

UNIVERSITY
ACADEMIC THESIS

MEDIA, CULTURE, POWER –
THEORIES OF MASS COMMUNICATION

ASSIGNMENT TYPE: ESSAY

Question:

How are media involved in a 'governing of populations'? How does this differ from a critique of the ideological role of the media? Choose a current (i.e. published in 2002) media text which registers or presents 'public opinion' about some issues, and describe and analyse in what sorts of ways it may contribute to such an exercise of 'governmental power'

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There are various theories and approaches to mass communications on the subject of the culture and the society. In this paper, I will be using the governmental approach in the ‘governing of populations’ to explore the role of media in the context of *material* practices of power, and identify its differences with the *ideological* role. Examples of recent media texts relating to ‘public opinion’ will be used to illustrate how the government of Singapore persuasively engaged itself in exercising its ‘governmental power’ (Greenfield 2001, pp.77-78; Hindess 1996, pp.105-113; Foucault, pp.253-254) to rally for the people’s commitment to stay within the country in the midst of a failing economy.

The ‘government of populations’ is basically a materialist approach, dispensing with the totalising theories associated with Marxism (Greenfield 2001, p.41) with a mix of Althusserian’s theory (Barker 2000, pp.48-65, 366-367), but breaks off from the assumptions determining ideas and practices of a “failed knowledge or consciousness” – the failure to recognise the real conditions of existence in an imaginary relationship of individuals to the social totality (Althusser 1971, p.153; Barker 2000, p.56-59; Greenfield 2001, pp.35, 45). “Government”, according to Foucault (1991), “is concerned with managing the population of the state and the institutions, organisations and processes that which population encompasses” (Hindess 1996, p.112; Barker 2000, pp.366-372). It is not popular sovereignty (Williams 1983, pp.236-238; Burke 1979, pp.3-22), as in the will of ‘the people’ (Bennett 1982, pp.38-41), nor ideological as in the control of territory (example: ruled by a prince), but the notions of

leading or controlling a series of actions through ‘rationality’ and of ‘technology’, as exemplified in the use and invention of technologies for the regulation of conduct (Hindess 1996, pp.105-106; Greenfield 2001, p.76) for the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health and the interests of ‘the people’ (Hindess 1986, pp.112-113; Greenfield 2001, p.76; Burke 1979, pp.3-22).

In order to understand the role of media in modern societies, we must first approach ‘governmentality’ in the context of the material practices of power (Greenfield 2001, p.75). According to Foucault (1982) and Rose (1990), our individuality, as in our personalities, subjectivities, and relationships, are not private matters, but are objects of power which are intensively governed (Foucault 1982, p.214; Rose 1990, p.1; Greenfield 2001, p.78). The central task of governing is focused on managing the subjectivity of ‘the people’ into the scope and aspirations of public powers, in which the space between the ‘private’ lives of citizens and the ‘public’ concerns of rulers are filled (Rose 1990, pp.1-2). The knowledge of a particular population in managing its subjectivity, is acquired through censuses, surveys, opinion polls, means of producing, collecting and materially inscribing, so as to translate the population into material traces, such as the size of its population, its fecundity, its fitness, mortality rate, dress, clothing, habits, productivity and other information (Rose 1990, p.6). These material traces are then used in political arguments and administrative decisions to form governmental power (Rose 1990, p.6; Greenfield 2001, pp.75-77) through a power-knowledge relationship.

In the ideological approaches, the power-knowledge relationship is viewed as the people's right to power and sovereignty (Bennett 1982, pp.38-41). This concept breaks off from the governmental approach, where ideology is viewed as a 'false' assumption of a fundamental reality socially determined by the ruling powers (Barker 2000, pp.54-65; Greenfield 2001, p.45). In the context of governmental approach, the term 'ideology' is used in a neutral sense as 'discourses', which refers to the materialist concept of knowledge as defined in the "institutionally organised sets of assumptions and practices for doing things and making sense" (Tolson 1986, p.155; Greenfield 2001, p.45). Media texts, in the materialist approach, are conceived as the sites where meanings are produced by material practices of composition and reading which contrast the ideological view of texts as reflections or representations of reality or society (McQuail 1994, pp.248-258). Audiences are understood as composed of 'actors' and seen as constitutive or positioned by the material practices in the materialist approach, where actors may choose to resist arguments and positions offered by the media texts (Bennett 1982, pp.38-39; Greenfield 2001, pp.95-96). In the idealist approaches, audiences are seen as existing naturally, either as a cultivated audience known as the *educated public*, or as passive receivers of mass culture known as the *mass audience* (Adorno 1976, pp.239-259; Greenfield 2001, p.95). The *educated public* is seen as capable of making or bringing itself into being through the pursuit of perfection or high culture, or through innate resources of taste, while the *mass audience* is seen as incapable of making itself and is subjected to deformation (Adorno 1976, pp.239-259; Greenfield 2001, p.95).

The terms ‘*mass audience*’, the ‘*public*’, and ‘*the people*’ in which the ‘*public opinion*’ is derived, are not very much dissimilar from the meaning of ‘the population’ (Burke 1979, pp.3-22; Greenfield 2001, pp.67-73). In the rest of this paper, our aim is to establish a governmental approach to ‘public opinion’, which, as argued by Bourdieu (1979) on the topic of opinion polls, “is simply the sum of a number of individual opinions” or polls producing a ‘consensus effect’ based on the figure of a unified public opinion (Bourdieu 1979, pp.124-130; Greenfield 2001, pp.90-94). Bourdieu establishes how opinion polls operate to impose “the illusion that a public opinion exists” (Bourdieu 1979, pp.124-130), which involves the creation of a special speech situation, delimiting who is able to speak, and prescribing topics, vocabularies and the types of possible statements that can be used (Bourdieu 1972, pp.124-130). Techniques used for opinion polls are usually based on aggregation, where respondents who ‘strongly agree’ and those who only ‘partly agree’ to the question posed, are lumped together (Author Unknown 1988, 1 page). Opinion polls are based not only on the means to produce what counts as an opinion, but are also the means to produce their own questions to their advantage and may be used as a governmental technique of surveillance (Bourdieu 1972, pp.124-130).

In Singapore, the governmental approach may be seen in the light of a recent speech given by the Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong during the National Day Rally on the topic of “fair-weather Singaporeans” who “will run away whenever the country runs into stormy weather” (Goh 2002; The

Straits Times 2002a, p.1). Goh calls these people who leave Singapore in the midst of crisis, 'quitters'. Goh's speech was designed to be a passionate rallying call for people (the Singapore citizens) to rise above the economic gloom to help rebuild a country (The Star Online 2002) in the midst of economy downturn and high pessimism in competing with the rising giant economies, such as China and Russia (Goh 2002). The speech raised numerous feedbacks by Singaporeans who are upset at being called 'quitters', but only few of these 'negative' feedbacks by 'the people' are seen published or broadcasted in the local media. The closest to a rebutting word from the public in a forum page of the press media was from a Madam Dorothy Wee (2002) who said, "I would love to stay, but I also don't want my daughter to be stressed out" (Wee 2002). All other feedback, speaks positively in favour of Goh's call for *nationalism* and for unity in the midst of difficult times (Birch 1992, p.76). Opinion polls through research interviews highlighted positive words from 'the people' with statements like, "Let's heed PM Goh's call to rally for country" (Lee 2002), "Quitting has never crossed my mind. This is home ..." (The Straits Times 2002b), "You have rights as a citizen, and with rights come responsibilities" (Koh 2002), and "A 'quitter' I could never be, because I don't have enough guts for it" (Lim 2002). News and editorials coverage on the reactions and responses on the issue, claim a research result of only two in ten Singaporeans have thought of emigration (The Straits Times 2002b; 2002c). Research figures such as these, are examples of how governmental power is exercised to provide the illusion that a public opinion exists, which in fact is simply the sum of a number of individual opinions, and

where polls produce an assumed 'consensus effect' by providing the figure of a unified public opinion (Bourdieu 1979, pp.124-130).

A look at the methods used by ACNielsen Research in conducting the survey for the opinion polls mentioned above, showed that the research was based on the questioning and interviewing of one thousand people (The Straits Times 2002c). This means that the survey was conducted in a manner that assumes a relative percentage representative of the whole population or the people's opinion, which may not be necessarily accurate. Research such as these, are often conducted in a way that serves to provide a legitimate argument for exercising governmental power in the governing of population (Bourdieu 1979, pp.124-130). As can be seen from ACNielsen Research's own description of their methodology for data collection, "research requirements are idiosyncratic and depend on a particular organisation's prerogatives and strategic goals. In this case, specific ad hoc research may be necessary, designed to address a particular market issue or set of issues" (ACNielsen 2002). "Market research is effective because by talking to or measuring a relatively small number of people, you can find out about a much larger group. However, it only works if the people are representative of the total group of interest, if the right questions are asked, and if the answers are interpreted correctly" (ACNielsen 2002).

As can be seen in the case mentioned above, the 'public opinion' through the use of governmental power, has been persuasively or pervasively

portrayed as positive in the light of ‘the people’s’ opinion polls (The Straits Times 2002c). This, however, is far from the truth of what the population hopes to convey. The only press feedback that *truthfully* states the masses’ opinions on this issue came from a foreign press that suggests how most Singaporeans feel of their government – that it “does not listen to feedback” (The Star Online 2002). In this case, we see that public opinion in its current deployment of the opinion poll, operates as “a populist device serving to legitimate particular ‘possessors’ of power by being conceived as a kind of conduit of authority from its location in ‘the people’ to those interests represented and purportedly validated by the poll result” (Greenfield 2001, p.94; Bourdieu 1979, pp.124-130). If public opinion based on the polls is the authentic voice of ‘the people’, then ‘the people’ is left with no choice, but to resign their opinions to those that of the assumed majority (Bourdieu 1979, pp.124-130; Gallup and Rae 1968, pp.16-33; Author Unknown 1988, 1 page).

In our studies of the governmental approach, we have come to understand that audiences are composed of ‘actors’ or as sites of action and decision and of discourses that have been socially acquired (Hindess 1986, pp.112-131). Actors, through knowledge acquired from different discourses, are able to mobilise the different forms of rationality and may resist or argue against populist accounts of public opinions (Hindess 1986, pp.112-131). Public opinions are accounts of persuasively conveyed information, which are based primarily on the numbers of opinion counts, such as through the use of opinion polls (Bourdieu 1979, pp.124-130). Opinion polls data are

gathered from research conducted through surveys and interviews on selected individuals or groups of people, who are assumed to be representative of the population. This approach, according to Bourdieu (1979), is in fact relative to the populist methodology of the social culture (Woollacott 1986, pp.206-218), and hence, not representative of the true opinions of the population.

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