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## **Power and the News Media**

**Teun A. van Dijk**  
University of Amsterdam

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the study of mass communication, there has been a continuous debate about the more or less powerful effects of the media on the public.<sup>1</sup> Instead of reviewing these positions and their empirical claims, this chapter examines in more general terms some properties of the social power of the news media. This power is not restricted to the influence of the media on their audiences, but also involves the role of the media within the broader framework of the social, cultural, political, or economic power structures of society. In order to focus this discussion better, I limit it to the news media, and in particular to the press, thus ignoring the undoubtedly pivotal role of television and other media genres in mass communication.<sup>2</sup>

The theoretical framework for this inquiry is articulated within the multidisciplinary field of discourse analysis, a domain of study in the humanities and social sciences that systematically examines the structures and functions of text and talk in their social, political, and cultural contexts.<sup>3</sup> Applied to the study of mass communication, this approach claims that in order to understand the role of the news media and their “messages,” one needs to pay detailed attention to the structures and strategies of such discourses and to the ways these relate to institutional arrangements, on the one hand, and to the audience, on the other hand.<sup>4</sup> For instance, topics or quotation patterns in news reports may reflect modes of access of various news actors or sources to the news media, whereas the content and form of a headline in the press may subtly influence the interpretation and hence the persuasive effects of news reports among the readers. Conversely, if we want to examine what exactly goes on if it is assumed that the media “manipulate” their readers or viewers, we need to know under what precise conditions, including structural properties of news reports, this might be the case.

### POWER

A brief conceptual analysis is needed in order to specify what notions of power are involved in such an approach to the role of the news media. I limit this analysis to properties of social or institutional power and ignore the more idiosyncratic dimensions of personal influence, for example, those of individual journalists. Thus, social power here will be summarily defined as a social relation between groups or institutions, involving the control by a (more) powerful group or institution (and its members) of the actions and the minds of (the members) a less powerful group.<sup>5</sup> Such power generally presupposes privileged access to socially valued resources, such as force, wealth, income, knowledge, or status.

Media power is generally symbolic and persuasive, in the sense that the media primarily have the potential to control to some extent the minds of readers or viewers, but not directly their actions.<sup>6</sup> Except in cases of physical, coercive force, the control of action, which is usually the ultimate aim of the exercise of power, is generally indirect, whereas the control of intentions, plans, knowledge, beliefs, or opinions—that is, mental representations that monitor overt activities—is presupposed. Also, given the presence of other sources of information, and because the media usually lack access to the sanctions that other—such as legal or bureaucratic—institutions may apply in cases of noncompliance, mind control by the media can never be complete. On the contrary, psychological and sociological evidence suggests that despite the pervasive

symbolic power of the media, the audience will generally retain a minimum of autonomy and independence, and engage more or less actively, instead of purely passively, in the “use” of the means of mass communication.<sup>7</sup> In other words, whatever the symbolic power of the news media, at least some media users will generally be able to “resist” such persuasion.

This suggests that mind control by the media should be particularly effective when the media users do not realize the nature or the implications of such control and when they “change their minds” of their own free will, as when they accept news reports as true or journalistic opinions as legitimate or correct. Such an analysis of social power and its symbolic dimensions requires going beyond a narrow social or political approach to power. It also involves a study of the mental representations, including so-called social cognitions such as attitudes and ideologies, shared by groups of readers or viewers. If we are able to relate more or less explicitly such mental representations, as well as their changes, to properties of news reports, important insights into media power can be gained. Well-known but vague notions such as “influence” or “manipulation” may then finally be given a precise meaning.

Within a more critical perspective, many analyses of social power, including those of media power, usually imply references to power abuse—that is, to various forms of the illegitimate or otherwise unacceptable exercise of power, given specific standards, norms, or values. For instance, manipulation as a form of media power enactment is usually evaluated in negative terms, because mediated information is biased or concealed in such a way that the knowledge and beliefs of the audience are changed in a direction that is not necessarily in its best interest. To distinguish legitimate or acceptable power from power abuse, I use the term *dominance* to refer to the latter. Dominance usually involves processes of reproduction that involve strategies aimed at the continued preferential access to social resources and the legitimation of such inequality.

### ACCESS

Another important notion in the analysis of (media) power is that of access. It has been shown that power is generally based on special access to valued social resources. This is quite literally also true for access to public discourse, for example, that of the mass media. Thus, controlling the means of mass communication is one of the crucial conditions of social power in contemporary information societies. Indeed, besides economic or other social conditions of power, social groups may be attrib-

uted social power by their active or passive access to various forms of public, other influential, or consequential discourse, such as those of the mass media, scholarship, or political and corporate decision making.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, “ordinary people” usually have active and controlled access only to everyday conversations with family members, friends, or colleagues. Their access to dialogues with officials or professionals, such as lawyers, doctors, or civil servants, is usually constrained in many ways. Although ordinary people may make use of the news media, they generally have no direct influence on news content, nor are they usually the major actors of news reports.

Elite groups or institutions, on the other hand, may be defined by their broader range and scope of patterns of access to public or other important discourses and communicative events. Leading politicians, managers, scholars, or other professionals have more or less controlled access to many different forms of text and talk, such as meetings, reports, press conferences, or press releases. This is especially true for their access to media discourse.<sup>9</sup> Journalists will seek to interview them, ask their opinion, and thus introduce them as major news actors or speakers in news reports. If such elites are able to control these patterns of media access, they are by definition more powerful than the media. On the other hand, those media that are able to control access to elite discourse, in such a way that elites become dependent on them in order to exercise their own power, may in turn play their own role in the power structure. In other words, major news media may themselves be institutions of elite power and dominance, with respect not only to the public at large, but also to other elite institutions.

Access to discourse and communicative events may take many different forms. More powerful social actors may control discourse by setting or selecting time and place, participants, audiences, possible speech acts (such as commands or requests), agendas, topics, choice of language, style, strategies of politeness or deference, and many other properties of text and talk. They thus may essentially determine who may say. (or write) what, to whom, about whom, in which way and in what circumstances. It is hereby assumed that social power of a group or institution (and their members) is proportional to the amount of discourse genres and discourse properties they control.

The social power of elite groups and institutions as defined by their preferential access to discourse and communication is effective only if it is further assumed that such discourses are important or influential. Thus, controlling access to the discourses of government sessions, board meetings, or court trials is a manifestation of power because of the consequentiality of such discourse and decision making, that is, because they may seriously affect the lives of many people: The more people

affected, the larger the scope of the enactment of discursive power. More specifically, public discourse may affect the minds of many people. Hence, the degree or modes of access to the news media are usually also a measure of the degree of elite power.

### INFLUENCE AND SOCIAL COGNITION

Special access to the minds of the public does not imply control. Not only does the public have some freedom in participating in the use of media messages, it may also not “change its mind” along the lines desired by the more powerful. Rejection, disbelief, criticism, or other forms of resistance or challenge may be involved and thus signal modes of counterpower. In other words, *influence* defined as a form of mind control is hardly unproblematic, as is the power of the media and of the elite groups that try to access the public through the media.

In the same way as forms or modes of discourse access may be spelled out, the ways in which the minds of others may indirectly be “accessed” through text and talk should also be examined. Such an account requires a more explicit insight into the representations and strategies of the social mind. Although I am unable to enter into the technical details of a theory of the mind here as it is being developed in cognitive and social psychology, the very processes of influence involve many different, complex steps and mental (memory) representations, of which I only summarize a few.<sup>10</sup>

### UNDERSTANDING

Readers of a news report first of all need to understand its words, sentences, or other structural properties. This does not only mean that they must know the language and its grammar and lexicon, possibly including rather technical words such as those of modern politics, management, science, or the professions. Users of the media need to know something about the specific organization and functions of news reports in the press, including the functions of headlines, leads, background information, or quotations. Besides such grammatical and textual knowledge, media users need vast amounts of properly organized “knowledge of the world.” A news report about the Gulf War, for instance, presupposes at least some knowledge about the geography of the Middle East, as well as general knowledge about wars, international politics, earlier historical events, and so on. This means that a lack of education may seriously limit

news understanding, as is shown by much empirical research. In other words, powerlessness may involve limited (passive) access to mass-mediated discourse due to a failure (fully) to understand news texts themselves or the events such texts are about.

### MODELS

A notion that is crucial in the study of news understanding is that of a model. A model is a mental representation of an experience—that is, an event people witness, participate in, or read about.<sup>11</sup> Each time people read a news report, for instance, about the 1992 disturbances in Los Angeles, they form a new (or update an already existing) model of that event. Thus, “understanding a news report” means that readers are able to construct a model in their minds of the events the news report is about. Such a model may also include their opinions about the event. Although such models represent readers’ subjective understanding of events, for example, those in Los Angeles, they embody particular instances of socially shared knowledge and opinions, about such things as riots, inner cities, poverty, blacks, or racism. Thus, the knowledge and attitudes of the social group of the reader will determine the models of what he or she reads in the newspaper.

We are now better able to define the informational and persuasive functions of news. It is the aim of a news report and its authors that the readers form a model of the news event in the report. Essential for this discussion is the fact that the structures and contents of such models may be manipulated by the structures and contents of news reports. Journalists themselves have a model of each news event, and they will generally write their reports in such a way that readers form a model that is at least similar to their own model of such an event. Well-known notions in critical news analysis such as “preferred meaning” or “preferred understanding” may be explained in terms of such models. Indeed, we may henceforth simply speak of “preferred models.” Such preferred models form the core of processes of persuasion, disinformation, and the media control of the public, especially if they are inconsistent with the best interests of the readers, but consistent with the interests of the elites.

One of the many ways to influence the structure of a model (and hence, the understanding of a news event) is to manipulate what information is important, by displaying it more or less prominently in the news report, headlines, leads, or photographs. Conversely, if journalists or their elite sources want less or no attention paid by the public to certain aspects of a news event, they will make sure that such information

is less prominent or absent in the news report, so that it will most likely lack prominence in the model of the news event. In the same way, news texts may emphasize or deemphasize the causes or consequences of events or the properties of news actors. Thus, news about the events in Los Angeles may play down the racist causes or backgrounds of the events and emphasize the criminal character or activities of young black males, in such a way that the models of the readers are influenced in that direction.

### **KNOWLEDGE**

If news understanding or mental model building is a function of general, socially shared knowledge, then control of such knowledge may indirectly control understanding. Thus, if the news media and those political or other elites that have access to it do not provide detailed information about the interests of the United States or other Western countries in the Middle East, the readers' knowledge, and hence their understanding of the news about the Gulf War, may be limited. Indeed, it may well be in the best interests of these elites that such public understanding be minimal. Similarly, it would also be in their best interests if the public does not have access to other means of communication that provide necessary background knowledge, hence, the well-known marginalization of radical media or oppositional experts and the pervasiveness of disinformation campaigns on the Gulf War as well as about other more or less overt wars in which elite nations are involved. Note though that the influence of such campaigns on the knowledge of the public is complex and far from straightforward: Effective credibility strategies, such as the use of statistics, authoritative sources, credible eyewitnesses, photographs, and other means that persuasively suggest the "truth" of claims are needed.

### **ATTITUDES AND IDEOLOGIES**

The strategic control of knowledge is a crucial element in the control of discourse understanding and, therefore, of discourse access and the critical counterpower of oppositional reading and understanding. Beyond knowledge, however, there are other crucial forms of what is now generally called social cognition,<sup>12</sup> such as the schemata of socially shared opinions traditionally known as attitudes.<sup>13</sup> Whereas control of knowledge influences understanding, control of attitudes influences evaluation. Acceptance of a war against Iraq, as well as of the Cold War against the

Communists before that, crucially depends on their legitimacy and justification, which in turn depends on the ways the enemy and its actions are portrayed in the news, which explains the pervasive and unambiguous images of “Evil Empires,” terrorists, dictators, naked aggression, and other forms of perceived threat to one’s safety and legitimate interests.

There are many discursive means that strongly suggest such negative evaluations of “them,” including hyperbolic emphases on obviously “bad” behavior and other rhetorical moves, such as metaphors or comparisons (“Saddam Hussein is Hitler”) that define “us” as victims and “them” as evil aggressors. Information that does not quite fit such an evaluative process and the construction of unambiguous attitudes, such as the death of many thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians as a consequence of the United States’ (not so smart) bombs, will be duly deemphasized, if not fully concealed.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, controlling attitudes may be a result of controlling the discourses of mass communication, as well as their topics, meanings, style, and rhetoric, whether by the journalists themselves or, indirectly, by those they accept as credible sources. Obviously, such results depend on the access to alternative sources of information, oppositional knowledge and beliefs, and more fundamental ideologies. Such ideologies are here defined as the basic mechanism of the social cognitions of a group, that is, as systems of norms and values that control the coherence and the development of more specific social attitudes.<sup>15</sup> Anti-Arab ideologies, for instance, will almost certainly be more supportive of the development of attitudes about the Gulf War, which in turn may justify such a war against an Arab aggressor. It will be shown how ideologies of race, class, gender, or world region control the production and understanding of news about minorities, women, workers, or the Third World.

Once such fundamental patterns of knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies are firmly in place due to repeated news reporting and other forms of public discourse (e.g., in education), they will further “act” on their own when people have to evaluate news events. After some time, there is little need for conspicuous manipulation of specific knowledge and opinions of the readers for each case. Once given the (carefully selected) “facts,” although presented in a seemingly objective fashion, the readers will themselves produce the preferred models of the elites and may even act accordingly: An active consensus will replace passive or tacit consent. Ideological control in that case is virtually total, or “hegemonic,” precisely because persuasive text and talk are no longer seen as ideological but as self-evidently true, as is the case for much dominant discourse in the United States. On the other hand, in the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe, official discourse was seen as so obviously ideological that its persuasive power was very limited.

### RACISM AND THE PRESS

Against the background of the theoretical framework of news media power sketched earlier, I now focus on more specific domains of dominance. I begin with a summary of critical research into the ways the news media are involved in the reproduction of racism and the subsequent maintenance and legitimation of white group power.<sup>16</sup> This analysis then serves as a paradigm for a brief account of the role of the media in other forms of elite dominance, such as those of gender, class, and world region.

The persuasive power of the press is particularly effective if its reporting is consistent with the interests of most readers. This is particularly the case for the coverage of race and ethnic affairs in the United States, Europe, and other Europeanized countries. From the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the 1960s and the urban "riots" in Great Britain in the 1980s until the ethnically based civil wars in Eastern Europe and elsewhere today, ethnic and racial conflicts have been a major topic of news. Immigration and integration are among the most alarming social issues of current European politics and media reporting. The rebellion of poor blacks who set fire to parts of Los Angeles in April 1992 was a story that hit the headlines all over the world.

Analyses of ethnic affairs coverage show a remarkable alignment of the press with the dominant white power elites, as well as with the popular resentment among the white population at large, whose protests against further immigration or serious equal rights policies are prominently displayed in, and thus further exacerbated by, the news media.

True, with the general attitude change on civil rights issues since the 1960s, the Western news media became less blatantly racist. Moderate support for minority rights seems to have become the dominant consensus, if only in theory, and it may be assumed that the liberal quality press in particular played a role in this overall ideological change.

At the same time, ethnic and racial discrimination is far from eradicated. Minorities generally remain in socioeconomic positions that have often been characterized as that of an underclass. Attacks against minorities and immigrants in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy are still, or again, the order of the day and hardly energetically combated by the authorities. In sum, racism or ethnicism remains one of the major problems of white societies.<sup>17</sup>

This complex picture, full of contradictions that pitch humanitarian values of equal rights against ethnic and racial dominance in virtually all domains of society, is also reflected in the coverage of ethnic affairs in the news media of Europe and the United States. The media have played a crucial role in the reproduction of the ethnic status quo as

well as in the perpetuation of racism and ethnicism.<sup>18</sup> Today, this is blatantly the case, for example, for the Serbian media, whose fierce nationalism and scare stories are fuelling the aggression against Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, or for the Rumanian (and other) media inciting hatred against Jews, gypsies, and Hungarian minorities. Hardly less explicitly nationalistic and xenophobic is the anti-immigrant coverage of the right-wing press in the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. The power of the right-wing popular press especially is due to its access to a vast audience rather than to its intellectual prestige. Its legitimation is derived from its claim to speak “for the people,” a population whose ethnic opinions it has helped to shape in the first place.

The (much smaller) liberal press takes a more complex position on ethnic affairs. It does not openly advocate discrimination, prejudice, and racism, and it usually maintains critical distance from the racist right. It advocates tolerance and understanding and may occasionally pay attention to the plight of immigrants or other minorities. At the same time, however, it plays a more subtle role in the reproduction of ethnic inequality, thus showing that it is part of the problem of racism and not the solution. It does so by sharing and contributing to the dominant white elite consensus on ethnic affairs, according to which Western societies are not racist. Indeed, the denial of racism is one of the major strategies of the media and other white elites in their positive self-presentation as moral leaders of society.

### **HIRING, ACCES AND PRODUCTION**

The facts, as research continues to show, are inconsistent with this moral arrogance of white elite power. Few newspapers in Western Europe have ethnic minority journalists, let alone minorities in higher editorial positions. In this respect, the media (both on the left and on the right) are hardly different from other elite institutions and corporate businesses, which block access and promotion of “foreigners” with transparent arguments about “lacking qualifications” or “cultural problems” that essentially blame the victim. As a result, the newsroom, editorial meetings, and the routines of news gathering are predominantly white centered. The predictable consequence is that minority organizations or spokespersons are seldom approached as credible sources, although, for all practical purposes, they might be considered the leading experts on ethnic affairs.

Analysis of news reports confirms these sociological facts of news production. Even on ethnic affairs, minority spokespersons are much less quoted than white officials and other elites (politicians, the

police, scholars). If they are quoted at all, they are seldom allowed to define the ethnic situation alone, but are accompanied by white speakers who are invited to give their view of the events. This is particularly true for “sensitive” topics, such as discrimination, prejudice, or racism, or in times of social crises such as “riots.” Critical minority voices that do not confirm the prevailing white elite consensus are deemed to be less credible and are marginalized as being too “radical.” On the other hand, those minority spokespersons who do happen to agree with the white elite perspective will be given special access to the media and be prominently displayed as representing minority points of view. For white people, nobody is as persuasive on ethnic affairs as an Uncle Tom.

### NEWS STRUCTURES

What is true for access, routines of news production, sources, and quotation patterns also holds for other properties of ethnic news coverage. Analyses of topics show that despite slight changes and variations of coverage during recent decades, news on ethnic affairs remains focused on a small selection of preferred topics, including immigration, crime, violence, cultural differences, and race relations. The prominence of these topics is further biased by the overall tendency to cover such issues in terms of “problems,” if not of “threats.” Immigration in such a case will never be represented as a boon to a country lacking a workforce for dirty jobs or enough youths to prevent demographic decline. Rather, immigration, although tacitly condoned as long as it is economically propitious, will be represented as an “invasion” or a threatening “wave.” Refugees, who used to be pitied within the older framework of humanitarian paternalism as long as there were few, are now barred from entering the country and being called “economic refugees” (i.e., as coming only because they are poor), a well-known code word for being considered “fakes,” despite the political or economic oppression in their countries. Ethnic, especially “black,” crime has become a special category and is stereotypically associated with drugs (crack), mugging, violence, rioting, gangs, prostitution, and other forms of threats to the white population. Thus, young Moroccans in the Netherlands have easy topical access to the front pages of the quality press when a scholarly or bureaucratic report shows that they engage in street crime, but not when other research documents show how they are being victimized by discriminatory employers who refuse to hire them. Similarly, cultural differences of language, religion, clothing, food, mentality, or everyday behavior are among the standard explanations of failing integration or lack of success in school, at work, or in business. Muslim traditionalism

or fundamentalism is one of the best-known examples of such cultural “explanations.” Muslim fathers are given the entire blame for the failure of their daughters to stay in school, thus associating all Turkish or North African immigrants with fundamentalism or backward provincialism, an “orientalist” tradition that also characterizes much news about Islam.<sup>19</sup> Stereotypes and prejudices in textbooks and lessons or discrimination by teachers and white students are not topics in the press, let alone preferred as explanations of minority failure in education.

In sum, the preferred topics of ethnic affairs coverage not only form a handy schema to define and interpret ethnic events, but also to select stories for their newsworthiness or to represent the white group or society as essentially tolerant and understanding. Also, they are the dominant strategy of defining the “others”—for the white reading public—as problematic, if not threatening, aliens, who at the same time may be blamed for most of society’s social and economic ills. It is not surprising that other topics seldom or never reach such prominence in the press, as is the case for economic contributions, political organization and activities, social self-help, minorities in high positions, high culture (as opposed to pop culture), and so on. Any topic that might contribute to a nonstereotypical (let alone a positive) attitude schema about a minority group is carefully avoided, if not censored. Exceptions here structurally define the rule, show that they are incidental and no threat to white group dominance, and at the same time signal that failing success must be blamed on the others and not on the majority.

Similar conclusions follow from analyses of all other levels and dimensions of news reports on ethnic affairs. Strong stylistic or rhetorical derogation of ethnic minorities and especially of antiracists is a normal daily feature of the British tabloids. Editorials are replete with the usual moves of positive white self-presentation and negative other presentation, such as the well-known apparent denial “We have nothing against blacks (Turks, etc.), but . . . ,” of which versions also appear in everyday conversations among whites. Similarly, apparent concessions or apparent praise also serve for moral face-keeping when the overall message about minorities or immigrants is meant to be negative. Phrases such as “Life of blacks in the inner cities is very difficult, but ..... is a ploy that organized much of the white media editorial and other commentary about the Los Angeles uprising in 1992.

### **THE READERS**

It is not surprising that, as a result of such coverage, the white readers get a seriously biased version of ethnic affairs. Because the average readers

lack access to alternative definitions of the ethnic situation, and because alternative interpretations are hardly consistent with their own best interest, they will generally accept such mainstream definitions as self-evident.

Conversely, as indicated earlier, the press will again use such popular resentment as support for its own coverage. Despite the general and official norms against discrimination and racism, few popular transgressions of such norms have so much access to the press as those on ethnic affairs. Letters to the Editor that sometimes openly express blatant ethnic or racial prejudices are hardly rejected, certainly not in the right-wing press. Interviews with resentful whites in the poor inner cities are standard fare of "race reporting." Indeed, the same whites would have little access if their ire was directed along class instead of racial lines. In other words, popular resentment against immigration or minority rights is both newsworthy and welcome, while also allowing journalists to publicize opinions that would be inconsistent with their more liberal and moderate self-image. What would be strictly local, personal, or neighborhood opinions thus become national opinions due to the vast scope of the mass media.

Whether intentionally or unwittingly, the press thus plays a crucial role in the reproduction of racism in society. It does so not by simply voicing the attitudes of the white public, but by defining the ethnic situation in such a way that it persuasively influences the public in adopting these elite models of ethnic events in the first place. Under specific socioeconomic, political, and sociocultural conditions of crisis and uncertainty, such models may be further exacerbated by sections of the white population in a more overtly racist direction, against which the respectable press may then take issue too late and with little energy. Once conjured, racial resentment is hard to put back into the bottle. And because explicit and consistent antiracism is not the policy of most Western newspapers, there is no alternative framework to combat the dominant ethnic consensus it has helped to preformulate.

### **RACISM, THE MEDIA, AND OTHER ELITE INSTITUTIONS**

The news media are not the only elite institution involved in the reproduction of racism.<sup>20</sup> However, they are the most effective and successful actors in managing the ethnic consensus and in manufacturing public consent. They do so, first of all, by supporting or legitimating the ethnic policies of other elite groups, such as the politicians, the police, the judiciary, scholars, or the social bureaucrats.

Analysis of government policies and parliamentary debates shows that, although generally couched in carefully managed discourse

styles with the usual claims of tolerance and hospitality, the fundamental attitudes of other white elites are hardly different from those advocated by the mainstream media. Harsh immigration restrictions, “tough” measures against ethnic crime, “pragmatic” policies on refugee reception or welfare, and open or concealed resistance against effective civil rights legislation and practices (e.g., on affirmative action, or in combating discrimination) are among the many policy choices of Western governments and parliaments. Except for especially harsh individual cases, whose critical coverage may persuasively signal the humanitarian values of the media, these basic policies are largely supported by the mainstream press, if not legitimated by its biased reporting. It is also largely through the media that popular resentment reaches the politicians, who in turn will use “vox populi” as an argument for even tougher immigration or ethnic policies with the well-known phrase that “they” should be treated in a way that is “strict, but fair,” if not in a way that is “for their own good.”

Similarly, if mainstream social science research, especially by white scholars, focuses on those properties of ethnic groups that are consistent with prevailing stereotypes (crime, deviance, drugs, ethnic culture, etc.), the serious press will also prominently display such “results.” Reports that confirm negative stereotypes are often front-page news, even if most scholarly work hardly reaches even the inner pages of the newspaper. On the other hand, the little critical research on discrimination or racism will either be fully ignored or explicitly attacked as exaggerated, ridiculous, methodologically flawed, or simply as “politically” biased.

In sum, the mainstream news media are inherently part of a power structure of elite groups and institutions, whose models of the ethnic situation provide (sometimes very subtle and indirect) support for the ethnic status quo of white group dominance. Whereas on many other issues the press may, within certain boundaries, play a more critical role vis-a-vis other elite groups, this is seldom the case for the domain of ethnic affairs. Leading white politicians, scholars, the police, or others involved in the definition of ethnic events usually have immediate access to the mass media. On the other hand, those who are able to provide alternative definitions, such as minority leaders or (other) antiracists, more critical scholars, and representatives of (small) oppositional parties, will not only have little access, but may also be explicitly marginalized and attacked when they are seen as a threat to the moral hegemony of the dominant elites, including the media themselves. Critical studies of the involvement of the media in the reproduction of racism are resolutely denied access to these media and thus seldom reach the public at large.

To protect their positive image and their humanitarian face, the media and other elites do not altogether ban protests against racism. They do so, however, by identifying and criticizing the extreme right as the only group that is involved in racism. Their own positions on ethnic affairs, however negative, will in such a presentation always appear to be more moderate, tolerant, and humane. Criticism of the racist right thus implies a denial of their own racism. It is not surprising that racist parties, even when overtly and daily engaging in discrimination or in incitement to racial hatred, are not prohibited as criminal organizations. They are very useful as political or social boundaries of the consensus, as scapegoats for general racism, and as occasions for face-saving. Similarly, by ignoring the many forms of everyday discrimination and racism, also in elite institutions, the media may level occasional accusations against individuals who have too clearly broken the consensus, as in cases of overt discrimination by business corporations. Press coverage of such cases may be extensive (although not as extensive as that of ethnic crimes), but it will always imply or emphasize that such cases are incidents and not structural. Indeed, their perpetrators are often represented as mere moral offenders and not as criminals like others. The conservative press may go further and explain, excuse, or even deny such deviance, if only by consequently putting “discrimination” or “racism” between quotes, as the object of (dubious if not ridiculous) accusations, and always as something that is being “alleged”—sometimes even after convictions in court.

In sum, the role of the press in the reproduction of racism dovetails with that of the other power elites in white societies. It certainly does not passively record and report popular resentment, political decisions, or scholarly research results. It is not the neutral mediator of prevailing ethnic attitudes in society. On the contrary, although the (mostly small) liberal press may express ethnic ideologies that are more moderate than those of large sections of the white population, most of the press subtly and sometimes more blatantly (as in the right-wing tabloids), but always actively, fuels and spreads the ethnic attitudes that sustain contemporary racism. It does so, if only unwittingly, by its discriminatory hiring policies, biased news gathering, marginalization of antiracism, selective quotation of white elites, stereotype-confirming topics, denial of racism, and the consistent semantic, stylistic, and rhetorical construction of a contrast between (good) *us* and (bad) *them*. More importantly, it does so by its vast and unique scope of access to the public at large and by persuasively providing the white readers with an interpretation framework of ethnic events that hardly allows antiracist understanding and action.

### OTHER PATTERNS OF DOMINANCE

Our analysis of the role of the press in the reproduction of racism is paradigmatic for its role in similar relations of inequality and oppression. Within flexible but clear boundaries of dissent, contradiction, and variation, much of what has been argued here also holds for the position of the mainstream press with regard to male dominance, class conflict, protest movements, international policies, and the relations between the North and South. More or less subtly, the press and most other news media position themselves in all these power conflicts at the side of the dominant group, thereby confirming the status quo, legitimating inequality, and reproducing the (ingroup) consensus on which they rest. If occasionally the news media seem to engage in a more oppositional role, they do so only when a clear and powerful movement of (usually moderate) dissent has been established among the elites. If in this way the media become agents of change, their ideological and sociological position seems to be inconsistent with a leading role; the media seldom initiate such change.

#### Gender

Examples and research to support gender patterns abound. Feminist scholarship has extensively shown the prevalence of male chauvinism in the mass media, even today, despite the modest gains in the employment of female journalists and program makers in the media and the slow acceptance of some major demands of the women's movement.<sup>21</sup> In spite of these socioeconomic advances and obvious ideological changes, most of what has been said for minorities also holds, although somewhat less extremely, for the position of women in the media and in the news. Most journalists are men, and women have even less access to higher editorial positions. As sources they are less credible, and hence less quoted, and as news actors they are less newsworthy.

Virtually all major news topics are as male-oriented as the social and political domains they define. Gender issues have low newsworthiness, unless they can be framed as open forms of conflict or as amusing fait divers. The women's movement may, up to a point, be benevolently covered, as long as it is not "radical" and as long as male positions are not seriously threatened. Women's engagement in political protest, for example, against nuclear arms, is amusingly reported as long as it is playful, but it is ignored, attacked, or marginalized as soon as it appears to be serious, as was the case for the women beleaguering the U.S. airbase at Greenham Common in the United Kingdom.<sup>22</sup> Sexism as a struc-

tural problem of society is denied or mitigated, identified with old-fashioned chauvinists. Sexual intimidation may be covered for spectacular cases (as in the Hill-Thomas hearings in U.S. Congress), but it is hardly or only reluctantly taken seriously as an everyday problem. Special contributions of women tend to be ignored, especially in male-dominated domains such as politics or science. Their small presence in disreputed domains, such as crime or war, is hardly acknowledged. Thus, news content and style continue to contribute to stereotypical attitudes about women. Feminism itself is ignored, problematized, or marginalized. Readers are generally presupposed to be male.

This incomplete list of some major properties of the news coverage of gender shows again, as for the issue of race, that journalists and the media are hardly different from other elite groups and institutions, and that male elite power is hardly challenged by the media. Collusion and consensus, rather than conspiracy, are the conditions and the consequence of such male-dominated reporting, even when the majority of the (potential) audience is female. That is, unlike the case of white group dominance, there is not even the potential counterpower of a female majority that is able to challenge such dominance; this is also true for the domains of politics, corporate business, science and scholarship, the forces of law and order, the unions, the church, scholarship, among other more or less powerful institutions of Western societies.

### **Class**

The working class is hardly covered more positively than minorities and women. Most mass media, not only in the West, are business corporations deeply integrated in the capitalist mode of production. It has become trivial to emphasize the increasing commodity status of news and other media genres. Advertising is the life blood of virtually all mainstream media, which precludes serious critique of advertising businesses. Free market ideologies are generally paramount, now also in Eastern Europe, and rarely does the press fundamentally challenge them.

Against this framework, class conflict is increasingly portrayed as a thing of the past, if classes are recognized as relevant social formations at all. It might thus be repeated for “workers” essentially what has been summarized here for the coverage of women and minorities in the media. They have less active and passive access, are less credible sources, are less quoted, have less news value (unless they resort to violence and strikes), and so on.<sup>23</sup> Business news will focus on business elites, not on those on the workforce. Workers’ contributions to the economy are taken for granted and hence ignored, although they may be blamed for recessions. Exploitation, health hazards in factories, as well

as any other situation for which management or owners (let alone the whole capitalist system) could be blamed are ignored or underreported, except in spectacular cases defined as incidents. Strikes tend to be covered as a problem for the public, if not as a threat to the economy. In industrial conflicts, the perspective of management is prevalent in the definitions of the situation, in interviews, quotes, topics, and style of coverage. Workers are not defined as being part of the audience. In sum, except in negative accounts of conflicts or in news about negotiations with their leaders, workers are hardly visible at all.

### **North Versus South**

Much critical attention has been paid in mass communication research to the information and communication gap between the North and South.<sup>24</sup> Within the broader framework of issues such as decolonization, independence, and (under)development, scholars, journalists, and politicians from the Third World, supported by some critical scholars in the First World, have emphasized the imbalance in international information and news flows. These critical analyses have focused on Western biases in news about the Third World, on the dominance of Western news agencies and communication multinationals, on the cultural hegemony of Western (and especially U.S.) television programs, and so on. Due to the absence of Third World news agencies and a lack of correspondents for Third World newspapers, most news about these countries, even in their own newspapers, is channeled through First World news agencies and inevitably shows a Western perspective. As shown earlier in the coverage of ethnic minorities in the United States and Europe, this white, Western perspective prefers news events that confirm stereotypes tailored to the expectations of Western readers.

Although more recent coverage of the South has undoubtedly gone beyond the “coups and earthquakes” accounts of earlier decades, its overall properties are markedly different from that of Western countries. War, civil war, coups, oppression, dictatorship, and violence in general are still the staple of news reports about the South, especially when they can be interpreted as a threat to the First World. The same is true for poverty, hunger, underdevelopment, misery, and—more recently—ecological catastrophes. If backgrounds and explanations are given at all, they tend to attribute the blame primarily to the “backward” policies and behavior of Third World nations, organizations, and politicians. At the same time, such explanations play down the direct or indirect effects or legacies of Western colonialism, corporate practices, military intervention, international trade, and politics. On the other hand, Western aid and other contributions are emphasized and presented as

beneficial and seldom as problematic. As is the case in ethnic affairs coverage, the overall portrayal of the Third World is organized through the combined strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other presentation.

For this analysis of the role of the news media in the structures of dominance, these overall conclusions further support the thesis that the news media generally adopt the perspective and legitimate the dominance of the elites, even in an international perspective of relations between states and world regions. Criticism of their own dominance and perspective in the domain of international news, as occurred within the framework of several Unesco debates and publications, was ignored, ridiculed, attacked or marginalized. Proposals for a new international information and communication order were resolutely rejected with the argument that such a new order would imply a limitation of the “freedom” of the (Western) press and news agencies. It is not surprising that the same media generally also supported Western resistance against similar proposals for a new international order in the domains of finance, trade, and the economy and against any other change of the status quo that would imply a more equal balance between the North and the South. Except for marginal dissent, the Western media have also supported most military interventions of Western countries in the Third World—for example, in the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East—that were until recently legitimated in the framework of anticommunist rhetoric.<sup>25</sup> Since the fall of Eastern European communism, this news rhetoric has focused on other enemies, such as terrorists and Muslim fundamentalists, thus reflecting the prevailing rhetoric of the political elites.

The persuasive power of such rhetoric lies in its apparent plausibility and apparent moral superiority. Freedom, democracy, and human rights are among the key terms that organize such political and media legitimation of the elite perspective and actions with respect to the “others.” The problem is that for most Western countries, especially the United States, these and related notions were selectively defined and applied to those situations in which their interests were being threatened, for instance, in Central America and Africa. Freedom mainly implies market liberalism and freedom of (Western) investments, not local autonomy or freedom from oppression or exploitation. Democracy is advocated only for those nations in which the current leaders (whether dictators or elected governments) are seen as a threat to Western interests. Human rights are a strategic argument focusing primarily on “unfriendly” nations or leaders, while being ignored for Western client states.<sup>26</sup>

### CONTROL COLLUSION, AND CONSENSUS

Most interesting for this analysis is the remarkable parallel between the political, corporate, and media elite positions on international affairs and North-South relations, as it was for gender, race, and class discussed earlier. Again, it should be asked whether this consensus is voluntary or imposed by one of these major elite groups. There is evidence that in many situations the news media have been persuaded, manipulated, or even coerced to follow political (or military) views on international affairs. Disinformation campaigns, financial incentives, subtle threats, or retaliation may combine with consensual political outlooks among journalists and politicians in the construction of “preferred” interpretations of the current political situation in the world.<sup>27</sup>

The same is the case, although less openly and more indirectly, for the collusion between the media and corporate business and its interests, a relationship in which multinational corporations often have more or less direct access to the boardrooms and hence, indirectly, to the newsrooms of mainstream media. Advertising is only one of the strategic means to keep editorial opinion on such multinationals within the boundaries of acceptable dissent. Indeed, none of the Western mainstream media advocate economic or financial policies that are fundamentally at variance with the basic tenets of Western corporate enterprise. Similarly, serious critical inquiry into the activities of such corporations in the South are virtually absent in the Western press. Exceptions confirm this general rule and are limited to the coverage of catastrophes, such as oil spills, major accidents in plants, or threats to the interests of Western investors or stockholders.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, the mainstream news media are far from passive onlookers, let alone defenseless victims of political or corporate control and manipulation. Through their reporters, correspondents, or stringers, the news media often are the first to witness or describe breaking events, new developments, or local situations. It is primarily their definition of the situation that contributes to the manufacturing of public opinion, if not to the opinions of the political elites. They are in principle able to reveal harmful international or local consequences of foreign policies or corporate activities. With their specific access to the means of influencing public opinion, they may put pressure on politicians and corporate managers. That is, to the extent the press is “free,” it also has potential (counter)power. Sometimes it exercises such power when other elite groups also oppose prevailing policies, as was the case in the later stages of the war in Vietnam.

That the news media generally do not act as major opponents of political or corporate policies and interests is not because of their power-

lessness, but because of the fundamental similarities of ideological positions. It is true that because many journalists tend to be liberal, opposition in the Western press is not uncommon as far as specific conservative policies and actions of governments or businesses are concerned. Such criticism suggests freedom and independence of the media. However, such challenges remain within the flexible but clear borders of dissent set by editorial policies of newspaper organizations, whose basic ideologies are in agreement with those of the other power elites.

In other words, there is no question that the news media are being controlled by these other power elites. Rather, it can be said that their common ideologies are jointly produced, each acting within its own sphere of influence and control, but each also dependent on the other. Foreign policies without support from the press can hardly be legitimated and sustained and are difficult to implement when the corporate lobby is opposed to them. International business is seriously hampered by bad publicity or by firm state antagonism. And conversely, mainstream news media cannot operate without the cooperation of the political and corporate elites.

Thus, shared elite interests favor the development of related ideological positions, as is also the case for the role of similar socialization, education, class background, gender, ethnicity, or political orientation of most elite groups. Despite occasional conflicts, contradictions, controversies, and varying directions of control, the news media are inherently part of this joint production of a consensus that sustains elite power—that is, northern, white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, politically “moderate” (that is, more or less conservative) dominance by a small minority over a large majority of non-Western, non-white, female, lower class, poor, or otherwise different “others.” It is the reproduction of this elite dominance that also explains virtually all structures and strategies of news production and news reports of the media.

#### NOTES

1. The literature on the influence or “effects” of the mass media is vast. Klapper (1960) is a classic statement. Bradac (1989) and Bryant and Zillmann (1986) are collections of more recent approaches. Early research emphasized the power of the media, a position that gave way to a more skeptical approach to mass media influence when experiments in the 1960s and 1970s often showed little direct effects. Instead, it was then suggested that the media especially have agenda-setting functions: They do not tell people what to think, but what to think about (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; MacKuen and Coombs 1981; McCombs and Shaw 1972). At present there is a tendency to pay attention to significant indirect, overall and ideological influences of the media, for example, in the framework of a critical

- analysis of the role of the media (see, e.g., Hall, Hobson, Lowe, and Willis 1980; see also later discussion). Besides the earlier quantitative approaches, the question of effect and influence is now also studied in a more qualitative way (see Bruhn Jensen and Jankowski 1991).
2. For the role and influence of television, see, for example, Livingstone (1990), Robinson and Levy (1986), Rowland and Watkins (1984).
  3. For different theoretical, analytical, and methodological approaches in discourse analysis, see the contributions and references in van Dijk (1985a). Although there are several introductory studies, none of them cover the whole field of contemporary discourse analysis.
  4. This argument is developed in more detail in my book on discourse analytical news theory (van Dijk 1988a, 1988b). These books also give references to other linguistic or textual approaches to news analysis. See also the book by Fowler (1991).
  5. The philosophical and social scientific literature on power and related notions is very large. For a conceptual analysis that also informs our approach (although I take a somewhat different perspective and focus on discourse-based, persuasive dimensions of power), see, for example, Lukes (1986); see also Clegg (1989) and Wrong (1979).
  6. For the power of the media interpreted as influence on the audience, see the references given in Note 1. For an analysis of the power of the media as an organization, for example, in relation to other elite institutions, see Altheide (1985), Altschull (1984), Bagdikian (1983), Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter (1990), Paletz and Entman (1981), among many other studies.
  7. At present, there is a rather heated debate about this autonomy of the “active” audience. Some authors within a broader cultural approach emphasize the active uses of the media by the audience (e.g., Liebes and Katz 1990; Morley 1986). Critical approaches to the mass media, however, rather emphasize the manipulative or other influential roles of the media and a more passive public (see, e.g., Schiller 1989). For a brief recent discussion of this debate, see Seaman (1992).
  8. There are not many studies that examine the role of “access” in much detail, either within a general theory of power or more specifically for the news media. For details of this discourse analytical approach to “access,” see van Dijk (1988a, 1995).
  9. Many studies detail, although usually rather informally or anecdotally, this media access power of the elites (see also the references in Note 6). For more systematic and theoretically oriented studies on the routines of news production and the role of elite sources and news actors in newsmaking, see Cans (1979) and Tuchman (1978).
  10. For further references and a theoretical background on the cognitive psychology of text comprehension, see van Dijk and Kintsch (1983), who illustrate their theory with an article from Newsweek. For specific applications to the study of news, see, for example, Graber (1988), Gunter (1987), Ruhrmann (1989), and van Dijk (1988a). For the role of knowledge in discourse understanding, see Schank and Abelson (1977) and the many other

studies that have adopted their notion of “script” as a mental organization of knowledge.

11. For a more detailed discussion of this fundamental new notion in the psychological theory of language and text comprehension, see, for example, Johnson-Laird (1983), van Dijk (1985b, 1987), and van Dijk and Kintsch (1983).
12. After a more behavioristic period in social psychology, which followed earlier cognitive approaches, the later 1970s brought social psychology back again to a more cognitive orientation, in which extensive use is made of cognitive schema theory. For introduction and detail, see Fiske and Taylor (1991) and Wyer and Srull (1984). A somewhat different approach is taken in French social psychology, for example, in the studies of “social representations” by Moscovici and his followers. For a collection of this work, see Farr and Moscovici (1984). Unfortunately, there is no place here to detail the vital role of social cognition on the influence and power of discourse in general and of news in particular. Whereas there are several studies about the cognitive psychology of news, there are no recent studies that approach news understanding and influence from the point of view of a modern theory of social cognition (for a short discussion, see van Dijk 1988a).
13. The study of attitudes, attitude change, and persuasion is a main chapter of traditional social psychology, which generated massive experimental research, but paid little attention to the actual internal structures, organization, and strategic uses or changes of attitudes. Contemporary approaches have a more cognitive flavor (Eiser and van der Pligt 1988; Petty, Ostrom, and Brock 1981a, 1981b; Zanna, Olson, and Herman 1987). Due to the neglect of discourse analysis in social psychology, most studies of attitude change, even those on verbal persuasion, lack a sound textual dimension (for discussion, see van Dijk 1990).
14. In the meantime, a vast literature has appeared on the coverage of the Gulf War. See, e.g., Greenberg & Gantz (1993), Hackett & Zhao (1994), Iyengar & Simon (1993), Kellner (1992), *Media Development* (1991), Rojo (1995). For critical political analysis, see also Chomsky (1992).
15. Such a sociocognitive definition of ideology is at variance with the more vague philosophical and sociopolitical approaches to the notion, for example, in a Marxist or Neo-Marxist perspective. Billig (1982) and Rosenberg (1988) are among the few social psychologists who deal with ideology (see also Billig 1991; Billig et al. 1988), although this approach now focuses on the role of rhetoric and discourse, and not on social cognition (for a discourse approach, see also Seidel 1988; Thompson 1984; Wodak 1989). The reasons to restrict ideology to the fundamental framework of the interest-bound social cognitions of groups is to distinguish such ideologies from (of course ideologically monitored) social and political action, discourse, economic goals, and interests or the various (state or other) institutions by or in which ideologies are acquired or reproduced (see, e.g., Althusser 1971; Larrain 1979). For studies of ideology and the mass media, see, for example, Cohen and Young (1981), Golding and Murdock (1979), Hall et al. (1980), and Kress (1983), among other studies. See also van Dijk (1995b).

16. This summary is largely based on my book on racism and the press (Van Dijk 1991), in which further references can be found on the role of the media in ethnic affairs.
17. Of the many contemporary studies of racism in Europe and North America, I only mention those—taking very different approaches—by Barker (1981), Dovidio and Gaertner (1986), Essed (1991), Gilroy (1987), and Miles (1989).
18. Of the other book-length studies that detail this role of the media in the reproduction of racism, see, for example, Bonnafous (1991), Ebel and Fiala (1983), Hartmann and Husband (1974), Indra (1979), Martindale (1986), Merten et al. (1986), and Wilson and Gutierrez (1985). The summary of research provided later incorporates results of these and other studies.
19. See Said (1981).
20. See van Dijk (1993) for a more detailed analysis of the role of the elites in the reproduction of racism. Here, the role of the media and its relationships with other elite institutions is also discussed.
21. For further details on the role of gender in the media, see, for example, Creedon (1989) and Tuchman, Daniels, and Benet (1978). Although there are several studies on women journalists, there are surprisingly few extensive studies on the representation of women in the mass media. For a recent study and further references, see van Zoonen (1994).
22. See Günther (1988) and Hollingsworth (1986).
23. The most detailed and influential studies of this role of workers in news representations are the studies of the Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1980, 1982) of the television coverage of industrial disputes in the United Kingdom.
24. Some of the major monographs and edited volumes on the debate on the role of the media in relations between First and Third World, North and South are Atwood, Bullion, and Murphy (1982), Boyd-Barrett (1980), Hamelink (1983a), Richstad and Anderson (1981), Schramm and Atwood (1981), Smith (1980), Stevenson (1988), and Unesco (1980).
25. See Chomsky (1987, 1992) and Herman and Chomsky (1988).
26. See the references given in Note 24 for further literature.
27. See the references given in Notes 6 and 24, and Golding, Murdock, and Schlesinger (1986), Hollingsworth (1986), and Negrine (1989).
28. See, for example, Bagdikian (1983), Hamelink (1983b), and Schiller (1971, 1989).

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