

# Presumptions of Immunity: Ideology, mass media and third level students

Michael Breen &  
Eoin Devereux

*Paper presented at the NCDE Third-Level Conference, Limerick, March 2002*

# Ideology: Our Approach

- The ideas that legitimize the power of a dominant social group or class
- Our interpretation of the term and our particular emphasis on **ideology as dominant ideology** is in broad alignment with the neo-Marxist tradition, but it is not solely confined to explaining class relations.
- Ideological analysis of the 21st century mass media may be applied to class relations as well as analyses of heterosexism, homophobia, patriarchy, racism or ‘terrorism’.

# Extent of the term ‘ideology’

- We are interested in examining the interrelations of **meaning** and **power** and how meaning serves to maintain relations of domination.
- We favour using a ‘relaxed’ rather than a ‘closed’ definition of the term.
- When we engage in ideological analysis of the mass media we are often confronted with competing ideologies rather than a single monolithic ‘thing’ called ideology.

# Ideology as Dominant Ideology

- Thompson's (1990) work reasserts the importance of doing ideological analysis within media and communications studies.
- He concedes that ideologies other than dominant ideologies exist
- Media texts that are ideological do not necessarily have to be false, erroneous or illusory although they may be.
- By emphasizing the hermeneutic dimension he privileges the role of the media audience in examining if and how an ideological effect takes place.
- The real value of his methodological framework is that he argues convincingly that we need to concentrate on all three key dimensions of the communications process – namely production, content and reception.

# Ideological Analysis: A Tripartite Approach

- Thompson's (1990) tripartite model takes what he terms a 'depth hermeneutics approach' in examining the media's ideological role.
- If we wish to understand more fully how media messages or texts help sustain or perpetuate relations of domination then we need to place a firmer emphasis on the issues of meaning and interpretation.

# The tripartite approach

- Although individual analyses of production, content and reception may go some distance in informing us about particular aspects of the ideological character of mass communication, a methodological framework using a combination of all three and with a particular emphasis on the reception and appropriation of media messages or texts is potentially far more illuminating.

# Media Discourse

- Media discourse analysis has a particular concern with revealing the connections between media discourses and power relations and is therefore particularly suited to undertaking ideological analysis.
- The approach holds that a detailed and systematic analysis of media texts focusing on the discursive formations employed by media professionals can tell us a great deal about the ideological assumptions of the media professional(s) and media organisations concerned.
- Furthermore we can consider the discourses within the selected media texts and we can also consider possible alternative discourses that might have been employed.

# Teaching Ideology in Media Studies

- Different exercises
- Permeates content
- Needs elaboration
- Requires evaluation



# Unequal power relationships and the mass media

- Think of three recent examples of media coverage concerning unequal power relationships between men and women, the social classes or different ethnic groups.
- What sorts of messages, in your opinion, do these examples contain?
- Can these messages be considered to be ideological?
- Is there more than one kind of ideological position/perspective evident within the media content?

# The Media Diary

- Diary of your media use and consumption for one week.
- All forms of media use and consumption in the selected seven days, traditional as well as newer forms of media.
- As comprehensive an account as possible of your everyday media interactions.
- For each day:
  - Note the kinds of media that you use;
  - estimate the amount of time spent in specific kinds of media usage
  - highlight the kinds of media genres that you typically engage with.
- Show the other kinds of situations in which you consume media texts.
- Examine your findings in the context of where you ‘fit’ in social terms.
- Consider the significance (or not) of your age, class, ethnicity or gender in trying to understand your personal media use and consumption.

# Content Analysis / Ideology Exercise

- Write a critical commentary of no more than 1,000 words on the ideological content of a national, local or provincial newspaper of your choice. Select a maximum of 10 articles from the newspaper in question and explain why you think your chosen examples are ideological in orientation.
  1. In beginning the commentary itself please state clearly what you understand by the terms 'ideology' and 'dominant ideology'. In the main body of your report please highlight:
  2. What you consider to be the ideological nature of your selected articles or features and why?
  3. What kind(s) of ideology are reproduced in the coverage and why?
  4. How do your chosen examples relate to existing public discourses about your chosen research theme (e.g. immigration, poverty, gender inequality).
  5. In writing about specific examples of ideological representation please note the location of the story/feature in the newspaper and if there are photographic images please comment on how they relate to the story/feature in question.

# *What have you learned that is most useful to you?*

- The amount of influence, the content of the news in television etc. has on us and as a result the importance of news gatekeeping
- I learned to look for more in the news than just what was being said, to read between the lines and try to pick out ideology
- The capacity to read between the lines, and an understanding as to how the media constructs reality.
- A greater awareness of everyday news - its selection, and of hidden/implied meaning.

# *What were the best aspects of the course and why?*

- The lectures. I loved being challenged by the various schools of thought. Media is so powerful and infiltrates everything, this course awakened this in me.
- The projects (Media Diary and content analysis) allow us to actively participate in the course and understand better the mass media.
- I loved the lectures because they really challenged you and also made you question the media you consumed.

# *How did the level of work in this course compare to your other courses?*

- Both the media diary and content analysis were the most difficult and time-consuming things I have done in academic life.
- More extra reading than others and more thinking for oneself.
- Media Diary - Fine, Content analysis - too much for what overall worth.

# *What changes in the content, structure and organisation would you like to see?*

- Please warn future students of the amount of work. 15-20 hours Media Diary, 25-30 hours Content Analysis.
- No content analysis, more video consumption.
- The only negative side of the course is the strain from the huge workload.

# *Any additional comments you would like to make?*

- Enjoyed the challenge.
- No content analysis ever again. Ever.
- Nicky's - sound,  
Michael - the jury is still out!