

An Analysis of Kellner's Theory of Media Culture

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1 Explanatory Adequacy

In an era when the media have grown to be one of the most dominant forms of culture in North American – so dominant, in fact, that they can now be seen as the pinnacle of commercial culture – an explanatory theory of the media becomes paramount. Yet considering the intimate relationship between culture and media and that, for many, the media have become their culture, a theory that views the media outside the context of culture will be afflicted with myopia. Thus, for completeness, a theory of the media requires a firm connection to culture in its every step. Douglas Kellner, in his book *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*, sets out to make these connections.

While an adequate theory of media culture, in our era, is of deep significance, it would nevertheless lack a fundamental connection to more profound aspects of life – freedom, justice, equality, and general welfare – without being tied to the political system that aims to ensure such liberties. Kellner rightly endeavors “to theorize the role of the media in a democratic society.”¹

The question, however, is whether he accurately captures the complexity of the links. Does his theory, which should be subject to the same requirements as any other theory, best explain the intricate set of relationships among media, culture, and democracy? If Kellner moves to make normative suggestions, they had best be founded on a robust account of the situation in question; otherwise, they run the risk of irrelevancy.

Yet a theory of media culture should account for at least the following predominant facts, which characterize the intersection of American culture and media when viewed in the context of a democratic political system: the treatment of politics as entertainment; the focus of image over substance, especially pertaining to politicians and their positions; monopoly ownership of the media by corporations; the uniformity of perspective from which the media cover political news; the media's seemingly vast political power, especially in light of its proclamation of objectivity; the historical basis for the formulation of a media culture and the history behind the media's acquisition of power over the political system.

With some of these conditions in mind, I seek in this essay to assess the explanatory power of Douglas Kellner's theory of media culture from the perspective of participatory democracy. Such a perspective is justified by the values that underlie Kellner's theory: the furtherance of democracy. But because of the ubiquitous nature of the media and its intricate relationship to democracy, a complete assessment of Kellner's theory would quickly snowball into an uncontrollable mass. Thus, I will attempt in several places to narrow my essay's focus while lending it a direct connection to an aspect of media culture by assessing Kellner's theory with respect to the news media.

Taking up such a perspective leads me to ask the following specific questions: Does Kellner's theory, which centers on film and television, adequately account for the role of the news media in U.S. media culture? And, more important, does it capture and explain the intimate and influential relationship between the news media and democratic government?

The angle of analysis that these questions entails is itself justified by Kellner's definition of media culture. In addition to television, film, radio, and so forth, Kellner says, "Media culture consists of ... print media ranging from newspapers to magazines."² As such, his theory of media culture should not only cover them but also explain the relationship of their micro-media cultures, so to speak, to democracy as well as other media. Otherwise Kellner is presenting only a theory of television and film culture and should label it as such.

A theory of media culture must not only account for such relationships, but do so parsimoniously: The facts of the matter must be explained as economically as possible with the greatest possible depth and scope. Examining Kellner's theory as applied to a few important facts about the relationship between media and democracy will serve as a test of his theory's scope and depth. An analysis of his theoretical foundations and explanatory apparatus, besides exposing any hidden presumptions, will reveal the extent to which his theory adheres to the requirement of economy.

During the course of this essay, it will no doubt become apparent that Kellner has succeeded in developing a theory of media culture that includes the strong elements of past views while discarding some obsolete or inapplicable aspects of them. I will argue, however, that his theory nevertheless fails to adequately explain several important aspects of the media in relation to culture and democracy. I will also argue that, in general, Kellner's theory relies on too much explanatory machinery to account for too few facts: too much explanatory machinery because Kellner borrows too generously from other theories; too few facts because Kellner unduly limits the input of data into his model.

2 Some Principal Characteristics

Before beginning to assess Kellner's theory, it may be useful to sketch in more detail a few of the above-mentioned characteristics underlying the relationship between the U.S. media and democracy. A complete list of such characteristics would, no doubt, be prohibitively large. Thus I shall restrict the list to either characterizations of print media or to factors so preeminent that a theory's failure to account for them would constitute a significant shortcoming. As a test of Kellner's theory, I will examine the extent to which it explains the following three conditions.

- The treatment of politics as entertainment, as sports, with the sensationalism and superficiality that typically accompanies coverage of sports and celebrities.
- The near-monopoly ownership of most of the country's more than 1,000 daily newspapers by 11 corporations³ and the effect this ownership has had on the relationship between the print media and the process of democracy, especially in light of the traditional view that a free press helps ensure democratic government. Such researchers as Ben Bagdikian have described the media monopoly; a theory of media culture should explain it, as well as the interplay between it, democracy, and culture. I will also examine how Kellner's theory can allow for resistance given the control of the media by big business.
- The uniformity of perspective with which the print media typically cover politic events. Uniformity of perspective is closely related to corporate monopolization of the media.

3 A Matter of Perspective

Before analyzing the application of Kellner's theory to these properties of the media, I would like to ask a deeper question: Does Kellner's ideological perspective and his theoretical presuppositions about media and culture provide a solid position from which to view the properties outlined above.

Kellner is an ideologue of the left, and his analysis is heavily biased by his ideology. Yet he redeems himself by acknowledging, in the spirit of Max Weber, the values, the ends, that he has in mind and holds dear: the furtherance of democracy. Kellner is concerned with how media either inhibit or advance democracy. Kellner's form of cultural studies is an activist one: It seeks, he says, to advance democracy and freedom. Since I believe, like Weber, that every social scientist necessarily brings his ideological perspective to his

analysis, I will not reproach Kellner in this regard other than to say that his conclusions should be viewed as determined, to a certain extent, by his ideological point of departure.

A genuine problem of perspective, however, emerges between Kellner's broad characterization of culture and a fundamental assumption that underlies his perspective. Kellner sees culture as a "highly participatory activity." But he also says that Media Culture will "explore some of the consequences for a society and culture colonized by media culture."⁴

Calling culture a highly participatory activity lies in contradiction to characterizing society as "colonized" by media culture. Willful participation – in the sense that Kellner uses the term to mean creation, cultivation, and identification – excludes colonization. Once it has been established that media culture is (willingly) participatory, the notion of colonization loses its import.

To think of society as "colonized" by the media presents two additional problems of its own. First, the characterization of American society as "colonized by media" is inaccurate (and to say, as Kellner does, that culture is colonized by "media culture" makes little, if any, conceptual sense). Second, such an inappropriate characterization, used as a point of departure for inquiry, may lead the analysis astray and produce mistaken conclusions.

Kellner's departure from these theories leads him to maintain that the media help reproduce either dominant forms of social power or resistance to domination, or have contradictory effects. Kellner's suggestion that American society is "colonized by" media culture, even when the word "colonized" is taken in its vague sociological sense of one group imposing itself on another, is difficult to reconcile with the thesis that media can articulate such diverse ideological positions as domination, resistance, or both.

The difficulty in reconciling these two assumptions reveals a logical problem in Kellner's perspective. Had Kellner not made the colonization assumption, his view would have been implicitly consistent with the reproduction and domination views because assumption (ii) follows, at least to a certain extent, from (i). Yet, without making the first assumption, and in fact making the opposite one, Kellner leaves his adoption of possibility (ii) to the apparatus he appropriates from the British and Frankfurt theories when he could have, in fact, derived it logically – and thus more parsimoniously – from the view that American society generates its own media culture. Borrowing the view from the Frankfurt and British schools, while useful, brings only additional, and perhaps ad hoc, baggage to his theory, thus weakening it. In other words, a theory that combines the best of all previous theories to account for a certain phenomenon – here, media culture – will no doubt have vast explanatory power, but that power is acquired only through the adaption of a great deal of theoretical apparatus.

Kellner's perspective, however, contains several strong assumptions from the Frankfurt and British schools. From the Marx-inspired Frankfurt school, Kellner borrows a primary assumption: That "media culture is industrial culture, organized on the model of mass production. . . . It is thus a form of commercial culture and its products are commodities that attempt to attract private profit produced by giant corporations interested in the accumulation of capital."⁵

But today's media culture has added several layers atop its industrialism and mass production, Kellner correctly acknowledges. Media culture is also a high-tech culture, a characteristic addressed by the Frankfurt School only marginally – and mostly from a aesthetic perspective and within the context of industrialization – in such writings as Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

From the British, Kellner adopts their emphasis on social and political power. For Kellner, media culture takes on sociological and political relevance because it "demonstrates who has power and who is powerless."⁶

Both assumptions – that culture is a battleground for power and that media culture is industrial culture – expand the lens of Kellner's perspective, lending it a wider view for examining the relation between media culture and the democracy.

Yet, as mentioned above, Kellner's adaptation of the best of past theories of media and culture itself presents a theoretical problem: His theory's explanatory power stems from the use of a great number of generalizations about media and culture. Ideally, a theory – even in the realm of culture, which is no more complex than, say, language – should achieve maximum explanatory power with the minimum number of generalizations. A

theory that stipulates an additional principle to account for every major fact not only impinges upon its own explanatory power but also raises the possibility that it is missing an important generalization about the facts in question. Furthermore, as noted above, a theory should generate its own apparatus whenever possible. By simply borrowing as needed from previous theories, Kellner undermines the potential of his theory to generate its own explanatory principles from within, as I pointed out above in my discussion of the colonization assumption.

On the other hand, Kellner's multiperspectival approach, adopted from principles laid down by Nietzsche and Foucault, may contain the capacity to better explain the cultural and political conditions of media than the ideologically limited approaches taken by the Frankfurt or British schools. The question becomes whether appropriating so much machinery proves its worth in explanatory power.

4 Politics As Entertainment

Reflecting on the use of television and radio to document the proceedings of Germany's parliament, Jurgen Habermas says that through these two media, the debates "are stylized into a show. Publicity loses its critical function in favor of a staged display."⁷ Such staged displays, put on to achieve political ends through the format of entertainment, have become the norm of 20th century American political life.

Staged displays continue unabashedly today. In fact, they have only worsened: the media's presentation of politics has moved beyond the stage to the stadium. In its mildest forms, the press displays politics as an absurd production unfolding on a stage for entertainment. At its worst, however, politics is covered like a major sporting event. "For the American media in the 1990s, public life is sports. The entire press has become the sports page," James Fallows writes in *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy*.⁸

During the 1980s, some critics of the media, most notably Noam Chomsky, argued that the press emphasized coverage of sports to deliberately divert the public's attention from political issues. If that is so, then the print media's coverage of politics as sports during the 1990s has taken Chomsky's characterization to its logical extreme, with the result being that the public is, indeed, diverted from the issues behind the game.

Chomsky's instrumentalist view offers an explanation of why the press covers politics as a sporting event. Fallows, too, has an explanation: "Much of today's press acts as if, down deep, they believe that none of it matters in public life." This indifference, Fallows continues, manifests itself in "the instinct of reporters to skip past the consequences of any trend or event and focus instead on how the game was played."⁹

The consequences of treating politics as a game, as entertainment, are severe. In Habermas's view, the press is an important port of call in the public sphere. When the press turns away from the concerns of citizens, it closes important access to political life. Without a public political sphere, where all the policies that affect the populace are debated and discussed, democracy ceases to have meaning. Fallows agrees: "A relentless emphasis on the cynical game of politics threatens public life itself, by implying that the political sphere is mainly an arena in which ambitious politicians struggle for dominance, rather than a structure in which citizens can deal with worrisome collective problems."¹⁰

And what's more, I want to add, is that the focus on the game of politics erects an artificial barrier between citizens and the public political sphere, fanning the feeling of helplessness, impotence, and lack of influence over the politics that directly affect their lives. Focusing on the game of politics exacerbates the citizen's profound sense that regardless of what he or she does, nothing will change.

In *Breaking the News*, Fallows argues that the failure of the press to engage the public in political life underlies much that is wrong with the relationship between the media and politics in the United States. The result, Fallows says, is "fatalistic disengagement" of the public from politics.

Perhaps here an instrumentalist would step in to say that the press has not failed – but in fact succeeded in its conspiratorial move to cut the public off from political power, thereby bolstering its own.

These observations and explanations, poignant as they are, lead me to ask, on the one hand, how Kellner's theory accounts for the press's treatment of politics as sports and, on the other hand, if he better captures its causes and consequences. For, as Kellner himself says, whether a "theory is useful can be determined by whether it does or does not illuminate specific phenomena."¹¹

Beyond assuming that media texts are not merely "pure and innocent entertainment,"¹² Kellner has little to say directly about the treatment of politics as sports. For one thing, Kellner believes media texts are more complex than mere entertainment. Kellner, no doubt, would reject an instrumentalist line holding that the media conspire to cover politics as sports to deliberately divert the public from the substance of the issues. In fact, despite the treatment of politics as sports, Kellner holds that "in the political sphere, media images have produced a new sort of sound-bite politics which places the media at the center of political life,"¹³ a view that clashes with Fallows' observation that the public is fatally disengaged from political life, largely because of the media's sound-bite politics.

The answer to my question – how Kellner accounts for the news media's treatment of politics as sports – can be found in the chapter on the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf, the chapter which most directly deals with the news media's coverage of a political event.

Kellner, like Fallows, sees the media covering the war as if it were a major sporting event. Kellner, however, gives a different explanation than Fallows. And Kellner adds another element: The media not only covered the war like a sporting event but became involved in the event themselves – as cheerleaders.

"Television," which framed the war as an exciting narrative, Kellner says, "served primarily as a propaganda apparatus for the multinational forces arrayed against the Iraqis and as a cheerleader for their every victory."¹⁴ The audience was led to see the war, in Kellner's words, as the "Super Bowl of wars." Kellner even goes so far as to point out that "seven Super Bowl [football] players were asked their views of the war."¹⁵

What motivated the news media to cover the war in such a way? Surely it wasn't for the explanation that Fallows puts forth for the news media covering politics, more generally, as sports. Surely it was not because reporters thought that none of really mattered.

Not surprisingly, Kellner's analysis takes a different track. The war coverage, he says, must be seen "within the framework of the political economy of commercial television."¹⁶ Although Kellner acknowledges that the situation involving the media's coverage of the war was complex, his dominant argument is that the television networks and the other news media covered the war with the goal of attracting viewers. "Competition revolved around presenting the most patriotic, exciting, and comprehensive coverage," Kellner says.¹⁷

Thus, Kellner takes an instrumentalist approach that is almost as direct as Chomsky's. The only difference lies in the attribution of motivation. For Chomsky, the media may cover a particular political event positively because they are acting as the propaganda wing of the government. For Kellner, it seems, the news media covered the war positively because they were seeking to make money. But such a view assumes that viewers already supported the war, an assumption that seems dubious in light of public reaction to the Vietnam War. Perhaps viewers did support the war merely because they were backing their country in a conflict, much like the fans of a sports team would obviously support their team over another. The Vietnam experience, however, somewhat undermines the force of this assumption. Why else might the American public back the war? Kellner's explanation: Through the news media's coverage, "the audience was mobilized to support every move of the Bush administration and the Pentagon."¹⁸ Kellner goes so far as to say that the news media produced the popularity of the war as well as the patriotism and "irrational hysteria" in support of it.¹⁹ Kellner's explanation, then, is not only instrumentalist but circular: The news media backed the war to attract audience share while they mobilized the support for the war that provided the motivation to attract viewers by covering the conflict positively.²⁰

The circularity of Kellner's explanation makes its power suspect. If Kellner argues in the first instance that the media are covering an event positively in order to gain audience share on the assumption that viewers already support the event, then an independent explanation must be put forth for the audience's support of the event.

But no matter: As Kellner acknowledges, the media's coverage of the event seemed to have little long-term

effect. The success of the war, as portrayed by the media, did not secure President Bush's reelection. In fact, the war, Kellner writes, "eventually raised questions concerning whether he was really an effective president. Its short-term positive effects also point to the fickleness of audiences in a media-saturated society, who soon forget the big events of the previous year."²¹ Perhaps none of it really matters politically to the public – because it doesn't matter politically to the news media.

5 Corporate Media Culture

Fact: Most of America's newspapers as well as magazines, TV and radio stations, and film production companies are owned by fewer than 15 major corporations. Kellner, to his credit, assumes that American culture, including media culture, is predominantly commercial. Such an assumption begs to be followed by at least a theoretical examination of the economic relations underlying commercial culture. Indeed, a powerful theory of the media will explain the cultural and political consequences of the monopoly ownership of the media. To what extent, then, does Kellner's theory account for the role of the corporation in generating media culture?

As a start, Kellner, adopting the theoretical apparatus of the Frankfurt school, views media as organized on the model of mass production. But Kellner also sees the shortcomings of applying an industrial model emphasizing the state to a postindustrial age increasingly dominated by giant corporations – insights which enable him to improve on the Frankfurt school's model in two ways. First, he acknowledges the economic structural changes that have resulted in "transnational corporations replacing the nation-state as arbitrators of production."²² Second, Kellner recognizes that to view media culture as beholden to the laws of industrial production in an age of postindustrialism would fail to take into account the rapid advances in technology, often initiated by large corporations, that are propelling Western societies beyond the industrial model.

Yet, given the degree of corporate involvement in media culture and Kellner's acknowledgements of commercial culture and of corporations as the arbiters of production, I would have expected him to more thoroughly explore the influence of corporations upon media culture and, in turn, democracy. This Kellner does not do. He, no doubt, has other goals in mind. But by failing to explicitly deal with corporate influence on media culture and democracy, he lessens the input into his theory – and, as a result, reduces the scope of his theory's reach. A theory that attempts to explain the media's role in a democratic society must address the totality of significant factors that characterize the media. The economic aspects of media culture, which, with the increases in monopolization and market concentration that characterize a maturing capitalism, warrant explicit, detailed attention, especially when the media monopoly can be seen, as Mark Crispin Miller has written in *The Nation*, as the "true causes" of the "terminal inanity of U.S. politics," an affliction that undermines participatory democracy.²³ And the importance of such a study becomes still more pressing when America is seen, in the words of one cultural critic, not as a culture, but as an economy.

6 The Place of Resistance in a Corporate Media Culture

Participatory democracy in a media culture will thrive only if the mass of media consumers find within their cultural artifacts the means to take political action and partake in the political system, which is itself mediated by the media. From the normative perspective of progressive political activism, Kellner's failure to delve more thoroughly into the influence of the media monopoly upon participatory democracy leaves an important question unanswered: Given that most media are owned and controlled by corporations, how can readers and viewers find the germ of resistance?

One answer, of course, is the independent or alternative press, an answer which is the cornerstone of resistance for such instrumentalists as Chomsky. Yet the independent media – mostly small cable channels, college radio stations, and weekly newspapers – comprise but a small portion of American media culture, vastly limiting their potential as vessels for resistance. The motivation for resistance must be found within the mainstream media. The question stands.

Kellner supplies an answer: Moments of resistance, he says, can be gleaned from within most media texts, even those that explicitly carry conservative messages, by reading them against their ideological grain. The complexity of media artifacts also allows them to contain contradictory messages wherein resistance can be found.

But is it reasonable to expect the typical television watcher or newspaper reader, untutored in the intricacies of media culture, to find moments of resistance in media artifacts without being somehow trained to do so? The answer, it seems, is no. Until the critical media pedagogy that Kellner advocates becomes common curriculum in American education, what is needed for the project of resistance to be meaningful and successful is a way in which typical citizens, not just deconstruction workers or cultural studies practitioners, can find moments of resistance in media.

Assuming, though, that the average media user detects moments of resistance in, say, a newspaper article, how can he or she use it for social and political action? But before we ask how such moments of resistance can be used, it seems reasonable to ask whether they can be used at all: Can they serve as a point of departure for social action? Can the mere identification of a theme of resistance give a viewer an advantageous place in the struggle against oppression?

At least one cultural theorist argues the contrary. The passive viewer, the outside observer, cannot find his place in the active struggle against oppression from the starting point of consumption. Rather – at least when action is required – the observer must somehow become a participant in the production of the cultural artifact to become a meaningful force for change. This is the view of Walter Benjamin. He writes: “The place of the intellectual in the class struggle can be identified, or, better, chosen, only on the basis of his position in the process of production.”²⁴

All is not lost. Benjamin, just as he denies the usefulness of the viewer’s passive resistance, so too leaves an opening through which Kellner’s insistence on the decoding for resistance can be salvaged. The cultural artifact, Benjamin argues, produces the means to resist oppression only to the extent that it can turn viewers into producers. “And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.”²⁵

Kellner’s diagnostic critique becomes the apparatus that enables a consumer to find the wherewithal to become a producer in a time when the corporate-controlled media provides little direct inspiration for those seeking to become producers.

Kellner’s theory of resistance, supplemented by Benjamin’s call for action, must now cross its toughest barrier: How can the individual (or a group of them) carry out his or her intention to become a producer when most of the distribution channels are owned and guarded by corporations?

Kellner’s view responds, in a straightforward way, to this question by showing in such chapters as “Black Voices from Spike Lee to Rap” that corporations will open their channels to dissident producers if there is enough of an audience for their work to ensure profits for the corporation funding the film. The success of such film makers as Spike Lee and Michael Moore, the producer of *Roger & Me*, an attack on General Motors, demonstrates that resistance – even against the corporation itself – is possible within an industry controlled by corporations. Moore, in an article in *The Nation*, not only lends credence to Kellner’s theoretical position that there are ambivalent and oppositional movements within media culture but also describes how they can arise. Moore says: “If you are going to attack a big bad corporation in your film, it will help to have another big bad corporation in your corner.”²⁶ Thus, it seems that the media distributed by corporations are not directed toward collusive ends, dispelling the instrumentalist hypothesis.

Kellner also articulates a strong implicit theoretical response to the question of how active resistance through production is possible in media governed by corporations. Media culture artifacts, on Kellner’s view, necessarily contain representations of all oppositional tendencies within society. Even though the artifacts are distributed by corporations, the artifacts are produced by individuals or teams of them, and each artifact embodies each producer’s fears, fantasies, hopes, or desires.

To recap this section, Kellner’s theory sufficiently and economically accounts for resistance in the form of production, but seems to falter in showing how consumers of media can act on the themes of resistance

they detect in media artifacts, leaving unanswered how consumers' intentions to resist, outside of becoming producers themselves, can advance participatory democracy.

Just because the fact that resistance is possible in the realm of production does not necessarily entail that it will have a democratizing effect upon consumers. For built into the capitalist system, say Horkheimer and Adorno, is an anti-resistance mechanism that works by way of onslaught: the individual is barraged by a constant volley of mind-numbing information, leaving him no time to even consider resisting. "What is decisive today is . . . the necessity inherent in the system not to leave the customer alone, not for a moment to allow him any suspicion that resistance is possible."²⁷ The volley of information, images, and sounds has only worsened since the time when Horkheimer and Adorno were writing, prompting calls that an era of postmodernism has arrived. "The need which might resist central control," say Horkheimer and Adorno, "has already been suppressed by the control of the individual consciousness,"²⁸ a process that leads to the next section of my discussion: the homogeneous perspective propagated by the news media.

7 Uniformity of Perspective

The products manufactured and brought to market by the media form more than just a postmodern collage of images, words, and sounds. And they are more than mere ideologies, however superficial. They are a perspective – not many but one: A uniform perspective that radically influences how we perceive the world, what we describe as "reality," what we call "knowledge," how we think, and what we think about. Horkheimer and Adorno, already identifying the uniformity of perspective in the 1940s, called it an "ever-changing sameness." Walter Benjamin, writing even earlier than Horkheimer and Adorno, noted the profound effect a uniform perspective of the media could have on its consumers. "During long periods of history," he writes in *Illuminations*²⁹, "the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence." Since the first half of the century, the picture has only gotten worse. Herber I. Schiller calls the 1990s version of media's uniform perspective "packaged consciousness."³⁰

In light of these observations, it seems reasonable to ask a theory of media culture to explain how the uniformity of perspective in the deliverance of the news has affected the way people think and act, and more importantly, the way people participate in democracy.

Kellner does not answer these questions directly. In fact, contrary to the observations and strong intuitions of such critics quoted above and, no doubt, at least some empirical evidence, Kellner does not hold that the media's perspective is uniform. Instead, Kellner says, "the texts of media culture," which presumably include the news media, "incorporate a variety of discourses [and] ideological positions . . . which rarely coalesce into a pure and coherent ideological position."³¹ Kellner's general characterization of the media, then, runs counter to the uniformity of perspective view.

Yet Kellner does note that "certain media texts advance specific ideological positions." Thus, Kellner's position seems to be that although particular media texts may contain a particular position or be limited by a single perspective, the totality of media culture contains a multiplicity of positions, implying a multiplicity of perspectives.

I would like to examine the rationale for Kellner's position with respect to an important event: the 1991 war between the United States and Iraq in the Persian Gulf region. Because the media's coverage of the war was performed by at least four major networks and many major newspapers and wire services, it should not be taken as a single text, and thus should not be subject to Kellner's caveat that a particular text can take a particular position based on a singular perspective. Indeed, coverage of the war in the Persian Gulf should be taken instead as a microcosmic example of how the news media function as a cultural entity. As such, if Kellner's position is accurate, the news media would have covered the war from a variety of perspectives and their media texts would have contained a variety of discourses and ideological positions.

Kellner, however, makes the mistake of treating coverage of the war as a single cultural text – an untenable position given the number of networks and newspapers covering the war.

At any rate, to reinforce my argument that Kellner's misgivings about a uniformity of perspective are misguided, I will briefly examine chapter 6 of Kellner's *Media Culture: "Reading the Gulf War: Production/Text/Reception."*

In "Reading the Gulf War," Kellner quickly finds himself in trouble on several fronts, largely because he puts forth a web of contradictory statements. First, he assumes an instrumentalist perspective in his analysis of the news media – a perspective he derided in earlier chapters of the book, producing within his theory an internal theoretical inconsistency. In an earlier chapter, for instance, Kellner writes that he sees "media culture as contested terrain reproducing on the cultural level the fundamental conflicts within society rather than an instrument of domination."³² Yet, at the beginning of chapter 6, Kellner writes: "The mainstream media in the United States and elsewhere tended to be a compliant vehicle for the government strategy to manipulate the public, thereby imperiling democracy which requires informed citizens . . . and a free and vigorous critical media"³³ and that "the political economy of the media in the United States facilitated the manufacturing of consent for U.S. government policies."³⁴

Later in the same chapter, however, Kellner clarifies the above statement: "Although the mainstream media served as propaganda conduits for the U.S. government and military, in my interpretation, the media are not propaganda instruments per se for the state as some argue (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Chomsky 1989)." The view of Chomsky and Herman, as explicated in their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, however, is exactly the position that Kellner takes toward the media's coverage of the Gulf war: that "the political economy of the media in the United States facilitated the manufacturing of consent for U.S. government policies."

As he continues to back pedal on his earlier statement, Kellner introduces an ad hoc explanation that also conflicts with his earlier characterizations of the media and, more importantly, fails to adequately account for the influence of the media:

"Rather, one should see the major commercial networks primarily as money machines seeking ratings and profits. If the war is popular, then in pursuit of ratings the networks will provide a positive picture of the war, eliminating discordant voices, as happened in the Persian Gulf War. Moreover, General Electric and RCA, which own NBC, are major military contractors who will benefit tremendously from a successful war, and NBC dutifully served as a Pentagon propaganda organ from beginning to end of the war."³⁵

Even within this excerpt, Kellner contradicts himself: He first says, taking a Frankfurt School approach, that the networks are money machines seeking ratings from presenting a positive picture of the war to an enthusiastic audience. Next, however, he points out, taking an instrumentalist approach, that NBC, owned by General Electric, served as a propaganda machine for the Pentagon, implying that the network positively covered the war to help the corporate father rather than to meet the expectations of an enthusiastic public.

Other aspects of Kellner's explanation are circular. First, he says that the media "utilized images and discourse of the crisis and then the war to mobilize consent and support for the U.S. military intervention."³⁶ But later in the chapter he says, as quoted above, that the networks presented a positive picture of the war to boost their ratings before a war-supporting public. Thus, according to Kellner's analysis, the media both mobilized the public's support of the war with positive coverage and presented positive coverage of it because the public supported it.

Let me sum up these observations by returning to the question of a uniform perspective. First, recall that I established the media's coverage of the Gulf war to be not a single media text, as Kellner claims, but many texts that together form a microcosmic example of the news media's behavior. Now, if Kellner is right in seeing the texts of media culture as reproducing the fundamental conflicts within society, either there was no conflict within society over the war in the gulf, a position that is clearly not the case, as Kellner himself acknowledges; or the media acted, as they usually do, in unison, confirming the uniformity of perspective view; or the media acted in unison but that such collusion was a particular exception, putting the burden on Kellner to put forth a strong explanation of how all or nearly all the media involved could have acted in complicity despite their diversity in numbers and medium.

Indeed, in light of my original assumption that a theory of media culture should explain how the media's uniform perspective influences how people think and act, Kellner, aside from the internal inconsistency of his

many views, holds in part that the media's uniformity of perspective, in the case of the Persian Gulf war, is produced by the majority's support of the war. Such an explanation, taken to its logical extremes, fails to account for the media's uniformity of perspective in covering the spectrum of political issues.

Moreover and more generally, Kellner's position that the media "are extremely cautious in going against public opinion"³⁷ conflicts with polls that show people feeling powerless over politics, feelings of powerlessness that stem at least in part from the news media. Ralph Nader, who has been studying effects of news coverage on citizen attitudes, sees "a huge collective demoralization for the people who are masochistic enough to watch TV."³⁸

Kellner's explanation also has some rather odd implications for participatory democracy. If Kellner's assumption that the media pander to the majority of their viewers' and readers' political enthusiasms to gain audience share is true, then the media, rather than influencing the political thoughts of the people, reflect them – meaning that the content of the media is voted in, so to speak, just as politicians are voted into office. Under such a view, the normative assertions made by Kellner that the media system must be democratized³⁹ are rendered moot – for the media is already a democracy, its content decided largely by popular vote.

Such an analysis, of course, is taking Kellner's assumption to rather extreme conclusions. But the analysis does, I think, illustrate some of the problems that surface as a result of Kellner's seemingly willy-nilly adoption of various explanations. Kellner's theory, as his chapter on the Gulf war demonstrates, contains an array of explanations, some contradictory, of the media's role within a democratic society. Indeed, analyzing all the links among his theory's explanations of the relationship between media, culture, and democracy can quickly become messy, largely because he so generously borrows as needed from audience reception theories, instrumentalism, critical theory, and so forth, even when such explanations contain conflicting presuppositions or lead to disparate conclusions. There is, however, a reason for this, and it is a reason that, I believe, is also detrimental to Kellner's theory.

8 The Ill-Hewn Net

Kellner's theory, it seems, is rather loosely scattered about; repetitions notwithstanding, he's all over the place. He posits a new tenet or appropriates an established one from another theory for nearly every fact of media culture. In fact, it seems as if his approach to media culture is not so much a theory as an ill-hewn, overly large net. His theory is ill-hewn in that it borrows almost willy-nilly from other theories whenever convenient, sometimes regardless of whether the doctrine contrasts with earlier ones that Kellner has laid out or borrowed from others. It is overly large in that it uses too much machinery to explain too few facts.

Ultimately, a theory of the media must move beyond the media, for the media are merely a reflection, an embodiment, of the dominant nature and conditions of a cultural epoch. Thus, a theory of the media must not only describe and explain the working of the media, but also make the leap into explaining the substance of the culture itself. In the end, an analysis of a culture's media must be an analysis of that culture itself. The easily accessible cultural artifacts of media provide a valuable window into a culture's essence, as Siegfried Kracauer points out: "The surface-level expressions . . . by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things."⁴⁰

Does Kellner make this leap? Does he take a step back, look at media, and ask to what extent his theory sheds a clearer light on the fundamental conditions underlying late 20th-century American culture? Yes, this Kellner does, and his attempt to get at culture through media, to in fact combine the two under the rubric "media culture," is a well-intentioned, and, to a certain extent, successful venture.

Kellner's theory of the media, however, succeeds in explaining only a limited range of American culture and only by putting forth a great deal of explanatory machinery. Considering the vast array of data about the media, Kellner overly limits the input of data into his theory. The result, accordingly, is that the output of his theory accounts for only a limited quadrant of the media's cultural field and political influence. When pressed to account for additional important facts of media culture that lie beyond the limited range of data

that Kellner surveys, his theory fails to provide the scope and depth that I would expect of a theory with so much explanatory apparatus.

9 Notes

1. Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1995), 10.
2. *Ibid.* 1.
3. Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 4th Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), ix.
4. Kellner, *Media Culture*, 2-3.
5. Kellner, *Media Culture*, 1.
6. *Ibid.* 2.
7. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989),
- 8.
9. James Fallows, *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 160.
10. *Ibid.* 161. *Italics in the original.*
11. *Ibid.* 31.
12. Kellner, *Media Culture*, 48.
13. *Ibid.* 4.
14. *Ibid.* 18.
15. *Ibid.* 210.
16. *Ibid.* 211.
17. *Ibid.* 4.
18. *Ibid.* 211.
19. *Ibid.* 211.
20. *Ibid.* 223.
21. I address this – and its implications for democracy – in greater detail below. See my section on Uniformity of Perspective.
22. *Ibid.* 226.
23. Kellner, *Media Culture*, 17-18.
24. Mark Crispin Miller, “Free the Media,” *The Nation* (June 3, 1996),
- 25.
26. Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 228.
27. *Ibid.* 233.
28. Michael Moore, “The Movies & Me,” *The Nation* (Nov. 4, 1996), 10.

29. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1995), 141.
30. *Ibid.* 121.
31. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 222.
32. Herber I. Schiller, "On That Chart," *The Nation* (June 3, 1996), 16.
33. Herber I. Schiller, "On That Chart," *The Nation* (June 3, 1996), 16.
34. *Ibid.* 101-102.
35. *Ibid.* 198.
36. *Ibid.* 199.
37. *Ibid.* 212-213.
38. *Ibid.* 199.
39. *Ibid.* 201.
40. Quoted in Fallows, *Breaking the News*, 200.
41. See, for example, Kellner, *Media Culture*, 226.
42. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75.