

“Rediscovering” Ideology Critique (Again): Toward a Critical Realist Analysis of Political Media Effects

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This article outlines a blueprint for ideology critique in political media grounded in critical realist philosophy of science. The approach brings theories of ideological hegemony as explicated by Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall into dialogue with social-psychological theories of issue framing. The article argues that oppositions between critical-cultural and social scientific approaches to communication are sometimes drawn too sharply. It positions critical realist notions of causality, truth, methodology, and politics as a bridge between leading traditions of ideology critique and media effects that can enable multimethod analyses of hegemony in news texts and popular attitudes. This synthesis is illustrated with reference to U.S. media coverage and public opinion on neoliberal economic and social welfare policy. The article elaborates one way in which work that connects intellectual paradigms can inform and motivate critical and systematic interrogation of unequal and undemocratic power relations in media communication.

Keywords: hegemony, ideology, media effects, framing, critical realism, neoliberalism

In a piece published during the early Thatcher and Reagan years, as neoliberalism emerged as an institutional political force, Stuart Hall (1982/2005) charted the “rediscovery of ideology” in media and communication studies. Hall’s essay celebrates the critical departure from conventional media effects research that inspired groundbreaking scholarship at the intersections of cultural studies and political economy. Amid vibrant arguments over materiality/discourse, structure/agency and domination/resistance, a central question ran through this work: How does “the ideological” operate in and through media practices and representations? This high period of ideology critique provoked sharp debate about fundamental intellectual identities and purposes (reflected, for instance, in the *Journal of Communication’s* 1983 “Ferment in the Field” Special Issue).

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More than 30 years later, another rediscovery of ideology and its complex links with communication and political-economic power may be under way. Once again, Hall's (1982/2005) appeal to the critical tradition for the "extensive empirical work . . . required to demonstrate the adequacy of its explanatory terms" (p. 84) is resonating (e.g., Downey, Titley, & Toynbee, 2014; Downey & Toynbee, 2016). Introducing the latest "Ferments in the Field" issue, Fuchs and Qiu (2018) identify a "new critical and materialist turn" (pp. 225–226) that recalls, revises, and extends the focus on power relations and social inequalities that animated debates of the 1970s and 1980s. Emerging research in this vein includes work on the global environmental consequences of communication technologies (Christensen & Nilsson, 2018), and digital media, labor exploitation, and hyperconsumption (Murdock, 2018).

This article presents an underexplored research approach that can advance that vital critical agenda: an empirical strategy for ideological analysis explicitly anchored in critical realist (CR) social science. Hall (1982/2005) defined the revolt of critical cultural studies against "administrative" media research as a response to class, race, gender, and cultural inequalities that motivated the social struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. This article argues that partial reintegration of these divergent perspectives on altogether different—and thoroughly critical—terms is both possible and necessary. A reintegration of media effects research and critical ideological analysis through a CR prism is possible because concepts and methods have developed sufficiently to provide proper analytical devices for this project. A reintegration is necessary because the inequalities and struggles that mark the current historical conjuncture call for new modes of practical political engagement in communication scholarship (McChesney, 2016).

As one dimension of the larger renewal of materially grounded critical analysis, this article sketches an epistemological and methodological blueprint for CR studies of hegemonic framing in corporate news media. Although social scientific political communication research continues to generate important insights, much of it remains hindered by a hesitancy to accept the intrinsically political character of its central objects and epistemological implications. Embracing the politics of political communication in analytically rigorous and intellectually defensible ways requires constructive engagement with the rich traditions of political economy and cultural studies. This work is needed now more than ever to elaborate and refine understandings of ideology at a new social inflection point. Intellectual and political space for democratic responses to neoliberal capitalism and authoritarian governance is opening. Understanding the current conjuncture—and the modes within which emancipatory cultural formations and political interventions are working (or might work)—requires understanding the constraints that limit social change. Again, Hall's (1979/2019) analysis is apt: "If we are to be effective, politically, it can only be on the basis of a serious analysis of things as they are, not as we would wish them to be" (p. 377). Theoretically informed, empirically grounded ideology critique that adapts and refines concepts and methods underdeveloped or unavailable in the ferments of the 1970s and 1980s ought to be a crucial element of that task.

Although the divide between administrative and critical paradigms no longer arouses heated debates in leading publications, it remains real and problematic. Critical and multimethod research (especially political economy work) is still marginalized in many journals (Splichal & Mance, 2018; Walter, Cody, & Ball-Rokeach, 2018). This obstructs intellectual development and impedes the field's capacity to respond to contemporary political-economic, technological, and social challenges. At the same time, even as there has been greater interparadigm understanding and methodological integration in recent decades

(see, e.g., Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdock, 1999), cultural studies' frequent detachment from or dismissal of quantitative research (and sometimes causal claims in any form) continues to disregard forms of knowledge that can facilitate social critique and liberatory politics (Lewis, 1997, 2008).

However, as others have established in media policy research (Napoli & Friedland, 2016), there are real possibilities for integration. This article offers a way to elaborate these links in the domain of news media and political communication. A CR perspective on ideological framing shows how aspects of critical and mainstream research not only can coexist but can be synthesized and synergized. Critical realism's distinctive stances on discourse and materiality, structure and agency, causal explanation, and scientific neutrality can resolve limitations within, and tensions between, critical-cultural and social scientific traditions. In doing this, CR can underwrite systematic ideology critique that incorporates qualitative and quantitative research without lapsing into positivist orientations that render critique incoherent or untenable.

This article illustrates its theoretical argument with reference to possible connections between U.S. corporate news coverage of economic and social welfare policy and configurations of popular opinion as elements of public consent for neoliberalism. Definitions of neoliberalism are multiple and contested (Ferguson, 2009), and neoliberalism has manifested differently across levels of analysis, social sites, and geohistorical settings. The analysis here focuses on neoliberalism as a political project to reconfigure the intersection of states and markets in ways that reinforce the dominance of capital and amplify socioeconomic inequality (Hall, 2011).² Still, the article's overall conceptual approach is applicable beyond the particular context it engages. Precisely because it is grounded in the contingency of social life and social inquiry, CR epistemology spans spatial borders and temporal settings. Moreover, both the specific processes of hegemonic framing and the larger power dynamics of corporate news in the neoliberal epoch are pertinent to global and cross-national communication.

The last decade or more has seen welcome CR interventions in media and communication studies, including with reference to news production and circulation.³ Still, explicitly critical realist empirical studies and CR theoretical or methodological elaborations in the context of news discourse and reception remain rare. This article is by necessity a partial step toward conceptualizing ideology critique in that context through a CR epistemology. More work is needed to advance this theoretical synthesis and apply it in research practice. Building on previous scholarship that advocates critical realism as a framework for ideology critique (Downey & Toynebee, 2016, pp. 1265–1266), the article seeks to encourage such theorization and application of CR perspectives in systematic analyses of media discourse and public attitudes.

The next section uses Stuart Hall's early work as a touchstone to locate latent conceptual linkages between critical-cultural theories of ideological hegemony and social scientific theories of issue framing.

² Understood broadly, the neoliberal project comprises related constellations of ideas, discursive codes, subjectivities, practices, policies, and institutions. This article focuses on neoliberal media discourse and policies.

³ For example, Lau (2004) applies critical realism to news values, and Wright (2011) employs a CR lens to reconsider journalistic professional identities, practices, and training.

This discussion sets up an explanation of how critical realism addresses key epistemological and political tensions and limitations of these perspectives. The article proceeds to make a case for quantitative analyses of media reception as a form of CR ideology critique. Throughout, the argument identifies suggestive concrete applications to hegemonic framing processes in neoliberal news coverage. The conclusion briefly discusses implications for media power and the potential benefits of deeper dialogue between communication research paradigms.

Ideological Hegemony and Framing in News and Public Opinion

Hall's (1979/2019, 1982/2005) reading of Gramsci defines hegemony as the relatively durable—but never unchallenged or incontestable—production, circulation, and acceptance of ideas, discourses, and practices that facilitate popular consent to prevailing power relations. Struggles waged in and through cultural venues—or “the politics of signification” (Hall 1982/2005, p. 64)—are pivotal for shaping those relations and the state/corporate actions that underpin and enforce them (Hall, 1979/2019; 1982/2005, pp. 64–66). Consequently, Gramsci (1985) proposes extensive, detailed, concrete analyses of publishing and press organizations, identifying media institutions, practices, and discourses as comprising hegemony's “most prominent and dynamic part” (pp. 388–389). However, while important theoretical and qualitative studies have built on Hall's pathbreaking work, this perspective on ideology has forged few connections with social scientific communication and public opinion research.

Scholars have urged greater interchange between Gramscian and conventional social scientific approaches to political media (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Lewis, 2001). Still, apprehensions remain on both sides. Theories of media hegemony seem empirically intractable according to orthodox scientific constructs and evidentiary standards. And critical-cultural scholarship often sees the quantitative research that suffuses mainstream social science as epistemologically reductive, reflecting crude transmission models of communication (Hall, 1980b, p. 131; 1982/2005) and reducing dynamic social processes to superficial data points (Lewis, 1997, p. 86; Smythe & Van Dinh, 1983). At the same time, incisive political critiques have accused conventional research of supporting corporate-state interests (Splichal, 1987), even as mainstream communication science strives to preserve what it imagines as an ideologically pristine, value-neutral explanatory enterprise (Carragee & Roefs, 2004).

Notwithstanding its limitations, however, the social scientific media effects paradigm offers a rich array of concepts and methods to reconceive and redirect toward critical analysis centered on Hall's (1982/2005) key questions: “How does the ideological process work and what are its mechanisms?” (p. 61). These approaches make it possible to measure (imperfectly, partially, and tentatively) ideological closure in news discourse and specify its relations to public opinion. Social scientific research demonstrates that political news can significantly—if complexly and indirectly—influence popular attitudes (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2009). But there has been little concrete application of its concepts and techniques to analyze hegemony. Such work might offer critical scholarship a new way to determine, as Lewis (1997) puts it, “How widespread are practices of resistance or subjugation, and where do we find them?” (p. 87).

In particular, this article proposes that social-psychological theories of framing (Entman, 2007) applied through methods including quantitative content analysis and experimental studies can provide

critical insight into ideological processes. These theories maintain that political preferences expressed through surveys emerge from mixtures of often apparently contradictory "considerations," or raw mental constructs (Zaller, 1992). The ambivalence that defines these considerations resembles the ideological fragmentation of common sense (Gramsci, 2005). For instance, a poll respondent may simultaneously hold considerations elevating the "deserving" over the "undeserving" poor, denouncing unfair corporate executive pay, and decrying public sector bureaucratic waste. Confronted with a survey question, the person draws on considerations that are most salient and mentally accessible. Poll results, therefore, are relatively temporary constructions that—while grounded in sociopolitical concepts and images—are immediately derived from contextually contingent mental configurations. Particular considerations in this multifaceted common sense become activated by issue frames. These semantic devices in public discourse work through cultural resonance to highlight certain ideologically inflected aspects of an issue and downplay others, thus promoting particular definitions of public problems, and particular actions (or inaction) to address them. For example, a frame might define sluggish economic growth as a problem of high corporate taxes, triggering neoliberal-shaded considerations in common sense linked to traditional ideas of entrepreneurship.⁴

Social scientific research recognizes people's capacity to resist framing influence using cultural and cognitive resources derived from their concrete circumstances (e.g., Druckman, 2004)—in other words, their ability to produce "negotiated" and, occasionally, "resistant" decodings of media texts (Hall, 1980b). Still, circulation of ideologically narrow constellations of culturally resonant frames attached to socially credible sources tends to encourage survey responses that align with those framing contexts. Considerations primed by this persistent framing can become routinely cognitively accessible (especially if they are emotionally charged), or easily called to mind when prompted by poll questions (Zaller, 1992). In other words, certain ideologically inflected elements of popular common sense become consistently operative and acquire relatively firm associations (or "articulations"; Hall, 1985) with political tendencies or policy positions.⁵ Framing, then, is one concrete way that fragmented mental constructs can catalyze "more active and organic ideologies, which have the capacity to intervene on the ground of common sense and popular traditions and, through such interventions, to organize masses of men and women" (Hall, 1980a, p. 69). Poll results shaped through issue framing are potent resources for leaders pursuing a democratic warrant for their policy stances (Druckman & Jacobs, 2015). Because public opinion is a constituent of hegemony (Lewis, 1999), these media dynamics are a central means by which consent for political configurations, policy regimes, and broader power relations is registered (Hall, 1979/2019, 2011).

⁴ Definitions of framing are legion. This article does not argue for a single conception of framing as best for all purposes and in all contexts. However, Entman's (2007, p. 164) definition is well suited to a CR synthesis of ideology critique and social scientific framing analysis. This definition draws attention to specific processes of inclusion/exclusion and emphasis/marginalization of cultural signs and mental constructs. Moreover, it makes clear and explicit connections to social-psychological public opinion research. That said, other framing conceptualizations are consistent with CR epistemology and may be effectively applied in other contexts to enrich a broader revitalization of ideology critique in media studies.

⁵ Indeed, Hall's (1982/2005) explanation of hegemonic signification recognizes "repetition" and source "credibility" as key to establishing "the dominant definition" of social problems (p. 77).

Hall (1982/2005, p. 67) draws an important analytic contrast between “content” and “manifest meaning,” on the one hand, and “structure” and “code,” on the other. This article recognizes the crucial role of historically conditioned semantic structures that underlie specific utterances by social actors often assumed to be conveying straightforward meanings (e.g., media statements from political leaders about tax policy). However, more directly observable, discrete messages cannot be neglected. The deeper source of ideologies’ effectiveness may lie at the level of code—or “the social encyclopedia of common knowledge” (Lewis, 1997, p. 93)—but codes could not be expressed without their attendant (also historically conditioned) messages. In other words, particular issue frames rest on ideological codes, even as these codes owe their social/political effectivity in mobilizing publics to those frames. Specific utterances acquire ideological force through grounding in codes that partake of culturally resonant common sense. But these codes could not activate and direct signals of popular consent absent manifest expressions (framing patterns) that link political leaders, policy issues, and events to the fragments of common sense (mental considerations) on which the codes are based.

Seen from a standpoint critical of unequal and undemocratic power relations that may constrain the “active and organic ideologies” in public circulation, emancipatory discourse in political news would be defined as widespread and consistent dissemination of many culturally resonant issue frames that can activate different considerations (elements of common sense). To what extent does relative ideological framing closure/openness characterize popular news media coverage of policy issues? And how effective are prevailing issue-framing configurations in conditioning public opinion to support—or contest—existing power relations? Addressing these questions coherently demands not only careful theorization but also concrete, historically specific research that can “call out” ideology, but only on the familiar basis in social science of empirical methodology” (Downey & Toynbee, 2016, p. 1266). A CR perspective can strengthen the epistemological foundation for this work.

Truth and Causality in Critical-Scientific Ideological Analysis

Rejecting the assumption of radical incommensurability between theoretical languages, critical realism embraces possibilities for common conceptual reference points that can transcend the limitations of distinct paradigms (Porpora, 2005, pp. 262–264; Sayer, 2000, pp. 47–48). Shared reference points between Gramscian analyses of media hegemony and social-psychological framing effects research suggest potential for a critical-scientific synthesis that joins these perspectives. This section draws on CR principles, CR interpretations of Gramscian thought, and Stuart Hall’s elaborations and reformulations of Gramsci’s work to elaborate how a causally explanatory and socially critical social science can support empirical analyses of ideology. These ideas are fleshed out (albeit necessarily in summary and suggestive form) by referencing political economy, political communication, and public opinion studies that, while not CR per se, suggest CR’s capacity to enhance understanding of neoliberal news media.

In CR ontology, the domain of the *real* consists of social structures with causal “tendencies” or “mechanisms” not typically available for direct observation. The domain of the *actual* constitutes events that structural tendencies may (or may not) trigger. The *empirical* is the realm of observation and interpretation. Importantly, real causal tendencies exist independent of events they may generate. Moreover, events are

not always known empirically (and may be unobservable, given prevailing concepts, methods, and social contingencies).

Nevertheless, structures, tendencies and events have ontological statuses irreducible to (even if always mediated by) the empirical domain. Whether and how a tendency is "actualized" is contingent on historical conditions, including other causal tendencies that may obstruct its effects. Whether and how actualized events are grasped empirically depends on fallible cognitions, analytic methods, and the uncertainties of observation. CR's stratified ontology of real structures that generate events contingently and complexly, knowledge of which requires conceptual and linguistic mediation, is compatible with ideology critique grounded in theories of hegemony. Indeed, Gramsci (2005) implies the distinction between the real and the actual in asserting that "politics is in fact at any given time the reflection of the tendencies of development in the structure, but it is not necessarily the case that these tendencies must be realized" (p. 408). Similarly, in recognizing the "reality" of social relations and their "structure and tendency," "independent of mind, independent of thought," Hall's (1985, p. 105) concept of ideological articulation reflects differences between the real and the empirical: Rather than collapsing ideology (let alone social relations more broadly) into discourse, for Hall (1982/2005), subjects make sense of social reality via ideology, which works "in and through language and discourse" (p. 76). In Sayer's (2000) CR formulation, ideas and discourses "construe" rather than "construct" social life (p. 53).

Following this framework, a CR model of media hegemony under neoliberal capitalism might include four interrelated spheres, each with real, actual, and empirical strata comprising various concrete sites:

- 1) The *institutional* sphere includes media companies and associated firms in their structural relations with states and economies. Examples of actual events include corporate mergers and regulatory policy enactments. Empirical traces could derive from financial and economic data analyses (e.g., C. E. Baker, 1994) and archival research charting the historical development of state-media relations (e.g., Pickard, 2014).
- 2) The *organizational* sphere comprises structures of professional journalistic, public relations, and other communicative norms and practices. Events include (among others) news editing and reporting routines, such as practices of questioning at press conferences. Empirical evidence might come from ethnographic work or interviews with journalists, editors, producers, and corporate/state media relations personnel (e.g., Gans, 1979/2004).
- 3) The *textual* sphere comprises encoded information and semantic representations generated through media. Events here include inscription of issue frames in news stories. Empirical evidence could derive from forms of content analysis and qualitative textual interpretation (e.g., Bell & Entman, 2011; Limbert & Bullock, 2009).⁶

⁶ As Hall (1982/2005, p. 57) argues, positivist content analysis problematically implies strict separation of form and meaning, and mechanical and transparent transmission from sender to receiver. A CR conceptualization, however, carries no such claims about communication. In referring to "content analysis,"

- 4) The *psychosocial* sphere is constituted by audience/prosumer beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Events include opinion formation, voting behavior, and protest participation. Empirical evidence might come from audience ethnographies, interviews/group conversations (e.g., Gamson, 1992), participant observation, and survey analyses.

This outline suggests that news media institutions in Sphere 1 may hold causal tendencies to reproduce or propagate ideologies consistent with neoliberal capitalism's structural imperatives (McChesney, 2004). And journalistic norms and practices in Sphere 2 might hold tendencies (e.g., deference to state or corporate sources; Bennett, 1990; Thrall, 2006) that reinforce those in Sphere 1. But Sphere 2 may also carry tendencies (e.g., through professional codes or labor contracts that mitigate commercialism) which counteract neoliberal logics (McKercher & Mosco, 2006). Contingent on their actualization, such tendencies, again, may reinforce or counteract the generation of neoliberal frames (Sphere 3) in media texts.⁷ Depending on these contingent actualizations, and on contingent actualizations of reinforcing or mitigating Sphere 4 tendencies—such as socially embedded mental schemas (preexisting sedimentations of common sense) that encourage dominant or resistant decodings—events reflecting or contradicting popular support as part of neoliberal hegemony may actualize.⁸

This article is concerned primarily with the interface of Spheres 3 and 4. However, feedback circuits from audience reception or interpretation to media production (Bødker, 2016, p. 411) usefully illustrate CR notions of structure and agency in Gramscian ideology critique. Gramsci firmly criticizes strong deterministic (and economic) views. But his writings recognize the real existence of material structures that variously constrain and enable forms of agency which can, in turn, reinforce or reshape structures (Joseph, 2000, pp. 181–182; Morera, 1990, p. 158). As Gramsci (2005) put it,

It may be ruled out that immediate economic crises of themselves produce fundamental historical events; they can simply create a terrain more favorable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life. (p. 184)

A CR view suggests that while real structures (e.g., neoliberal structures of capital accumulation) may hold hegemonic tendencies to constrain critical media discourse, popular decodings, and political actions, these causal mechanisms do not always trigger events (e.g., hegemonic news production or public

this article merely follows familiar conventional terminology for quantitative methods of analysis applied to news and other media texts.

⁷ One operationalization strategy that may be adapted for Sphere 3 analyses would derive lists of possible frames from careful reading of contemporaneous extrajournalistic sources related to a particular case, such as academic literature or texts from government agencies, interest and advocacy groups, protest organizations, and other actors (Guardino, 2019; Tankard, 2001). Coding categories could then be constructed to identify frames in news texts at headline, story, paragraph, sentence, or other units of analysis.

⁸ "Neoliberal hegemony" here refers to the relative success of the neoliberal political project/policy regime in securing dominance via public consent. Ideological processes operating through media constitute a key (though certainly not the only) mechanism of this achievement.

beliefs). And actualization of such events may be blocked or mitigated by other events generated by other activated tendencies (such as norms of journalistic autonomy and ethics fostered in newsworker unions). Further, agency enabled by other structural tendencies (e.g., alternative cognitive frameworks cultivated through popular discussion) may catalyze events (such as critical public opinion formations, electoral campaigns, or protest movements) that reshape neoliberal structures. In that sense, expressions of popular opinion shaped by frames in political news are forms of sociopolitical agency that can, in turn, affect tendencies in textual, organizational, or institutional spheres. For instance, media-conditioned opinions in polls (Sphere 4) may contribute to changes in state policies directed at media or other sectors (Sphere 1) that reinforce, modify, or disrupt neoliberal hegemony at the level of structural political-economic relations. As a key dimension of that hegemony, then, media's ideological processes might catalyze popular thoughts and behaviors that legitimate neoliberal policies, practices, and subjectivities. However, generation of such events (or blockage of events that contravene neoliberalism) is far from guaranteed.

This CR conceptualization highlights the fluidity and dynamism of hegemony as theorized by Gramsci and Hall. CR's view of structure and agency and distinctions among the real, the actual, and the empirical clarify spaces for contradiction and disruption of prevailing power relations. And the historically shifting character of neoliberalism (indeed, of any social order or policy regime) in specific contexts continually presents possible grounds for the interplay of resistance and domination. As Morera (1990) writes of Gramsci's ontology,

There is no iron law of history that produces concrete political and ideological forms out of the changes in the structure . . . politics and culture are characterized by a certain degree of autonomy which allows for significant intervention in these fields. (p. 152)

That crucial notion of relative autonomy undergirds not only the practical possibility of transformative political action but also the conceptual coherence of critique that may facilitate such action. Extreme structuralist views undermine political action, rendering ideology critique both practically moot (because what is the point of critique if emancipatory action is impossible?), and analytically dubious (as critical distance collapses under structures that necessarily determine thought and language). Strong agentistic views produce equally serious problems: What can socially transformative political action mean if there are no structures producing unequal or undemocratic power relations? And where does one locate practical evaluative criteria for ideologies and their political effects, if not in the actualized and latent tendencies of real structures to shape and channel social relations?

Thus, while hegemonic ideological tendencies may not be empirically verifiable according to positivist scientific standards, a CR view defines these tendencies as real constituents of the structure of corporate-capitalist media. Critical realism aims not at generating universal social laws based on mechanical regularities, nor testing hypotheses whose truth value is tethered to sense data alone. Instead, empirical research produces limited accounts grounded in concrete evidence and cohesive argument that identify causal mechanisms by abstracting from complex sets of structural relations. Because truths are contestable, partial, temporary, and uncertain—one cannot know for sure that any particular structure with particular properties and causal powers exists—knowledge of media hegemony cannot be predictive. Lewis (2008) gestures toward this idea: "There are no absolutes here: plausibility simply implies an attention to the

weight of evidence and a knowledge of appropriate theoretical models, forms of enquiry and analysis" (p. 665). Still, coherent truth claims about the real can be made. There are stronger and weaker configurations of evidence, better and worse applications of various methods, and more or less cogent causal narratives that interpret this evidence. In Sayer's (2010) words, "The admission that all knowledge is fallible does not mean that all knowledge is equally fallible" (p. 68).

Against positivism, critical realism defines reality by objects' structural properties and mechanisms, not by whether these objects produce observable empirical regularities (in corporate transactions, editorial practices, news texts, audience responses, or elsewhere). In contrast to strong forms of interpretivism and constructivism, however, CR recognizes causal processes independent of the observation and interpretation that construe those processes. This means that alternative interpretations and observations (popular or scholarly) can be assessed for theoretical soundness and evidentiary grounding. Consequently, even if there is no pure, unmediated space of theorization, analysis, or action, one can critically evaluate ideological formations (and scholarly accounts of those formations) in relation to real conditions and appraise their capacity to enable awareness of those conditions. Critical realism's stratified ontology highlights its departure from both extreme relativism (which denies space for reasoned, evidence-based critique) and positivist neutrality (which presumes transparent observation of valueless facts). In this way, CR enables coherent forms of critical social analysis (including ideology critique) that can support practical political action. As Hall (1985) puts it, "There may be some ideological categories which give us a more adequate or more profound knowledge of particular relations than others" (p. 105).

Ultimately, CR ontology and epistemology suggests that orthodox social scientific objections to media hegemony theories as nonfalsifiable conflate causal tendencies (reality, existence), their contingent activation (effects, events), and imperfect empirical awareness of tendencies and events (measuring, knowing). For instance, real tendencies to support neoliberal economic policies may inhere in structures of newswork or popular consciousness, even if they are not always actualized in particular contexts (e.g., they do not produce journalistic privileging of corporate sources, opinions in favor of tax cuts, or attendance at antisocialism rallies). And such tendencies can be actualized even if they are not captured empirically in news content, survey responses, or movement ethnographies. In recognizing these complex relations, critical realism enables nuanced yet systematic analyses of hegemonic processes.

Scientific Critique, Quantitative Research, and Media Reception

A CR perspective on the contingent activation of causal mechanisms, structure–agency interactions, and empirical claims as partial renderings of the actual and the real provides a strong foundation for ideology critique. For CR, any internally coherent social science must be a critical social science that identifies constraints on—and possibilities for—social change effected through practical political action. Critical realism recognizes the positionality of the scholar, the situatedness of knowledge, and the imperative for reflexive scientific practice (Sayer, 2000, pp. 51–55): "For better or worse (not just worse) the conditions and social relations of the production of knowledge influence its content" (Sayer, 2010, p. 6). But even as knowledge production is situated in social relations and conditioned by social positionality, it is not exhausted by those relations or reducible to that positionality. Again rejecting both relativism and neutrality, the CR postpositivist scientific project foregrounds empirically informed critical evaluation of

discourse, ideas, events, and structures from the perspective not only of what is, but of what could be. These possibilities are defined as latent causal tendencies and as human potentials to generate new tendencies that elaborate and enlarge social capacities. In Sayer's (2010) words,

Social science should not be seen as developing a stock of knowledge about an object which is external to us, but should develop a critical self-awareness in people as subjects and indeed assist in their emancipation. (pp. 41–42)

Following this view, CR communication research agendas must include both critique of media discourse as it is contingently received, and critical analysis of the extent to which this discourse encourages popular attitudes and beliefs that reinforce, advance, or contest prevailing power relations. For example, U.S. polls have long indicated considerable support for specific neoliberal economic and social welfare policies (Hacker & Pierson, 2005; Weaver, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995). A CR analysis of media hegemony would examine these signals of consent through careful conceptual reasoning aided by a range of qualitative and quantitative methods (including content analysis, survey research, and experimental studies). Such methods should be geared toward concrete evidence that clarifies structural properties and unravels causal mechanisms that shape ideological processes that may be in operation.

Consequently, while there is no privileged epistemic position entirely outside ideology, for critical realism, this does not obliterate the possibility or validity of empirically grounded ideology critique. On the contrary, it is from the scholar's positionality and the reflexive nature of intellectual work that judgments entailing political positions are intelligible. As Gramsci (2005) understood, "There does not exist any independent class of intellectuals" (p. 60). However, while Gramsci "emphasizes the historical character of knowledge, he does so only in terms of its function in the organization and transformation of societies, not in terms of its truth value" (Morera, 1990, p. 193). Similarly, critical realism rejects positivist binaries of ideology/science, theory/history, and value/fact. But it insists that explanatory analysis can illuminate emancipatory possibilities through empirically informed reasoning about social structures and causal tendencies, their potential to expand (or impede) human social powers, and the adequacy of (scholarly and popular) accounts of structures, and of ideas and discourses that mediate and legitimate them.

Viewed from this CR perspective, survey-based and other quantitative methods complement more typically postpositivist approaches to media reception/consumption. Even media effects experiments (e.g., Guardino, 2019, pp. 144–179) may be conceived and formulated to explore contingent actualizations of hegemonic tendencies in popular consciousness. In that light, Corner (2016) invites interrogation of the assumption that "a good deal of what is circulated in the interests of powerful groups is believed and 'used'" (p. 270). CR experiments can assist this task by demonstrating how media reception may catalyze or discourage political practices (e.g., expressing critical opinions, voting for insurgent candidates and parties, joining protest campaigns) that challenge hegemonic structures. The open-endedness of social life precludes the ability to fully hold off causal mechanisms by creating "closed systems" as in physical sciences (Bhaskar, 1979). However, experiments can sometimes be constructed to resemble "quasi-closed systems" (Sayer, 2010, p. 124) that partially control key social contingencies, thus clarifying the actualization of causal tendencies. Positivist experiments cling to a dubious neutrality and severely abstract from structure and historical context to focus narrowly on discrete behavioral responses. But CR experiments developed with

explicit reference to larger power dynamics can examine moments of ideological influence or opposition by modeling actualized mechanisms (such as the reception of different news texts). Observed empirical regularities in survey or other measures could then be prudently extended to illuminate hegemonic processes in the "open systems" of society and politics. Such studies may help identify liberatory tendencies that could actualize if new structures of media production and circulation emerged (or latent potentialities in existing structures were activated) through political agency.

Any credible argument for observational survey analysis or experimental methodology in critical research must confront the reasonable suspicions of statistical approaches to media reception that continue to pervade cultural studies (Lewis, 1997, 2008). Critical realism responds first by distinguishing its conception of quantitative analysis in explanatory critique, on the one hand, from settled understandings of statistical research in orthodox social science, on the other. While positivism defines analytical statistics as preeminent tools of causal explanation, CR construes statistics as evidentiary aids. This is a crucial and underappreciated distinction: Statistical analyses can inform causal narratives and help arbitrate among alternative accounts of structural mechanisms, but these analyses are not synonymous with explanation (Porpora, 2005). Critical realism's expansive methodological repertoire carries no outright opposition to quantification. As Splichal (1987) puts it,

The problem of "being scientific" by using quantitative methods does not rest in the methods themselves, but rather, in the belief that the use of quantitative methods alone provides the "scientificity" (objectivity, validity, and reliability) of research. (p. 22)

Gramsci (2005, pp. 170–171, 244–245, 429–440) is sharply critical of positivist misuse and reification of numbers. Hegemonic processes cannot be grasped through narrow-gauged "mechanical causalism" (Gramsci, 2005, p. 438): "In politics, the assumption of the law of statistics as an essential law operating of necessity is not only a scientific error, but becomes a practical error in action" (Gramsci, 2005, p. 429). But Gramsci's work endorses no simple disqualification of statistical research as a vehicle for ideology critique. In Morera's (1990) words, "Statistical generalizations have practical application, that is, they obtain within certain limits. . . . Gramsci does not object to either laws or the concept of causality, but to empirical descriptions which are misrepresented as causal laws" (p. 95).

Critical realism also suggests constructive responses to the political inflections of statistical research practice on media reception. Quantification of popular beliefs and behaviors has long been implicated in corporate-state domination and exploitation, such as through the ratings and advertising apparatus (Meehan, 2005), and newer modes of digital political and commercial manipulation (Nadler & McGuigan, 2018). But from a CR perspective, all methods are reductive and liable to misuse, and some simplifying abstraction is necessary for any cogent form of inquiry that makes even provisional truth claims. This includes any critical, transformative social science. Indeed, studying polls empirically (and quantitatively) can be a means to contest myths of pluralistic democracy and technocratic scientism built from the ideological construct of "public opinion" (Splichal, 1987).

Even as he argues against "digital positivism," Fuchs (2017, p. 43) endorses critical use not only of content analysis and "statistical analysis of secondary data," but also observational and experimental

survey research. However, critical scholarship that applies these methods to explore media's ideological effects on public opinion remains rare. Some critically oriented scholars are relaxing rigid distinctions between qualitative and quantitative media research, leveraging their analytic strengths for richer description and explanation.⁹ The field would benefit from further creative work of this kind, including studies that adapt concepts and methods from the "effects" tradition to move critical analysis beyond textual production and circulation toward empirical analysis of popular attitudes and beliefs. A critical-realist prism can open up that research terrain. Survey results are not face-value, context-independent evidence of attitudes, much less are they identical with public opinion as an object somehow neutrally observed. As Lewis (2008) writes, "Data are a form of representation—a discourse about the world rather than a transparent reflection of it" (p. 659). "Public opinion" is an intellectual concept and a social-political-cultural construct often appropriated ideologically by dominant interests (Lewis, 2001). However, its empirical manifestations constitute traces of real tendencies, and its constituents—memories, mental images, beliefs—exist "independent of a researcher's concepts, classifications or labeling of them" (Sayer, 2000, p. 35). Polling is an empirical technology that opens a partial and conceptually laden observation portal—there is no one-to-one correspondence between survey answers, on the one hand, and attitudes, beliefs, and so forth, on the other. Still, public opinion's ontological standing is grounded in the materially and socially embedded causal tendencies that generate it, and that it generates.

Perhaps most importantly from a critical standpoint, powerful interests treat polling responses as "real" public opinion as they articulate and mobilize polls to practical political ends. In that sense, these attitudinal expressions manifest and produce ideology, which, as Hall (1982/2005) observed of recent theoretical debates, is "every bit as 'real' or 'material,' as so-called nonideological practices, because it affected their outcome. It was 'real' because it was *real in its effects*" (p. 78, emphasis in original). Hegemonic media effects support political-economic elites' capacity to draw pictures of popular opinion that protect and advance their policy goals and structural positions. Even a temporary 10- or 20-percentage-point polling shift over weeks or months can facilitate upper income tax reductions or welfare cutbacks at key historical points (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). From that angle, media effects as a constituent of ideological hegemony exemplify how conventional social science fixations on statistical magnitude and duration can obscure the political significance of communication in concrete settings. Despite their transitory and contingent nature, opinion formations that position people as supporters of neoliberal policy can be mobilized as popular signals legitimizing unequal power relations. Hegemony is maintained not by any totalistic and impervious imposition, but by the complex and contradictory production of particular moments of consent (Lewis, 1999). As an essential complement to institutional, organizational, and textual analysis, understanding how hegemonic media work in political-economic practice demands attention to polling opinion, and to methods—including observational surveys and experimental research—that explore the contingent ideological dynamics operating at that site of media reception.

Implications and Conclusions

⁹ See, for example, P. Baker et al.'s (2008) persuasive melding of critical discourse analysis with corpus linguistics. Indeed, critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2015; Guardino, 2018) is one qualitative approach that is epistemologically compatible with the perspective on CR ideology critique sketched here.

Even amid ongoing technological dynamism, television remains the most popular U.S. news format (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017). Moreover, technical and political-economic factors (Hindman, 2008; McChesney, 2013) funnel most online traffic to conventional political venues and corporate news sites (eBiz MBA, 2020). Interpersonal, blog, and social media communication are crucial domains for critical ideological analysis—on their own and in interaction with the still formidable corporate news system that is shaping and accommodating emerging digital communication modes (Entman & Usher, 2018). Further mixed-methods research on media hegemony should model complex online reception conditions—for example, examining how juxtaposed articles, videos, and user commentary encourage dominant, negotiated, and resistant readings. Still, because corporate news is a major source of material accessed and shared online or otherwise, its discursive patterns and effects remain prime subjects for rigorous ideology critique.

Social-psychological framing analysis using content analysis, surveys, and experiments can be adapted for that agenda. Reflexively conceived and designed from a CR perspective attuned to structure and contingency, this approach can bridge bodies of work that, on their own, lack conceptual and methodological resources to grasp important ideological processes as fully as they otherwise might. Since the 1970s, a range of broadly critical studies has analyzed media discourse, sometimes applying quantitative methods or integrating ideas of framing (Carragee, 2003; Good, 2008). Although this work has made key contributions that challenge academic orthodoxies, the timeworn qualitative/cultural/critical and quantitative/scientific/objective silos are consistently reproduced. Such fragmentation endangers coherent and politically effective knowledge production. As Lewis (2001) writes of media effects research and critical-cultural studies, “Both sides have often focused more on the egregious aspects of the other than on their more careful or incisive moments” (p. 5). This is a significant problem for the field at a moment when the social stakes are so high.

Bringing Gramscian theory and framing research into explicit dialogue through critical realism can make ideology critique both more systematic and more critical. Further, advancing social change may require persuading actors who are not inclined to engage cultural studies, especially those with relative power over concrete media practices and policies. This demands serious thought about how to carry out genuinely critical research on terms these skeptics may be open to (Gerbner, 1983, p. 363). In Lewis’s (1997) words, “We must learn not only to deconstruct their language but—albeit mischievously—speak it” (pp. 86–87). Given the implicit epistemological commitments of many policy makers, journalists, political activists, and students—especially the credibility of quantitative data in these circles—approaches like the one proposed here enhance the field’s critical warrant through their potential to inform communication policymaking, newswork, media activism, and pedagogy. Far from surrendering the special insights or blunting the political force of critical media studies, such boundary crossing strengthens its emancipatory vision. As Fuchs and Qiu (2018) assert, “It is a dead end for media and communication research . . . if we fail to make sense of common sense and if we keep talking to ourselves, forgetting social, institutional, and media industry players outside the ivory tower” (pp. 226–227). Just as the critical strategy sketched in this article is well positioned to analyze ideological tendencies in media discourse and popular attitudes, it can engage with—even as it contests—common-sense notions in state/corporate venues, by identifying democratic distortions in communication institutions and policies in an idiom that contains points of contact with prevailing elite views of knowledge (Napoli & Friedland, 2016, p. 54).

The conceptual and methodological readaptations elaborated here place the social science of communication in a fundamentally different position than it occupies in the positivist administrative research with which statistical analysis is typically associated. This approach can complement other strategies for studying media hegemony by providing glimpses into how politically salient public opinion might change if ideological processes were interrupted by weakening hegemonic framing in news coverage. As such, it offers a critical platform from which to "productively imagine how different (and better) forms of ideological attachment and identification might be made possible" (Phelan, 2016, p. 282). Ultimately, the greatest potential benefit from this critical-scientific synthesis is clearer knowledge of how popular voice, amplified through reformed or transformed media structures and processes, might inform and support practical democratic and egalitarian struggles (McChesney, 2016). That project advances the aspirations of Hall's (1982/2005) seminal essay and the critical work it reflected and continues to inspire.

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