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## REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN NEW MEDIA

M. Bilal ARIK\*

Emel ARIK\*\*

### Abstract

Media, which is a mediator of the modern world, appears as an important factor in the discussions of social inequality. Mass media that reinforces the domination of hegemonic forces in the capitalist system is also one of the primary determinants of the relationship of the individual with the social sphere. This study is mainly based on the assumption that the function of traditional media to conceal social inequality is reproduced in today's interactive new communication environments with promises of freedom and equality. In this study, which was conducted using the qualitative historical design method, the historical capitalism and the utopia of equality were discussed, followed by the examination of the reflection of globalization on the ideal of social equality, and the theoretical dimension of inequality in communication theories was outlined. In the last chapter, by referring to the role of new media environments in the production of social inequality, it was concluded that the Internet, which radically transforms the nature of communication and many social practices on a global scale, does not contribute to a more egalitarian world ideal. These new communication environments, presented as a freedom project, actually make it easier to supervise and monitor people rather than liberating them. While reproducing traditional inequality, the new media contributes to the continuation of a world where the ruling elites are much more "equal" compared to ordinary people.

**Keywords:** New Media, Reproduction, Inequality, Globalization, Economy-politics, Surveillance.

### INTRODUCTION

Modernism, given rise by the Enlightenment Movements in Europe, is an ideology based on the thesis of 'progress'. Although it presents itself as an egalitarian project, the reason for its existence is exploitation and inequality. Philosophers of the modern world have promised that one day our historical system will succeed in establishing a social order in which everyone will benefit from sufficient (that is, equal) opportunities and no one else will have privileges that others do not have. According to Immanuel

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\* Prof. Dr., Adnan Menderes Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi, Radyo Televizyon ve Sinema Bölümü, ORCID: 0000-0002-4020-0555

\*\* Doç. Dr., Akdeniz Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi, Gazetecilik Bölümü, ORCID: 0000-0003-3748-7257



Wallerstein (2000, 154), "these are not facts, but only promises". Above all, Wallerstein (1996, 13) defines capitalism as a historical system that feeds on the contradiction between capital and labor force.

Capitalism is determinant throughout the whole life, and economic rationality behind the system directly affects emotions, thoughts, and identities. In this order, which is based on money exchange or goods relationship, market conditions determine the quality of life, and they place the individuals into a more comprehensive network of mutual social dependence than they could ever imagine in the previous forms of society (Poole, 1993, 192).

In capitalism, the system works in favor of the powerful elite, in this context, for an organization that will give more power to powerful people, it is imperative that the masses are enchanted by this item-centered life and they do not become aware of the social inequalities. The main actor of this new social life is the bourgeoisie. In Marx's words, the bourgeoisie, once an oppressed class in feudal despotism, acquired its political sovereignty in the modern representative state after the establishment of the great industry and world markets. Modern governments are nothing more than a commission that manages the joint affairs of the entire bourgeois class (Cem, 1970, 334).

Media, which is a mediator of the modern world, appears as an important factor in the discussions of social inequality. Mass media that reinforces the domination of hegemonic forces in the capitalist system is also one of the primary determinants of the relationship of the individual with the social sphere. This study is mainly based on the assumption that the function of traditional media to conceal social inequality is reproduced in today's interactive new communication environments with promises of freedom and equality. The study was constructed in accordance with the qualitative historical design method.

In this context, firstly, the social impacts of globalization and its reflections on the ideal of equality will be discussed, and then how the rapid and transformative changes affect the media layout will be examined. There will also be discussions of inequality in the context of communication theories, and in this respect, Karl Marx's political economy, Frankfurt School's cultural industry and basic concepts of myths used in Herbert Schiller's *Mind Managers* will be discussed. In the final part of the study, by addressing to the role of the new media environments in the production of social inequality, it will be explained through various examples how the Internet, which radically transforms the nature of communication and many social practices on a global scale, can (or not) contribute to a more egalitarian world. In this chapter, especially individuals who lose their qualifications to be the subject of their life in a panoptic order and the ideals of equality lost within social networks will be analyzed.

## **1. GLOBALIZATION, CONSUMPTION SOCIETY AND INEQUALITY**

Western societies had a "Fordist" approach until the 1970s. The most important feature of the Fordist period is the standardization and collective consciousness in production and consumption. In the 1970s, the saturation experienced in production was not ensured in consumption due to the lack of sufficient demand, and the decrease in the demand for mass products led to an excess of production. Ensuring multinationalism and being able to take place on a global scale were set as the main target; consequently, the strict principles of Fordism were relaxed, and the Post-Fordist period, which contemplates the transitivity of individual production and consumption, started after overcoming the binding power of mass production and consumption. Along with the international debt crisis which emerged as a result of these developments, neo-liberal policies under the guidance of international neo-liberalizations to cover a significant part of underdeveloped countries became widespread (Uyanık, 2008, 212).

In the post-Fordist period, the nation-states had to share their dominance with multinational companies, and the regulators, which Andre Gorz specifies as anonymous and unseen, replaced the national state (Gorz, 1980, 140). During this period, the capital got more influential on governments and states than ever. Similarly, as Gorz said, "capitalism has never become as independent from political power as it is today. It should be noted that capitalism did not defeat the state, but national states. It dominated them by establishing a supranational state with its own institutions, devices, and relationship network" (İnsel, 2004, 139).

The change starting in the Western world spread to many parts of the world with the presence of appropriate political actors, and the untouched markets were abandoned to the use of international capital. The post-Fordist period caused significant changes not only in the economy but also in the social, political, cultural, and economic sphere. During this period, global companies were on the rise, and national initiatives as efficient production and regulatory units collapsed. Banking, finance, tourism sectors



flourished. Service classes diversified, and labor force decreased. Also during this period, individualist thinking became more common, and entrepreneurship was encouraged; moreover, everyday life practices gained a central importance in terms of individual differentiation. The main features of post-Fordism, which settled with an economy based structure in the 1970s and 1980s, are the emergence of new production sectors, new methods of financial services and new markets, but most importantly the acceleration of the pace of commercial, technological and organizational innovations. More 'consumption' is the basis of post-Fordism, and it can be said that in post-Fordism the goal is not even to increase consumption, but to provoke consumption. In this context, especially the stimulation of individuals through fashion and channeling emotions to capital were implemented with great expertise by mass media, and then consumers' 'seductive reproduction' has become a strategic target.

More 'consumption' is the origin of post-Fordism; it can be said that in post-Fordism, the goal is not even to increase consumption, but to provoke consumption. "In the consumer society, the consumer positions himself as if he had to be pleasant, seductive, praised, mobile and happy. They try to substitute their individual/social presence by shopping, spending time in shopping venues, and collecting intense indicators, trademarks, images, and achieving all taste perceptions" (Baudrillard, 1995, 97). Along with globalization, the ideals of equality of the nation-states have been shelved, and individuals differentiated by consumption have almost reproduced inequalities in their own selves.

## **2. THE CHANGING COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT IN THE GLOBAL WORLD AND ITS EFFECT ON INEQUALITY**

The 1980s brought significant changes in terms of the relationship between communication and society. The post-Fordist period, which was laid in the 1970s became well established and made everyday life practices and social institutions dependent on its ideology in the 1980s. "Developments in the 1980s upset both the material conditions and the mental climate that public publishers based their stable structures on. This upside-down led to the formation of a new publishing environment of which public publishers were also a part (Mutlu, 2001, 29). The most important goal of the new media companies acting with the logic of profit and competition is now to deliver their products to the widest possible consumer audience. In this case, there is a steadily expanding trend, and this trend is continuously moving towards building expanded audiovisual spaces and markets. The new media order is now becoming a global order (Morley & Robins, 1997, 29).

In the same years, many companies turned into large group in the media sector (newspapers, magazines, radio, television, etc.) as well as in entertainment and culture (films, records, book broadcasts, etc.). Vertical and horizontal monopolies in the media field allowed the companies investing in this field to expand significantly. With liberalization policies called deregulation, large media organizations demolished broadcasting monopolies previously owned solely by the government, and they expanded the area of use of the 'private initiation' as much as possible. The orientation of globalization and liberalization soon resulted in the formation of an atmosphere in which the capital determined the balance of power in the communication environment. With deregulation policies, areas that were previously closed to competition, especially communication, were opened to private entrepreneurs.

At the end of this process, press companies changed into media holdings and became the main determinant of popular culture under the guidance of the advertising industry. The media that designed popular culture undertook an industrial mission by making the propaganda of differentiation by consuming not social equality. Public responsibilities, democratizing and liberalistic structure of the press became increasingly obscure, while, on behalf of rulers, media undertook functional roles in policies that deepened inequality.

The change in the field of communication in the 1980s settled well in the 1990s. The main development in the 90s was the rapid rise in the global media system driven by 50 major media companies in the world (Chesney, 2003, 20). The increased power and capacity of companies to reach all over the world, mergers and more monopolization of media, and the collapse of public publishing made the inclination to focusing on balance sheet results more effective both in the United States and outside. (Herman & Chomsky, 2006, 22). As a matter of fact, Russ Lewis, the CEO of the New York Times Group, refers to a similar orientation saying "Today's news media is often a part of global companies and it depends on advertising revenues from other major companies" (Chesney, 2003, 112) Therefore, media organizations that abandon the role of being the advocate of citizens' dreams of equality in such a communication environment



contributed a lot to the reproduction of social inequality in favor of sovereign circles. Globalizing media has prioritized the interests of the company and preferred to turn people into consumers by seducing their emotions rather than improving the level of consciousness of society.

### **3. THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE INEQUALITY DISCUSSIONS IN THE MEDIA**

Mass media has become an integral part of all modern societies and has occasionally been named as the fourth power because of its contribution to social equality and democracy. Newspapers, radio, and television inform and entertain large masses, but on the other hand, they have been given the function of hiding social inequality by the governing forces. The ownership structure of traditional communication tools has been decisive in their areas of movement, and the economy has often become the most important focus of power to affect policies. According to the economy-political approach, media content is formed by the dynamics of the capitalist economy, and at this point, the economic interests of press companies are fundamentally decisive.

According to Marx, relations of production constitutes the base on which rises a legal and political superstructure, and they determine conditions of the political and intellectual living by creating appropriate forms of social consciousness to own discourse (Marx & Engels, 1992, 70).

On the grounds of Marx's theory that dominant classes internalize their ideology in the memories of dependent classes through their authority and economic power, Marxist approach suggests that the elite who hold mass media in their hands have a direct influence on the ideology and discourse of the tool. Communication tools attempt to prevent class conflicts and changes in the political platform by hiding class differences or advocating the thoughts of the executive class. The role of the media here is to legitimize the interests of the class that owns and controls the media through the wrong formation of consciousness. Every media product that occurs in this context is a cultural commodity of the capitalist system and is therefore limited by "market logic". Thus, mass media does not directly convey the truth in the process of news transmission; it encodes the truth in accordance with its ideology, that is, it reproduces the truth. In this selection process, within which framework and how the information will be presented are reorganized in accordance with the interests of the company. We define the world through mass media, but what we perceive is not the reality, but the reality that the media constructed in accordance with its own economy-politics. As Baerbal Röben stated, "communication is not random in terms of form and content, but it is shaped by forces like political, economic, psychological, social and ecological challenges (Alver, 2003, 207).

The concept of "cultural industry" that theorists of the Frankfurt School theorized is a concept that must be considered in terms of the impact of traditional media on social inequality. The theorists of the Frankfurt School analyzed the instrumental intellect and forms of 'totalitarian' domination that they observed during the development of modern industrial society (Marshall, 1999, 186). The term "Cultural Industry", which is identified with critical theory, was first used in the joint book "Dialectic of Enlightenment" (1944) by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment* illustrates the dark side and oppressive subjectivity of liberal ideals in economic growth and scientific progress (Behnabib, 1999, 100). According to Adorno and Horkheimer, in the cultural industry, "something was foreseen for everyone so that no one could escape; and distinctions were extended and made attractive" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1996, 10). Another important representative of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse, asserts that capitalist prosperity does not satisfy the essential needs, but it supplies the false needs that it creates and hides their falsity. According to Marcuse, people are corrupted, blinded and enslaved by "consumerism" (Marcuse, 1990, 23). In such an environment, individuals act under the control of the rhetoric that is deemed appropriate in the designated area, without violating the 'red lines' drawn by the authorities, and those individuals are removed from free and egalitarian social processes.

The viewpoints of Herbert Schiller, who is one of the key figures of critical theory, also reveal some properties of the media that consolidate social inequality in modern societies, and allow powerful ones to manage large masses of people. Schiller's book *Mind Managers* (1993) points out which manipulation techniques the media use to manipulate minds and hide social inequality. According to Schiller, in the media it is almost impossible to come across the diversity of ideas that should be in the news. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of monopolistic characteristics in the communication industry and the overlap of the interests and ideologies of the owners (Schiller, 1993, 34).

The most remarkable one of Schiller's five basic myths that constitute the content of manipulation and packed consciousness is the myth that the social conflict that reproduces social inequality does not exist.



Mental manipulators deny the existence of social conflict. To them, there are not such things as the origins of social conflict, exploitation and inequality. National message production centers present almost every conflict as an individual matter, both in its manifestation and in its nature. For them, there are "good" and "evil". The role of good and evil with the social categories they belong to is a good reason to distract from reality. According to media managers, tampering with the social issues makes the public uneasy and causes people to move. The smartest thing to do in this case is not to bring up such issues and not to itch this wound. (Schiller, 1993, 32). According to Schiller, such cultural mediators do not have any concerns about penetrating the roots of reality, but on the contrary, they try to polish the surface and make them forget the rest (Schiller, 1993, Ü33).

#### **4. NEW MEDIA DISCUSSIONS AND THE REPRODUCTION OF INEQUALITY**

With the 2000s, there have been significant developments that will change the communication environment from beginning to end. First, the Internet became widespread, and then with Web 2.0 technology, communication has evolved in a more different direction than ever before. As Manuel Castells (2005, 19) said, "Individuals are now living in a globally and locally knitted network society." In his book "Peeping Culture", Hal Niedzviecki (2010, 257) explains how today's communication tools and social networks surround our lives, and he illustrates today's peeping society.

As of the first appearance of the Internet, it was presented as a new democracy platform in which all people would be involved in communication on equal conditions; however, it would not be wrong to say that it basically created a simulation environment. From the moment people are involved in new communication environments, especially in social media, the things like who the consumers are, what they like and what they prefer, and their cultural, political, and economic motivations become visible with the permissions that users give without considering and foreseeing the outcomes. Digital copies are revealed and their categorized personalities are marketed to advertisers using the traces left behind by the individuals who are under constant supervision. One of the main reasons why social media has become so widespread is undoubtedly its nature that is highly suitable for sorting data. The individuals who become not the subject, but the object of the process are satisfied with the small pleasures they receive from the Internet environment while offering their own selves and freedom at the disposal of the system.

Advertisers who hesitate to leave traditional media have requested more information and documents to rely on the Internet as an advertising medium. One of the targeted ways to collect data is to create a profile about the consumers by categorizing them, and then, to display the products that they might buy or the products that could be sold to them. For this reason, some software or internet bugs have been installed in the system and this malicious software is given lot of information about the users who are not aware of all these. The goal is to build a system that can be measured, able to account and interpret actions; therefore, in a short time the virtual world has been formed in such a way that more data can be collected fully based on the wishes of advertisers. Thus, the "trash" (in the words of advertisers) that is not worth investing in and potential customers are separated from each other and whole strategy focuses on getting more yields from the potential customers who are inclined to consume while restricting contact with the trash. What is done here is downright social discrimination, and what makes this possible is the personal data that people (not)allow companies they do not know to use.

Data collected on the internet in order to analyze the lifestyle/consumption habits of a person/consumer is so detailed that this data which companies track can often be even more than what family members know about each other. In recent years, there has been an incredible increase in the leakage of this type of data. Therefore, it is not a slight probability that the information which even people would have difficulty expressing easily and quickly, such as what sites people travel around, their sexual, political orientation, income status, social events may fall into the hands of dark market forces that they never know. It is also highly possible that private information that individuals do not want to be learned at all could be revealed especially when raw data that does not mean anything alone is connected to each other after some analysis. People often know that data about them is collected on the Internet but they do not know the framework, therefore they worry about it. However, they remain to be one of the gears of the industry, and they continue to have a passive attitude though they do not have information about how and where the data is used. The darkness between this audience and its own knowledge points to a reality that the system does not want to be discussed at all, becoming a secret known only to some researchers and advertisers. No one can predict how much and what data has been collected about them, and they are treated as 'intelligence knowledge' by the system.



The internet, offered as a freedom project where everyone can equally benefit from the opportunities, essentially facilitates keeping people under control rather than liberating them. As a matter of fact, the biggest threat to the privacy of the individual participating in new communication environments comes from companies engaged in data mining, but the government agencies that control the audiences from the beginning to the present day through surveillance do not abstain from being involved in this field at the expense of violating people's personality rights by taking advantage of the technological developments. While the new media has reproduced inequality between traditional classes with the promise of equality, it has created a world where the ruling elites are "more equal" than ordinary people. Moreover, it internationalizes this inequality, and both capital and powers elite are reaching their expansion dreams much more easily in the virtual environment. Thus, the global equation, where the strong are stronger and the weak are weaker, is reinforced in the new media. When we look at the most clicked sites on the Internet or organizations that have the most followers on social media, it is seen that there is not a different reality from the monopolization in traditional media trends, where the sovereign forces are unevenly dominate the process.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, it was discussed how the new media, one of the most important actors of today's society, reproduces social inequality. The new media, an area in which almost all of the society is involved, changes the practices of everyday life with the values it produces and transforms all social processes in the context of its own reality. Whereas traditional media, with its both the ownership structure and the non-interacting nature, has the functionality to hide social inequality, the new media is particularly accessible and is presented as a platform for democracy and equality because of its interactive features; however, the sovereign forces are in the field of domination, so it cannot move away from its traditional code to restore social inequality productions. Moreover, the ordinary individual who participates in new communication environments as a subject turns into an object that ensures the continuity of the system from the moment they join. As a matter of fact, ordinary people who are able to build their own identity cause the concealment of class inequality, and not even realizing their unequal position and as the sovereign circles' desire, they take on the most functional role in inequality debates' not being on the agenda. Moreover, while liberating, their personal data is marketed to the industry by data mining companies, and this creates new and deep inequality in the sense of reaching knowledge between those who have purchasing power and the others who do not. Therefore, when it is considered from the historical perspective and in the context of social events and phenomena, our assumption before the study that the function of the traditional media to hide social inequality is reproduced in today's new interactive communication environments by the promises of freedom and equality seems to be justified.

Although capitalism is originally presented as an equalization project, the cause of its existence is based on exploitation and inequality. It is indispensable for the sovereign classes to exploit dependent classes and to generate extra value in this way as the continuation of the dominance of the bourgeoisie depends on the continuation of social inequality. It is mandatory for the continuation of the system that the masses are enchanted by a metacentric life and they are not aware of their social inequality. Consequently, egalitarian and solidarity policies are not adopted. On the contrary, competition and individualism are favored. In the process of globalization, this orientation has become more sharpened, and not mass-prosperity and happiness, but individual lifestyles and being different from others have been blessed. With globalization, nation-states have had to share their dominance with multinational corporations, and these structures that influenced the entire world quickly have transformed the world into a global village. Along with the globalization, consumption was provoked and people's desires were reduced to goods, and not an egalitarian but a competitive and individualistic culture dominated the social sphere. In the 1980s, the economic, and the rapid and transformative changes in the technological field have also led to some significant breakages in the media layout. Globalization has had its impact on communication, and multinational media companies have spread to many parts of the world destroying national communication policies and also citizen-centered public publishing was replaced by customer-oriented commercial publishing. Therefore, media organizations that abandon their role of being the advocate of citizens' dreams of equality in such a communication environment have provided important contributions to the reproduction of social inequality in favor of sovereign circles.

Meanwhile, in this study that opened a paragraph to the discussions of inequality in communication theories, Karl Marx's economy-politics, Frankfurt School's cultural industry, and the basic concepts of myths



used in Herbert Schiller's Mind Managers were discussed. According to the economy-political approach, media content is formed by the dynamics of the capitalist economy, and at this point, the economic interests of press companies become fundamentally decisive. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry is entertainment-oriented and distracts people, leading them to consumption, not action. This ruler-driven culture looks for the ways of making people good consumers and docile citizens by preventing the masses from discussing and recognizing social inequalities. Herbert Schiller, a major theorist in communication science, states that media managers suggest that tampering with social issues makes the public uneasy. According to him, with myths like there is no social conflict and the media is pluralist-neutral, mind manipulators guide the masses and serve a more unequal world.

In the last chapter, it was concluded that Internet, which radically transforms the nature of communication and many social practices on a global scale, does not contribute to a more egalitarian world ideal by pointing out the role of new media environments in the production of social inequality. Although ordinary people are able to have access to the Internet or transfer their messages via social media, powerful people have many more opportunities to be able to transfer their messages and manipulate reality. Therefore, the effectiveness and power of these media often lag behind considerably large organizations, although everyone turns into a media with the Internet. Those new communication environments presented as a freedom project make it easier for people to be supervised and controlled rather than liberating. While reproducing traditional inequality, the new media contributes to the continuation of a world where the ruling elites are much "more equal" compared to ordinary people.

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