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**Communication and Power: Plutocratic Hegemony and Political Discourse**

Jacob Fedechko

*University of Maryland, College Park*

138 Swedesboro Rd

Monroeville, NJ 08343

(856) 371.4427

[Jfedechko1@gmail.com](mailto:Jfedechko1@gmail.com)

Sean Vandenberg

*University of Maryland, College Park*

12803 Beaverdale Lane

Bowie, MD 20715

(301) 356.8956

[svanden@umd.edu](mailto:svanden@umd.edu)

### Abstract

This paper analyzes the process through which an elite plutocracy controls and manipulates the dissemination of information, thereby influencing public consciousness. By feeding the public the corporate media's version of information, the plutocratic hegemony is able to filter the public's perception of reality while keeping the public unaware of its true political agenda. Most Americans only know what the corporate media allows them to know, and the media, having internalized the plutocratic hegemony, distorts information and fails to perform investigative journalism on its own, enabling the plutocracy to retain its power over the populace. However, citizens do question the accuracy of corporate media news, lauding seemingly anti-hegemonic shows for their attempts to unveil the constructedness of American political consciousness. Most notable of such programs is *The Daily Show*, a satire that has placed host Jon Stewart as the counter-hegemon of American hegemony. Using Stewart's recent "Rally for Sanity" event in Washington, DC, we argue that Jon Stewart actually serves the plutocracy by posing as an anti-hegemonic force. We then explain how hope exists for Americans to regain awareness of political truth by exploring the counter-hegemonic potency of the fastest-growing information storehouse in the world — the Internet.

In submitting the attached paper or proposal, we, Jacob Fedechko and Sean Vandenberg, recognize that this submission is considered a professional responsibility. If this paper is accepted and programmed, I, Jacob Fedechko agree to present it. I, Jacob Fedechko, further recognize that all who attend and present at ECA's Undergraduate Scholar's Conference must register and pay required fees.

### The Political Discourse of America

American political discourse has devolved into complete anomy from the absence of “substantive” political discourse in the lives of average Americans. Information warfare<sup>1</sup> and the corporate control of media have debased the content of political dialogue in public discourse (Artz, 2003; Begich, 2006; Szucs, 2010). For the average American, politics, like religion, is now a pejorative term, a taboo of sorts, and one Americans eschew: “Do not talk about religion or politics.” But such behavior reveals something crucial: that the American public holds an extreme level of uncertainty for the validity of both its political and religious beliefs, an uncertainty that has led to an ever-increasing skepticism of the validity of its media-purported reality. Does this mean that the current political paradigm in public consciousness is flawed, even artificial? Yes. Plutocratic Hegemony has hijacked American political discourse by manipulating information and coercing a false political paradigm upon American public consciousness. But even though a small elite controls the dissemination of information (Bernays, 1928; Klaehn, 2002), the degree of manipulation and coercion over the public’s perception of reality is declining. In this paper, we will first explore how plutocratic hegemony influences public consciousness by analyzing political discourse within the media, using *The Daily Show’s* Jon Stewart and his “Rally for Sanity” as a point of reference (Bernays, 1928; Klaehn, 2002). We will then analyze the impact of the Internet and “media globalization” on countering plutocratic hegemony and restoring political power to the populace (Artz, 2003; Copland, 2007; Jamal, 2007).

In his farewell address, President Eisenhower cautioned the American people of “public policy” being used to impose the will of a “scientific, technological elite.” Today, this elite, this “Invisible Government” of plutocrats (Bernays, 1928, p. 38), functions as a transnational super-class of industrial-banking aristocrats, near identical to the description of the “High Cabal” given by Col. L. Fletcher Prouty, liaison between the Pentagon and CIA from 1955 to 1964 (Prouty, 2008). In his book, *The Secret Team* (1997/2008), Col. Prouty describes America’s socio-political circumstances as such:

It is time to face the fact that true national sovereignty no longer exists. We live in a world of big business, big lawyers, big bankers, and even bigger money-men and big politicians. It is the world of “The Secret Team” and its masters. We are now, despite common mythology to the contrary, the most dependent society that has ever lived, and the future of the viability of that infrastructure of that society is unpredictable. It is crumbling (xxxiii).

The elitists have so influenced our society that the American public, on the aggregate, has adopted their prescribed ideology, an ideology that oppresses the individuation of thought, one that believes the average citizen too ignorant and impulsive to govern himself, that believes a select “quintessential” few are needed to control humanity, to prevent our western society from entering into complete chaos (Bernays, 1928; Estulin, 2009). In the words of media personality Jon Stewart (2004), “The human race is by nature brutal, amoral, unreasonable and self-centered” (p. 2).

Though fragmented, the plutocratic elite acts in consonance throughout different sectors of society with the common goal of preserving their overall class dominance (Harris, 2008). The

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<sup>1</sup> “He [Assange] is an active enemy combatant who is engaged in information warfare against the United States,” says Gingrich (Szucs). \*This is an Orwellian statement. Revealing the truth is not information warfare against the US; it is information warfare against plutocratic domination.

father of Public Relations Edward Bernays in his 1928 book *Propaganda* accurately frames the elitist ideology:

It might be better to have, instead of propaganda and special pleading, committees of wise men who would choose our rulers, dictate our conduct, private and public... We must find a way to make free competition function with reasonable smoothness... The instruments by which opinion is organized and focused may be misused. But such organization and focusing are necessary to orderly life (p. 39).

Americans have internalized this ideology not entirely from conscious choice but from subconscious overload of ubiquity: the elitist ideology travels from mass media to popular culture to societal normality, corporate media television programs being the primary *modus operandi* for disseminating (dis)information (Begich, 2006; Entman, 2004; Klaehn, 2002).

On a deeper level, the plutocracy believes their extreme wealth and power gives them the right to rule and similarly average Americans having conflated power with righteousness sees their oppressors as rightfully ruling.

### **The Power of the Media**

The media serves as the primary means through which the plutocratic elite promotes its political/social agenda (Entman, 2004; Klaehn, 2002). Most notable of the research on the use of media as a mechanism of control is Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's Propaganda Model, a model that outlines how elitist-constructed information flows through the media to the public, effectively shaping the political discourse of a society. Through the corporate media apparatus, public discourse is molded to an elitist agenda, thereby bolstering the plutocracy's retention of power and class-dominance. After being institutionalized into the corporate media apparatus, members of the media come to internalize the ideologies of the plutocratic elite:

The elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news 'objectively' and on the basis of professional news values (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, p. 2).

Hence, most members of the corporate media truly believe that they honestly and accurately deliver information to the public, which, in turn, causes the public to be much more willing to accept their interpretation of the news as objective, *prima facie* fact. Not to say that shills and charlatans do not exist within the media — they do. But the majority of media personalities believe they are acting in the best interests of their audience and themselves, even though they actually are serving interests of elitist plutocrats (Bernays, 1928; Klaehn, 2002).

This earnestness of the media is epitomized by the catchphrase "support the troops." If we were to take this phrase literally, then it most certainly implies public support for the well being of American military personnel, that we speak and act in a manner that promotes military wellness, security, and liberty. But when we analyze the use of this phrase by the corporate media (and down through public discourse), we see it serves the interests of the plutocracy: the phrase silences any dissent against US foreign policy, preemptive wars, and an exploitive corporate empire by claiming such dissent suggests one does not support the troops. The meaning of "support the troops" thus becomes a logical fallacy because it is the US foreign policy and the interests of a plutocratic elite that US soldiers fight and die for (Butler, 1935; Harris, 2008). In reality, exposing and criticizing plutocratic usurpation of US foreign policy is "supporting the troops."

The catchphrase "support the troops" is an excellent example of a media propaganda

slogan, slogans being concise, repetitive phrases that are used to convey a larger complex of ideas. These propaganda slogans saturate media discourse and bombard Mass Society's consciousness, and become fully actualized as memes mindlessly perpetuated by members of Mass Society. Other propaganda slogan/ memes include: making the world safe for democracy, too big to fail, we have the moral responsibility to intervene.

Though its information is flawed and filtered to fit the plutocratic agenda, the media does attempt to operate [ideally] as a fourth branch of government with two primary roles: (1) to accurately reflect public opinion and interests (2) to accurately report on activity within the government and elsewhere in the public and private spheres. However, the "commercialization" of "public enterprises" such as media and culture has distorted the true purpose of media to the point that corporate media now facilitates the breakdown of its own source, American culture (Artz, 2003, p. 6). This is something even Stewart (2004) has addressed in his book *America (the Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*:

Yes our press has never been freer, its status never quo-er. By removing the investigative aspect of investigative journalism, today's modern media finally has time to pursue the ultimate goal the Founding Fathers envisioned for news-gathering organizations: To raise the stock price of the media empire that owns them (p. 154).

Ironically, Jon Stewart himself is an excellent example of that which he condemns. Despite his own lack of incisive investigation, Stewart delivers his criticisms of the corporate media and of America's "left-right paradigm" with such (ostensible) sincerity and accuracy, that he is imprinted as *de facto* counter-hegemonic in the public's consciousness, placing him in the position to influence public resistance or acquiescence to the plutocratic hegemony through the information and calls to action he sends to his audience. And yet *The Daily Show* (with Jon Stewart) primarily aims to gain viewers, not bring about change: Stewart functions within plutocratic hegemony identically to those he criticizes (an argument we will soon explicate).

### **The Power of Popular Culture**

The entertainment industry and popular American culture serve the plutocrats in a fashion similar to that of the media. People of any culture look to their peers and social norms for guidance on how to behave and on what decisions to make, and it is peers and social norms that act as social controls over the behavior of individuals (Berger, 1967). Just the fear of being ostracized, of not being part of the group, is powerful enough to make the majority of individuals conform to the memes and orthodoxies of any culture. Consider our obsession over professional sports, celebrity news, fashion, and all other meaningless diversions that act as black holes that suck the passions and wills of the population, leaving nothing but complete acquiescence. Bernays (1928), who coined the phrase "propaganda," certainly understood the real influence of seemingly mundane public events when he stated the following:

The minority has discovered a powerful help in influencing majorities... In the present structure of society, this practice is inevitable. Whatever of social importance is done today, whether in politics, finance, manufacture, agriculture, charity, education, or other fields, must be done with help of propaganda. Propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible government (p. 48).

In the form of sports, celebrity triviality, and hours of potential television programming, entertainment functions as attention-distracting propaganda, overwhelming the public consciousness, leaving little or no desire for consuming information of substance. Corporate media, to an extent, "force-feeds" the American public issues of insignificance (Michael

Jackson, Tiger Woods, Anna Nicole Smith, and so on), to shift public consciousness away from political responsibility towards political apathy, leading to the anomy of political discourse among the American public. Though we all possess the potential for complex, intellectual understanding, an overwhelming number of Americans simply no longer wish to even try to understand objective politics — to them, political affairs are like a bad drama series worth not even the slightest critical analysis. Stewart (2004) himself highlights this on the first page of his book, stating his explanation as to why people do not participate civically: 1) too tired 2) the game was on 3) monetary rewards unsatisfactory 4) had a “thing” (p. 1). The more people with this sentiment, the more pervasive the ideology underlying plutocratic hegemony.

### **Case Analysis: Jon Stewart and His Rally**

People came from all over to Washington D.C., dressed in an array of different costumes at what was supposed to be a rally for sane people taking place at a time when the American people’s economy and liberties are near eviscerated (Chapman, 2010; Paul, 2008). But, instead of calling his audience to collective action, Jon Stewart used his “Rally to Restore Sanity” to calm the public, reinforcing the belief that there are no immediate, dire problems with the American political/social environment, that everyone should remain relaxed and entertained: “[The rally] is for the people that are too busy, that have jobs and lives and are too tired of their reflection in the media as being a divided country that ideological, conflicted and fighting,” (J. Stewart, personal communication, 2010). And although it is true that Americans are busy with both familial and economic imperatives, Stewart failed to mention that it is the busyness of American life that elicits the need for media to provide honest and accurate information, that, otherwise, Americans are left with no objective conception of the world. Yes, Stewart does criticize the ridiculousness of our contemporary (corporate controlled) left-right political paradigm but implies it insane for Americans to involve themselves in meaningful political debate. During one point in the rally, the audience is asked to choose between fear, the belief that serious problems do exist with the integrity of our country (represented by Stephen Colbert), and sanity, the belief that no serious problems exist and that people should just relax (represented by Jon Stewart). This juxtaposition creates an either-or fallacy; an illogical argument that implies to the audience their only choice is utter insanity (Colbert) or complacency. In other words, Jon Stewart says that the sane are those who opt for inaction, for complacency and that the insane are those who desire to act, to fight for truth.

Interestingly, prior to this rally, Stewart had stated on CNN with Larry King Live that “75-85% of the country gets along...and [that] the other 15% control it. [They control] the dialogue, the legislation[...].” (J. Stewart, 2010). Though populist rhetoric of this sort typically rests outside the corporate media discourse, such comments have made Stewart *the* counter-hegemon in the public consciousness — his audience relies on him to actually counter the hegemony. However, Stewart’s comments only *appear* to challenge the political paradigm. During the rally, Stewart frames the array of corporate media channels as “over-the-top” and insane, in order to place himself upon a pedestal as the arbiter of what is rational and true, in the consciousness of his audience members. But Stewart never uses his position to fight hegemonic control: his actual hegemonic resistance amounts to satirical criticism and the ability to instill a sense of satisfaction in the members of his audience by laughing at politics and media. Jon Stewart, despite his brief allusion to the truism that a tiny plutocracy controls American public consciousness, functions within the hegemony by using his position to quell the public’s desire to question the plutocratic political agenda. It seems that Stewart’s rally was indeed for sanity, if we define “sanity” as an unfounded acceptance of the status quo and apathy towards hegemonic oppression.

Though the corporate media is losing credibility by the day, Stewart, in posing as counter-hegemonic, promulgates his opinions and omissions, thereby setting the limits of what is reality, just the same as the media personnel he criticizes. Although Stewart highlights the insanity of our current political paradigm, he does so for laughs, not for action, thus creating a “reality” of pacification, his wry show desensitizing the public to what should be real concerns of theirs. Stewart’s attacks on corporate media, such as those made in his rally, make him appear as hegemonic opposition; however, true opposition would engage in investigative journalism and would call the audience to action. His show is just a different flavor of corporate media programming, centered on his seemingly unique perspectives and personality. So long as the public does not accept responsibility to become educated on what is taking place in the world, there will be those like Stewart, eagerly reinforcing the status quo:

Propaganda will never die out. Intelligent men must realize that propaganda is the modern instrument by which they can fight for productive ends and help to bring order out of chaos (Bernays, 1928, p. 168).

During April of 2010, Stewart had an off-the-record meeting with current Treasury Secretary and former President of the New York Federal Reserve Bank Timothy Geithner (Bloomberg, 2010), a meeting that did not yield any *Daily Show* special on the economy or anything of significance (arguably nothing on his show is intended to be of significance). But, instead of attempting to investigate any of the claims against the Fed for its secret deals in loaning public debt to foreign governments and businesses (Chapman, 2010; Paul, 2008), Stewart ignores the opportunity. This encounter is a classic example of what Bernays (1928) would describe as the intelligent members of society coming together to combine their talents to create “order out of chaos” (p. 168), chaos most certainly being over 20% unemployment in the US, the foreclosure-fraud crisis, and an impending dollar collapse (Chapman, 2010; Paul, 2009). While Stewart does entertain the idea that corporate interests dominate American culture in media and in politics, being the loudest public critic of the corporate media’s lack of investigative journalism, he fails to do any investigating of his own when presented with the chance. It is also worth mentioning that Stewart’s real name is Jon Leibowitz, brother of New York Stock Exchange COO Larry Leibowitz (Reuters, 2010). These details of his off-camera life only further highlight how Stewart reinforces the status quo by posing as counter-hegemonic, only to not provide the public with the information and motivation to overcome their oppressors and the plutocratic hegemony.

### **The Internet and the Future of Political Discourse**

Plutocratic hegemony has been able to expand its influence primarily through a media oligopoly (via television) and through its ability to conceal its role in the true power structure of American society. Consequently, the plutocracy limits the public’s perception of reality by controlling information and providing the public with a “nomos” that conceals its agenda (Berger, 1967, p. 22). The corporate media oligopoly enjoys the power to “determine” in the minds of its audience right from wrong, acceptable from unacceptable, and the sacred from the profane, simply through its unmatched funding and its ability to drown out any contradictory information. This clandestine nature of the plutocratic agenda and corporate media marginalization is described well by C. Wright Mills in his book *The Power Elite* (1956):

Manipulation becomes a problem wherever men have power that is concentrated and willful but do not have authority, or when, for any reason, they do not wish to use their power openly. Then the powerful seek to rule without showing their powerfulness. They want to rule, as it were, secretly, without publicized

legitimation. It is in this mixed case—as in the intermediate reality of the American today—that manipulation is a prime way of exercising power. Small circles of men are making decisions which they need to have at least authorized by indifferent or recalcitrant people over whom they do not exercise explicit authority. So the small circle tries to manipulate these people into willing acceptance or cheerful support of their decisions or opinions—or at least to the rejection of possible counter-opinions (Mass Society, p. 317).

The media, through omitting/misrepresenting information, marginalizing dissenting opinions, and demonizing those who expose the plutocrats and the true power structure, has served as a lifeline for the plutocratic hegemony. Since this “invisible government” relies on its ability to covertly distort the public’s perception of the true power structure within America, we must, as Antonio Gramsci advocated, expose the plutocratic hegemony and its distorting of public perception (Copland, 2007, p. 639).

The strongest light with which we can expose hegemonic control emanates from cyberspace. With the advent of the Internet, distance no longer restrains the exchange of information: people can communicate face-to-face instantaneously on opposite sides of the world, at the click of a button. This digital connectivity, combined with the American public’s growing hunger for substantive information (likely a direct result of America’s current economic state), is the driving force challenging the hegemony at this time. By proliferating the amount of substantive information and providing the general public with a medium to access such information, the Net serves as the means by which Americans can regain control of political discourse: the free flow of information that was once suppressed by omission and marginalization has ignited a political reawakening within American public consciousness. Because the public no longer limits itself to television for information, corporate media is losing its ability to focus and direct public consciousness, leading “to a steady and constant decline in state hegemony” (Jamal, 2007, p. 560).

The incorporation of new information pertaining to the true power structure of corporate America will and must change both American political discourse and the reality of American public consciousness. The American public is on the verge of moving from “mass society,” where power and information dissemination is centralized in the hands of an elite few, to a new age of communication and decentralization of power brought by the Internet (Mills, 1956; Jamal, 2007). With the Internet providing meaningful information to average Americans, public discourse will continue to experience revolutionary changes — a paradigm shift from natural dependency on an elite few to responsibility and self-determinism can be an expected consequence. The new age of communication and information sharing is making it increasingly difficult for the plutocracy and the American corporate power structure to operate in secrecy. It would be interesting to examine the corporate media adoption of up and coming alternative media culture as an attempt to retain audiences. The likelihood of hegemonic survival looks dim, as Americans continually take it upon themselves to get informed and critically think about what is happening in the world — their information seeking and processing will reinvigorate discourse with truth, bringing the plutocratic hegemony to exhaustion.

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