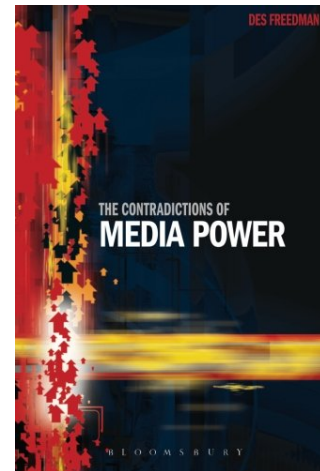


Des Freedman, **The Contradictions of Media Power**, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, 179 pp., \$ 26.96 (paperback).

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The political, cultural, and economic power of the media has long been a focus of debate and inquiry within the discipline of communication. Early mass communication scholars' research on propaganda and media effects is evidence enough of this (Simpson, 1994). The notorious cultural studies versus political economy dispute that preoccupied the field in the 1990s turned, in part, on a disagreement about the relationship of media discourse to structures of socioeconomic power (Garnham, 1995; Grossberg, 1995). More recently, interest in media power has motivated an outpouring of critical scholarship on digital media's contribution to contemporary protest movements and political upheavals (Wolfson, 2014).



In **The Contradictions of Media Power**, Des Freedman surveys and evaluates the main rival approaches to understanding media power, building the case for his own distinctive, broadly Marxist, theory of media power in the process.

What Exactly Is Media Power?

Freedman's central aim in the book is to delineate a definition of media power that is "both sufficiently clear to capture the dangers it can pose for democracy" and "sufficiently complex" (p. 3) to evaluate its various participants, networks, and channels. From his perspective, power is best seen as the ability of social actors to impose their interests at the expense of others. He notes that there are fundamental disagreements between scholars about the degree to which media power is concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations and wealthy owners, about how much autonomy the media have from other institutions of economic and state power, and about the degree to which digital technology has "decentralized" and "dispersed" control over the channels of communication. Nevertheless, he maintains that, as a general rule, an analysis of media power should "focus on . . . ownership patterns, resource allocations, governance arrangements and policy and regulatory regimes" (p. 15).

Early in the book, Freedman outlines what he takes to be the four main paradigms of media power—theoretical frameworks used to analyze the various dimensions of media power—that have informed the bulk of media studies scholarship.

The *consensus* paradigm views power in liberal democracies as essentially pluralistic and as more or less evenly distributed among parties, civic organizations, and assorted interest groups. The private, commercial media allegedly perform an integrative function for citizens in such societies and are imagined to be central to public life. Indeed, according to this paradigm, "market-driven media . . . is one of the

guarantors of a pluralist consensus” and regulation of the privately-owned media is “needed only as a last resort to deal with specific blockages (for example, monopolies or oligopolies) and to redistribute media power across a wider range of players” (p. 18).

The *chaos* paradigm holds that traditional forms of media gatekeeping have broken down as a result of sweeping technological changes (digitization, the rise of the Internet, the spread of social media) and political-economic shifts (e.g., economic globalization). In the wake of the certainties and stable structures associated with the “old media,” this paradigm posits a “tremendously uncertain . . . atmosphere of confusion in which power, it is argued, operates in far less hierarchical ways—proof, for its advocates, of the ability of forms of technological power to mediate, unsettle or reconstitute social relationships” (p. 20). The claims made by some scholars about the “revolutionary” role played by social media in the Arab Spring epitomize this approach.

In contrast to both the chaos and consensus paradigms, the *control* paradigm insists that “there is such a thing as a ‘dominant media’ bloc that uses its control over symbolic resources to naturalize hegemonic ideas and to confine public discussion to a narrow and artificially maintained consensus” (p. 22). In this view, the dominant media consistently privileges elite points of view while marginalizing the perspectives of the powerless, functioning ultimately to reinforce existing hierarchies and inequalities. According to Freedman, this framework is best exemplified by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman’s (1988) famous propaganda model of the news.

Finally, what Freedman calls the *contradiction* paradigm is a modified version of the control paradigm. Like Chomsky and Herman, scholars working within this theoretical tradition affirm that the media are geared toward “reproduction of existing relations of power” yet avoid the “functionalism” (p. 25) often attributed to the propaganda model by underscoring the degree to which the media in capitalist societies are beset by contradictions that create space for oppositional movements and dissident ideas that challenge those relations of power. Though mainstream media is inclined to “the amplification of powerful voices,” it necessarily must “address (in however a skewed way) both the interests of different audiences and the existence of conflicts among capitalist elites” (p. 28), and this renders the mainstream media vulnerable to pressures from mass struggles and social movements. This framework, obviously indebted to Marx and Marxist theories of politics and social change, is the one Freedman advocates.

Ownership, Media Policy, and Social Media

In the remainder of *The Contradictions of Media Power*, Freedman critically examines the empirical problems and theoretical lacunae plaguing the consensus, chaos, and control paradigms and elaborates an argument in support of the contradiction paradigm.

In chapter 2, “Elites, Ownership and Media Power,” Freedman assesses the assertions of the control paradigm about the concentrated power wielded by “media moguls” like Rupert Murdoch. He claims that, in the wake of neoliberalism’s assault on economic regulations, the wealth and political influence of media elites has grown exponentially. He presents copious evidence that the new media barons (Murdoch, Michael Bloomberg, Jeff Bezos, and Carlos Slim) are among the richest individuals in the

world, have deep ties to and investments in various other businesses, and have unprecedented access to politicians and policy makers. This enormous power has consequences. Owners “set corporate priorities, develop an editorial agenda and hire a team that will best execute the will of the owner” (p. 53). Freedman cites Rupert Murdoch’s use of his vast media holdings and his personal relationships with British politicians to support the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq as a prime example of elite media power in action. While he largely endorses the control paradigm, Freedman nonetheless grants that media output cannot be treated simply as automatic consequence of ownership structures and suggests, following Stuart Hall, that an account of media ownership is not itself a sufficient explanation of the way media content is structured.

In chapter 3, “Media Policy and Power,” Freedman considers how power shapes media policy and the policy-making process. Rejecting assumptions about the pluralism and democratic openness of the policy-making process embedded in the consensus paradigm, he argues that investigating “policy silence” and “non-decisionmaking” will reveal “the means by which alternative options are marginalized, conflicting values delegitimized and rival interests de-recognized” (p. 64). Thus, for instance, Freedman notes that mainstream policy debates about media source pluralism tend to equate pluralism with “maximizing consumer choice at low cost” (p. 77), passing over in silence radical demands for sweeping reform of media ownership regulations (e.g., adoption of strict, low caps on the number of newspapers or broadcast outlets any one corporation can own). The ability of the powerful to silence discussions surrounding particular policy ideas was also on display in the FCC’s 2010 rulemaking on network neutrality in which lobbying by the telecommunications industry succeeded in marginalizing grassroots activists’ concerns. For Freedman, these examples demonstrate conclusively that any valid analysis of media power has to abandon neoliberal faith in markets and liberal democratic institutions as guarantors of fair communication policies.

Chapter 4, “Power Shifts and Social Media,” evaluates the notion—advanced by adherents of the chaos paradigm—that the rise of social media has brought about a “shift” in power relations that is empowering ordinary people and amplifying their voices, bringing in its wake corresponding changes in politics and culture. While he does not deny that political and cultural life has been affected by social media, Freedman insists that social media, like other aspects of existence under contemporary capitalism, are marked by contradictions: “It is entirely possible that social media can be tools of empowerment *and* control, that the internet is subject to centrifugal and centripetal pressures and that the web both encourages new voices and consolidates existing ones” (p. 95). His analysis of Twitter illustrates this general point. The platform “lowers the cost of entry for people to communicate with each other” (p. 96) and has been used to organize politically (for instance, during the 2009 Iranian election), yet the fact remains that a tiny fraction of users attract the vast majority of followers, and users share personal information on the platform far more often than political messages. On Freedman’s account, the proposition that the digital revolution has “decentralized” and “disintermediated” control of the media does not hold up well under scrutiny. Rather, the evidence suggests that a small oligopoly of corporate giants (Google, Microsoft, Amazon) dominates the digital media economy just as, in an earlier era, Time Warner, Disney, and other corporate giants dominated the analog media economy. In the end, Freedman concludes, many of the claims made about the Internet’s alleged transformation of power relations are “overstated, lack context and are, at times, simply wrong” (p. 114).

Having raised serious objections to the three other major paradigms of media power, Freedman in chapter 5 sketches out the case for the contradiction paradigm. Although the corporate media's "output is . . . associated with a hegemonic project that is designed to legitimate elite frames and assumptions" (p. 119), that hegemonic project is nevertheless susceptible to disruption as a result of the contradictions of the capitalist system in which the media is embedded. Drawing on Deepa Kumar's (2007) dialectical theory of the commercial news media's relationship to social movements, Freedman delineates some of the ways the system's endemic contradictions undermine the media's ability to secure consent to elite perspectives. Audiences often prove willing to question and challenge the media when its ideological frames and assumptions clash with their own "experiences or aspirations" (p. 119). Moreover, under the right circumstances, the corporate media will respond to direct pressure exerted by grassroots activists and protest movements. Freedman analyzes the performance of the British press in reporting on the debate surrounding the Iraq War as an example of the way contradictions and crises created openings for dissident voices in what was otherwise homogeneously conservative, pro-war coverage. In particular, he traces how British tabloid *The Daily Mirror* broke with the rest of the mainstream media in opposing the 2001 bombing of Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, a development he attributes to the fact that the paper was undergoing "a rebranding exercise" at precisely the moment when popular opposition to those impending military actions was gaining momentum.

Conclusion: An Insightful Primer on Media Power

The strength of Freedman's book is that it offers a succinct, high-level overview of debates surrounding the media and political, social, and economic power. He usefully reduces the plethora of scholarly approaches to a complex subject to a few key paradigms. The book is a clearly written, carefully argued, and well-documented work of synthetic scholarship that makes a forceful argument for a Marxist understanding of the media and its imbrication in structures of power.

Yet the brevity and synoptic nature of *The Contradictions of Media Power* are also its main limitations. Many criticisms that Freedman makes of specific claims associated with the paradigms he disdains have been made before and at greater length by others. For instance, his debunking of the supposed disintermediating, decentralizing tendencies of the Internet sometimes reads like a condensed version of very similar arguments made by scholars whose work he cites (McChesney 2013; Morozov 2011). In addition, Freedman's positive case for, and explication of, the contradiction paradigm he favors seemed rushed and somewhat lacking in detail. The claim to empirical validity of the Marxist understanding of media power that he advances would have been bolstered with more systematic evidence and more concrete case studies and illustrations along the lines of his *Daily Mirror* analysis. Moreover, some of the key theoretical concepts that underwrite that his analyses—"ideology," "contradiction," "reform," "revolution"—deserved further elaboration. Of course, including more supporting examples and more theoretical explanation would have required Freedman to write a much longer book.

As it is, Freedman's slim volume is a lucid and thought-provoking primer on media power and the ways it has been theorized. It should be required reading for anyone interested in the topic and will inevitably become a touchstone for future scholarship.

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