entails "leaving our bodies behind" (Rheingold, 2000) and incarnating Norbert Wiener's prophecy of human-machine fusion. Our dependency on digital technology is by far a self-evident truth, which is, in my view, a syndrome of technological determinism.

Despite Douglas Kellner's objection to the doctrine of technological determinism, I believe that technology has never been so entangled with humans as in contemporary societies, creating new conceptions of techno-cultures and power relations. The world's social, cultural, political and economic forces are immensely determined by new technologies which are deployed to foreground hegemonic voices and exacerbate the cultural and digital divide. Accordingly, power relations have taken a new shape/configuration in terms of social organizations/institutions and digital media control. Power is still in the hands of those who own technology and control the digital media landscape with its social networking ramifications. Kellner employs the concept of "technocapitalism" to epitomize the increasing supremacy of technology:

> ... As the new organizing principle of society... in which technical and scientific knowledge, automation, computers, and high tech play a role in the process of production...producing as well new modes of societal organization and forms of culture and everyday life. (Kellner, 2003, p. 7)

5. Conclusion

Media critical theory is imperative for the accurate understanding of power relations, ideologies and hegemonic cultures that permeate media texts. We have clearly learned how culture and media smoothly correlate to produce cultural artefacts and practices that dominate contemporary societies and constitute the very substance of everyday life. For a sound and lucid understanding of today's societies beyond parochialism or utopianism, it is, in our view, sine qua non to seriously reflect on the power media is exerting on these societies. Media culture does not only shape beliefs, values and behaviours; it is also reflexive of the ways societies operate and sustain social, cultural and economic hierarchies.

In this context, we have seen how Herman and Chomsky's theory of manufacturing consent determines the sweeping power of media outlets in constructing public opinion and propagating hegemonic political practices. The two authors have deftly outlined the multiple stratagems employed by people of power to manipulate the media for propagandistic purposes. The media five filters proposed by Herman and Chomsky represent media as a frenetic machine that seeks to manufacture consent and forge propaganda models through, for example, advertising and the media elite.

Douglas Kellner, in his turn, addresses media discursive power through the concept of techno-culture. By adopting a cultural studies approach, he managed to unravel how the media are profoundly jumbled in people's lives. Media culture has always been consistently reflexive of power relations that define social organizations and create cultural, technological and economic divides. Media texts and images are not raw or unmediated materials; they are immensely loaded with ideologies, stereotypes and political agendas of the powerful elite.

Media must be conceived beyond its core function of communication and entertainment. Critical theory has been highly instrumental in transcending this parochial and cryptic attitude by dismantling media texts to decipher hidden messages and cliched positions. The normalization and ubiquity of digital media have further heightened the crucial necessity of media critical theory to reflect on the extent to which contemporary societies have been infiltrated by digital culture/technology.

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