# The interplay between the media as a form of social control and its potential to offer opportunities for resistance

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**Abstract:** In the dominant cultural system, media play an essential role of social control over people. Drawing Adorno and Horkheimer's theory and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, this article mainly discuss media's social control function in the cultural industry, its identity-forming effect and chances of resistance it might offer to the public. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, symbolic creativity might offer a different coping method when people feel lack of choice in the dominant cultural system. While Hall's encoding/decoding theory tells us that the influence of social control might not be so strong as we thought.

## 1. Introduction

It was well acknowledged that in Adorno and Horkheimer's theory the dominant culture tends to put heavy social control over people who are involved. Furthermore, media, as a form of social control, plays an important role in this system. It works for the culture industry, distracts people though barrage of images, prevent sustained thought and resistance and have a huge impact on people's identity. What is interesting, media also offers a number of chances for resistance of the dominant culture. This article is going to analyze both sides as well as discuss the interplay between them.

This paragraph is to briefly introduce my understanding of the key terms. In this essay there are four key terms: popular culture, mass culture, social control and resistance. Popular/mass culture is usually considered the rest one rather than the so called high culture, and it is more like folk culture compared with elite one. It is a common way of life, a part of everyday life as well as a part of the market. The term popular culture was used by defendant scholars when referring to the prevailing culture industry and mass culture is comparatively a negative term used by critical scholars. Popular/mass culture tends to dominate the society whilst leave people space to negotiate and even resist, so does the media as a form of social control. Then, what is social control? Literally, social control is regulation on people's thoughts and behavior by a mechanical system. However, the social control I am referring here is performed by media and the cultural industry. It includes the impact of culture industry on people's way of life, values and conventions. Talking about social control, another term that must also be mentioned is resistance. If social control is about regulating and effecting, then resistance is about people rejecting this regulation and effect. Those definition may not be prefect, however, as they are briefly introduced, we can still apply them in our discussion here.

After introducing the key terms in this topic, the following paragraphs are to demonstrate each side respectively: media plays an important part in social control but it also offers opportunities of resistance find the connection between the two and give an answer to this question.The culture industry has many ways to control the people involved: government, religion, media and so on. For the limit of article length, this article is going to focus on media only to suggest how media can be used as a form of social control.

## 2. Media as a form of Social Control

"The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry.'* As Adorno and Horkheimer [1] said in their books, the culture industry is so strong and dominant that almost every aspect of our lives is affected by the cultural industry. In such a united mechanism, media's role is often to strengthen and work for it Indeed, every day that we wake up we find ourselves influenced by media and other forms of culture; simply choosing our clothes, what we eat for breakfast, even how we get to work.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer [1], the consumer culture monopoly is similar as Hitler's totalitarianism in which people have to follow the "mainstream" in order to be accepted by other members of society. It is part of human nature that we attempt to fit into our surroundings, and in general it is the media that shows us 'how' we should be doing this. For example, a magazine can state that a particular product is a 'must buy' that everyone must have. Soon after, this product may be found in many people's homes or, mainly due to the fact that they do not want to appear to be an outcast if they do not have it. In this case, media also works as a means of social control because it points out the "mainstream" that most society members tend to follow.

The definition of identity is quite broad and there are so many scholars contributing to it. Therefore, I will briefly discuss their points and try to conclude them in this short article. According to Johnson[4] 'Identity is a relatively stable set of perception about who we are in relation to ourselves, to others, and to social systems". From which we can see identity is social-related rather than isolated individual thought. Also it is a on-going process during people's whole life.

This paragraph is going to uncover the effects on media in people's identities. In constructing people's identity, media plays a crucial part because it can create a informational environment around them, while the formation of identity is about the very act of being aware of the surrounding and deciding which group or flow to join or exclude. Besides, in the aspect of presentation, media also has a great impact on people because all the magazines, TV shows, broadcasts and movies tend to educate people on what should they be like as men or women, girls or ladies, and so on. To be specific, on what should they look like and behavior like as being certain group of people.Therefore, media can bee seen as the source or forming identity, and it can be used as a form of social control for how people understand their identity is found in the media.

Media never fulfill what they promised (e.g. absent of sexy scenes). In relation to gender arguably media promote a certain gender norm in which the male is seen as the dominating one. From this perspective, media can be used as a form of social control as certain gender assumptions are normalized and eternalized into out everyday life. So now we can see sexy images everywhere on the screen.

One of the main critiques about the culture industry is that, while it allows consumers to come to a state of understanding of the "reality" of society, it tends to ignore the resistance from people within the forms and institutions of the popular culture.[3] Another critique is that Adorno and Horkheimer's focus on homogeneity and sameness cannot applies well in American consumer culture in mid 50s but is a bit out of date in today's American consumer culture where enormous diversity and market segmentation has become its crucial feature. [10] While for the author, the book Dialect of Enlightenment by Adorno and Horkheimer was wrote originally in German first published in 1944 and was translated into English 28 years later in1972. Thus the language in the book was intricate and obscure and hard to understand, which may cause misreading and misunderstanding[1].


## 3. Opportunities of resistance

Since the Frankfurt School scholars' research on popular culture was proved to be narrowly focusing on social control and ignored people's possibility of resistance to that control, other scholars started to search for opportunities of resistance that the culture industry offer. As media plays an important part as a form of social control, in this section is to demonstrate and discuss Paul

Willis and Stuart Hall's theories to find out media's effect on offering these chance of resistance.

Paul Willis[12] admits that high culture is far away from most youngsters' lives while insists their lives are still filled with "expressions, signs and symbols" that they create, and they seek to express their identity, presence and meanings in the book Symbolic Creativity. Willis also pointed out that youngsters tend to establish their significance from time to time with meanings and expressions they show out, from which ^common culture" was created and is determined to be prevail and resistant More specifically, they are selective and active in using and decorating all things going around them, like music, TV shows and magazines and subcultures, which was marked by John Fiske[4] as "artist": not passively accepting everything from culture industry but making changes and creating on things they have got.

### 3.1 Symbolic Creativity

Rather than Adorno and Horkheimer [1], who insist that consumerism need to be condemned because it completely dominant on people's everyday life, even leisure time and leaving no space to escape from the industry or resist, also it make everything marketable, Paul Willis (1998:550) thinks on the contrary because the former assumption neglects the energetic and living characters of common culture, and their necessary work and symbolic creativity, especially. Although the work and creativity is usually ignored or marginalized but actually they always exist. Moreover, he believes "cultural commodities are catalyst, not product; a stage in, not the destination of cultural affairs", and insists that consumerism should be known and understood as an active process rather than a passive one.

Seen from his words, we should not criticize consumer culture so much because it is a "stage of creativity". That is to say, much symbolic creativity can happen in consumerism. For instance, if we buy a waistband with a ribbon on it, after we paid for it we can do anything to it as we want. There are many ways to turn it into new products. If we cut the band shorter and wear it on the forehead, it becomes a headband; If we raise it up under shoulders and arms and it becomes a plastron; as it was worn out we can still use it as a curtain folder. The point is that consumerism actually leaves us space to create new meanings because we do not have to behave like what Marcuse marked as "dupe" (take the product and follow all the instructions when using it).

This type of symbolic creativity is a typical resistance to the consumer culture, and media, as a part of consumer culture, also offer similar spaces of resistance. Take the famous movie Star Trek for an instance [9], thousands of fans emerged instantly after it was showed on the screen. However, these fans did not just went home after watching the film, the Trekkies, as their nickname, not only recited the lines, but also wrote books, organized activities, produced their own theme T-shirts, establish their subculture and resist the dominant one. Each of this can be count as symbolic creativity and doubtlessly is resistant to the culture industry. What is more important, they bought products from the culture industry, but create a new subculture and use it to resist it.

Though it looks fabulous, this theory, however, has been criticized for being too optimistic by the author himself. Moreover, symbolic creativity can be treated as a form of conscious resistance against existing social hierarchies, class or market structures. [8] In today's world, although we can see very fruitful creations derived from various cultural and social fields, not much of them can jump out of mainstream ideology or discourse systems.

### 3.2 Encoding/Decoding Theory

Beside Paul Willis, Stuart Hall[5] also gave us a view into the opportunities to resist the dominant culture, that is, his encoding/decoding theory. The encoding/decoding theory is based on the communication process model of sender/ message/ receiver. Although this loop has been criticized for it's ignorance of the complex relations in between the structure and its linearity, it is still useful for finding out some interesting rules in communication process inside this structure which was produced and maintained through those moments: "prodaction, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction". Putting this model on the dominant culture and applying Hall's theory we can find out the spaces of resistance to the popular culture.

According to Hall[5], the producing of media message and the reception of it may not be

identical. Both of them are different moments inside the process of communication. Most importantly, there are two essential conditions for message to be received as just the meaning as it was produced to and to take the complete effect: 1, the message must be appropriated as a meaningful discourse; 2, the message must be meaningfully decoded. That is to say, if we want the message to have the same effect as we expected when we produced it, firstly we must be sure that we (producer) share the same meanings so that the receiver can understand it, and secondly it must be made sure that the receiver decode the message properly.

However, the model introduced in the paragraph above is only an ideal one which is said to be perfect and the reality would not of course always be the case. First of all, misunderstanding might happen when there is no or not enough equivalence between producer and receiver in the meaning exchange[5]. This is because without shared meanings, the receiver is not able to decode the message and, as a result, the message can not get received. Secondly, due to lack of equivalence, sometimes receivers are not willing to accept messages if they seem to come from an authoritative but opposite party with an liberate intention (e.g. to persuade).

From this we can see that, not all readings are possible. It is likely that people won't receive all of the messages given by media (perhaps some audience could even totally ignore them), and this is just a excellent chance of resistance that media offers people because they are not getting so heavily controlled under the industry.

Under the assumption of "selective perception" Hall[5] carried out his own theory: three hypotheses of ways that television messages are decoded. Selective perception is about the audiences can interpret the media message anyway as they like, as a result, misunderstanding is likely to happen. It is likely that these interpretations are not intended, but due to the persons individual experiences they might have a different reflection on the message. Although the real 'selective perception' was proved not the same as what its concept suggests, it can be used as a basis here. The three positions categorized by Hall are dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position and oppositional one. The second case is negotiated position, in which audiences understand both the producer and the oppositional people's points of view and choose a side to follow. While in the third position audiences understand the meaning that contains in media messages in the way they like, sometimes opposite to what was assumed. Therefore, media offers opportunities for people who stand outside or against the culture industry because it's message would not always be decoded properly by them.

According to Raymond Williams[11], we can define culture in three general aspects: the ideal' one, which is about values; the 'documentary' one, on conventions; and the 'social' one, way of life of people living inside this culture. Therefore, to study the culture industry, we need to examine the values people always follow. Arguably the values that people always follow are produced and reproduced by media. However, on the other hand, people's thoughts and experiences encountered a differentiated according to everyday life which in fact is influenced by social class. This is explored by Bourdieu[2]. and further study on their conventions, and people's way of lives. Further more, to explore the media's role in social control, we must find out how media help constructing these aspects of people's lives respectively.

Adorno & Horkheimer as well as Stuart Hall, both see the naturalizing of ideology by the culture industry, but Hall seems to be more objective because Adorno and Horkheimer[1] tend to ignore the resistance it may offer. Our common sense, ideology and most importantly, our obedience to the social hierarchy is actually constructed by the culture industry through education, mass media and so on, but we would not realize that because it was constructed 'naturally', everyone thinks the same as us so we do not feel like to be the different ones. Stuart Hall [5] said: "Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community of culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed but to be 'naturally given...the codes have been profoundly naturalized".

Having discussed both in media's controlling usage and its potential resistance, a conclusion can be made that the social controlling role of media is arguably more significant than its potential to offer resistance. In the dominant culture industry, according to Adorno & Horkheimer [1], even if

someone chooses to resist, he is just a needle in the ocean. Moreover, he will then be regarded as stranger among other peoples, and the mainstream would always be the biggest flow.

## 4. Conclusion

To conclude, along side government and religion, media does play a crucial part as a form of social control. Having discussed the theories on both sides, although it does offer chances for resistance such as oppositional situation in decoding and the artist' attitude in symbolic creativity, its dominant role in the society obviously outweighs the opportunities of resistance it might offer. No matter on setting the "mainstream", constructing ideology, forming people's identity or on setting gender norms, people can always find its significance in helping control the society.

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