

Social media ownership and the battle for attention

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Dear friends,

As usual, I've spent a bit of time thinking about our current, largely accelerationist, political milieu and its relationship with the (news/social) media. Of most interest to me, at least at this particular moment, is how quickly the cycle changes, and how obvious the political bias of the media truly is. This is exacerbated, particularly here in Australia, by the fundamental lack of diversity of media ownership. It's a Murdoch town here, and he's got goons and crowbars ready for any serious start-up contender. Perhaps I should quickly clarify, in case any of the litigious media cronies are loitering, they have "earned" those billions of dollars of surplus funding, and their dominance begets them a naturally (out)sized influence in the chambers of parliament. Digressing, we are in a bit of a tangle. Social and traditional media ownership concentration is rife, the news cycle is attention grabbing shorter and shorter attention spans, and fascism is rising.

We've talked about social media, and the ways algorithms focus people's attention, and we've thought on media hegemony and the concentration of media ownership as a soapbox. But there's a schematic, here, emerging for us to consider worth further analysis. Media, in the varied forms which exist, have an extreme influence on civil society ideology and practice, and this requires examination. In particular we should ever examine our media in light of current events, as wars, ideological battles, and genocide become normalised, it is ever more important. Gramsci offers us a framework for understanding power and the relationship between capitalist/worker coloniser/colonised, and more, and emphasises the power of the media:

"The press is the most dynamic part of the ideological structure, but not the only one. Everything that directly or indirectly influences or could influence public opinion belongs to it: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture, the layout of streets and their names"

- Gramsci, 1971

There is a significance in the way media, or in Gramsci's time *the press*, has influence over public opinion. For Gramsci the thinkers and workers in those institutions, those responsible for writing the news for instance, are 'traditional intellectuals'. These educated folks work in knowledge production but are utterly subservient to the capitalists and narratives which benefit them. Yet Gramsci compels us to determine ways to redirect their efforts from pro-capitalist production towards emancipatory ends. But let's not get overly sidetracked -we'll come back to Gramsci at the end. For now, let's examine some 'common sense' perspectives and offer some good sense retorts to help us solidify our thinking in relation to theories of knowledge. For our consideration today:

- News cycles are operated in short terms;
- Some (counter-hegemonic) stories are deliberately phased out of those cycles;
- Social media vies for and directs attention of multitudes towards popular narratives;
- Most hegemonic narratives drive individualist pro-capitalist thought; and
- All media sits atop a consumerist, colonial and pro-capital base and is imbued by this way of thinking.

In an effort to be somewhat systematic, let's start with news cycles. In the United States, television news is notoriously set in 24 hour cycles, or perhaps 12 hour cycles, with attention spans increasingly shortening. Simultaneously attention as a metric becomes foundationally desirable[1]. There are events which may increase or decrease the total number of news

stories *covered*, but largely there is a constant feed of new material for news media to ensure novelty. This novelty – the demand for new news – is political. The stories shared are tinted with a way of knowing which drives a consumerist, colonial and pro-capitalist agenda. For instance, for MSNBC, a constant soft critique of Republican “decision-making” without proper reflection on Democrats failings, for Fox News a constant libellous critique of anyone ... anyone but Trump. But at both ends of a political scale these news corporations follow a common pattern: amplify a particular issue (related to a spin of hegemonic ideology), monetise attention (the level of this attention is now gaged by social media interactions), persist political narratives, move on to the next story. Throughout the cycle of introduction, monetisation, politicisation, and constant movement there are subtler themes. These largely relate to the monetisation of a particular channel –i.e., Fox News wants to retain angry viewers, and to direct their fervour into consumerism for Murdoch-friendly enterprises (read: sell shit).

Relatedly, during this clamouring for new news, stories which shed negative light on the cable news company's view of capitalism are silenced and phased out. Equally, and muddying these waters, stories which do not appear to capture the audience's attention are also phased out. Let's move to an example. Take for instance the rapid turn away from coverage of the *largest protest movement in American history*. This was covered quietly for about three days. For an event of such scale, this coverage is extremely short in terms of news cycles. If we were asked to decide between the two reasons for this story to be phased out, which would you select as a more likely reason? Limited newsworthiness or limited commercialisation opportunities. The politicisation of attention continually demands new stories, but never those which might challenge the dominant ideology –colonial capitalism. And with the large-scale monetisation of attention and emotion for consumerism under capitalism, disruption that verges anywhere near a critique of the hegemony is preordained as *danger*. Even in important could-be news stories we can see the political protection of colonial capitalism, take for instance Trump featuring heavily in the Epstein files. This challenges Trump, but also draws attention to the systemic failure to bring justice to young people exploited directly by capitalists. A story like this, a threat to capitalist hegemony, if even covered would be made to seem irrelevant and boring. The media use a handful of techniques here to balance “doing the job” and not challenging the status quo: overdoing charts, numbers and statistics, speaking in a disengaged tone, burying the article, not sending a push notification, or keeping just the anchor on screen for a segment read. Here, we'll see the news delivered while allowing the media to direct attention the way the hegemonic political agenda demands.

As traditional media languishes, relatively unable to capture attention during the TikTokification of news, new exaggerated attention-seeking practices emerge. Social media is repositioned as the most important space for that attention, while simultaneously fracturing it and directing it elsewhere. Even the news cycle itself has accelerated to “real-time” blogs and image+text formats to vie for a share of acknowledgement in a crowded market of diminished attention[2]. We also see increased sensationalisation and accelerationism which does more than grab at attention, it fundamentally shapes the pitch and tone of stories and may warp the truth of events just to stand out amidst users ad-ridden social media feeds of hundreds of news sources, comedy artefacts, and maybe the occasional family photo. Social media algorithms (often manipulated by billionaire fiefdom kings) then amplify the most successfully sensationalised story, which in turn feeds new garbage and extreme perspectives back into the 24 hour news cycle. Similarly to Elon re-training Grock on the right-wing misinformation echo chamber that is Twitter, the ouroboros of extremist shit masticates yesterdays garbage back into today's headlines. As though this weren't indictment enough, media moguls and pro-imperial think-tanks continue to cycle “in” meaningless pro-genocide, pro-war, and pro-military industrial complex propaganda as though it were news. This blend becomes digital noise, impossible to permeate. Moreover, discerning

fact from fiction, ideology from representation of reality, becomes a mammoth task, particularly for those whose digital literacy was (is!) never developed. Do I sound like Žižek? Ideology[3]!

If we consider social media to be the 'new' media kid on the block, it's worth examining its thematic ideological structures too. Following our assertion above that (cable) news media seeks to craft pro-capital consumerism around increasingly irrelevant news stories, then social media's primary drive is most likely for attention. This attention (seeking), naturally, is political too. And the political choices made by platforms are highly ideological, and gatekeep audiences[4], to craft a deliberate global narrative. Between these two medias ('traditional' and 'social') there is often collusion, traditional news driving engagement in sensationalised discussions on social media, exposing users to more interaction-based advertisement. Thereby driving up "engagement" statistics for social media companies, who then sell ad spaces back to the traditional news providers. Hang on... where are the benefits for the traditional media organisations?[5]

Traditional media cannibalises itself to drive engagement on platforms which, by their nature, put traditional media out of work (extreme example of this in Australia where our news media was largely blocked on Meta while News Corp attempted to force them to pay for linking to their articles). Here we are seeing a thinning of traditional media as they suffer with advertisers moving to the new media platforms. And, with social media giants increasingly consuming their competition (Facebook buying Instagram, anyone?) we are seeing a gentrification of all media - robbing a plurality internet forums to feed a singular behemoth (Meta). This meta (get it, ha) amalgam of social medias, strip mining the internet and traditional media and asserting itself as king has created one giant entity. In a cruel twist of fate this singular overlord of a platform heavily promotes an ideology of individualism. And its not just individualism for you[6]. This individualism coalesces around the attention drive, but it would be foolish to suggest direct causation. There has, however, been a rapid intensification of content which spurs self interest -perhaps psychologically there's a connection? Narcissus shines again.

Contrary to assumptions about social media democratising information access, the handful of dominant platforms have been shown to operate through curation systems that actively shape what content receives collective attention[7]. An attention economy has emerged, one tightly controlled by Meta (the conglomerate owner of Facebook, Instagram, Threads and others), and their vested interest is driving consumer engagement in advertising (particularly targeted advertising) and in an oddly non-paradoxical way, content gains attention based on already-received attention[8]. When studied, however, even aggregation platforms, which arguably help shape which stories gather attention, such as Reddit, made use of human ranking algorithms that direct which posts climb feeds (subtle, here, read the footnote)[9]. In essence, platform owners determine which voices gain visibility and which remain marginalised by their initial promotion (or lack thereof) in feeds. While engagement-forward and clickbait content has some affect, the initial filtration and ranking system which is deliberately opaque on corporate social media platforms has a remarkable influence on popular attention - and rarely is it not advertiser-friendly[10].

You may also have noticed, here, that there is an underlying thread of 1:1 relationships. The user has a relationship with the platform. The viewer has a relationship with the platform (subscription service). The advertiser with the platform. The traditional media? The platform. But it's not just the platform redefining relationships with media such as the infamous Web 2.0 (RWW), its a fundamental rewrite of human social interaction. In research in the above[10:1] a term emerged: "individuals-in-the-group". Rather than being "social" media, these platforms are attention-seeking individualising platforms above all as they seek monetisation and profitability. Not a "social" platform, but an advertising platform. We could, therefore, extend *our* argument, social media sites function as spaces

to internalise competitive values rooted in "performance metrics", "(anti)social consumer behaviour", and perpetual "self-optimisation". One literally needs look no further than the ads. But it's not just *our* argument. Research has shown this is not only the case, but deliberately the mission of the platform[11]. The platform acts as a hegemonic organ shaping neoliberal identities, encouraging people to adopt individualistic mindsets[12] and seek personal remedies[13] for what are usually fundamentally macro social challenges. Through constant engagement with these sites, users gradually embrace a worldview which prioritises individual achievement and self-improvement over collective action and systemic solutions.

Concerningly, social media also contributes to "depoliticisation" by transforming political issues into individual lifestyle choices rather than collective action problems. Climate change becomes just a personal consumer choice problem, economic hardship due to wealth inequality becomes personal loan fodder, identity becomes politics. Even as far back as 2011 research into social media's effect on collective vs personal ideology and values in online political spaces was being investigated[14]. Though the media broadly has been interrogated for its role in promoting individualism and other neoliberal colonial capitalist attitudes for decades. The movement from collective to individual organisation of society feeds that very consumerism, colonialism, capitalism, and elitism. From media ownership concentration to all eyes on advertising revenues, systems continue to confine acceptable discourse to consumerist capitalism. Human suffering, in this space, is theatre -grist for the mill, and sensationalisation, 'civil' debate, and influencers simply keep the advertising machine rolling. However, there are models which ease our understanding of this system, and even offer opportunities to challenge the hegemonic thinking.

Famously Herman and Chomsky developed the 'Propaganda Model', which argues that mass media in democratic societies primarily serves already powerful interests. It achieves this through five filters: (1) concentrated corporate ownership of media (massive capital investment), (2) dependence on advertising revenue that favours content appealing to affluent audiences, (3) reliance on official sources from government and business for news, (4) organised criticism that disciplines media deviating from elite interests, and (5) historically, anti-communism as an ideology that limits acceptable debate. These filters work together to create a propaganda system where news appears objective but systematically favours establishment views and marginalises dissent[15]. This model is particularly relevant to the construction of the US media, but is also growingly relevant as the US owned social media platform (Meta) subsumes any local/global alternatives. As it was with the media when this model was divined, social media also operates to secure and promote the agenda of an unelected wealthy elite, a wealthy elite profiting from human suffering and the destruction of our planet. As we consume ourselves to death, and intellectually backflip to make this our problem, we're eased by the comfort of advertising which suggests its all within our individual narcissistic power to change the world. Just lie back and stare at Instagram, and ignore those increasingly despotic capitalists over there, *they're harmless*.

So, where are we? We've seen that the acceleration of news cycles creates temporal conditions favouring simple reactionary narratives over complex systemic analysis [16]. This temporal pressure combines with systematic exclusion of counter-hegemonic perspectives to create an information environment dominated by establishment viewpoints. Social media amplifies this by directing collective attention toward content optimised for engagement rather than democratic value, while simultaneously promoting individualistic responses that depoliticise collective problems. The entire system rests on consumerist foundations which require media to serve capital's interests rather than democratic functions [17]. Digital platforms function as mechanisms of ideological reproduction that atomise collective solidarity while concentrating power in technological and financial elites[18]. Amazing. *What a time to be alive*. Let's return to Gramsci for some clarification about what we might do about all this.

Gramsci's "hegemony" shows us that this media apparatus functions as both propaganda and fundamental architecture of common sense. The accelerated news cycle, algorithmic curation, and individualistic framing we've examined constitute what Gramsci critiqued in examining the colonial capitalist hegemonic project. This project is one that secures ruling class dominance through coercion and rewriting human relations through capitalist logic emphasising that these are natural, inevitable, and personally beneficial (surprise: they aren't). The traditional intellectuals working within these media institutions, from journalists to platform engineers, are (often unquestioning) architects of consent to this reality, their technical expertise enlisted in service of maintaining the existing order. But Gramsci also offered us illustration of the contradictions within this system. Technologies which atomise us also offer possibilities for organic intellectual development and counter-hegemonic organisation[19]. The challenge, then, is to develop alternative forms of cultural and intellectual leadership that contest the dominant narratives at their root -not at the symptom. We need new "institutions", new forms of governance and collective knowledge production which nest in understanding our shared reality; a war of position which recognises media as a crucial battleground in the struggle for egalitarian social transformation. Or something, I don't know, it's Wednesday. Go out and touch grass.

In solidarity,

Aidan

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 3. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137361516_3
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 6. Its everything from "coaches" to influencers, it's all about you. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/jun/24/what-i-learned-following-400-online-instagram-gurus>
 7. <https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2024.59619>
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 9. This study "highlight that the order in which *content is ranked* can influence the levels and types of user engagement within algorithmically curated feeds" - <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2502.20491>
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 12. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7673976/>
 13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia4020041>
 14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.579141> (yes, 2010 was 15 years ago -the horror)
 15. <https://chomsky.info/consent01/>
 16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2023.103243>
 17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare8040497>
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 19. c.f., lemmys; mastodon; etc.