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Defining Media through Ideological Influences

Media both perpetuate identities to the public and are receptors of an ideology created and sustained within society. Media do not only send ideological messages out to the public but media systems are also interwoven into the ideological framework of society. Media also have their greatest influence on individuals over time. Through repeated exposure, media can have an influence on personal values, identity and beliefs (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach & Grube 1984). These values, identity and beliefs are undoubtedly reinforced by external inputs, such as friends, family, schools, teachers and other institutional forces in society. However, media play a 'significant role in shaping people's values and value orientation in contemporary society. Media content may articulate a value, demonstrate its applications, and foster a cultural environment for its adoption as a preferred standard for social comparison' (Paek & Pan 2004: 495). These social comparisons lead to ideological changes within individuals, communities and nations but at a glacially slow pace. One viewing of a hip-hop music video will not change how an individual views women, but a decade of watching this genre of music videos may have a profound impact on how a person thinks of the female sex. Cultivation theory (Gerbner 1969) argues that through long-term exposure to media, a cumulative effect begins to actually shape a person's views of social reality. Since Gerbner's (1969) groundbreaking research, there have been countless studies that have found mitigating factors against the cultivation of beliefs and attitudes through the media, but none have found that the cultivation effect does not exist. Research exploring cultivation theory has argued that such a long-term analysis of media effects can also help to explain actual behavioural changes and not just shifts in beliefs and attitudes that may occur over time (Entman 2004; Powlick & Katz 1998).

One's view of the world, or one's ideology, is formed through a network of life experiences and interactions within a myriad of social institutions, of which media play a central role. Individuals begin to shape their own ideologies by learning about the world, in part, through media frames. There are conscious and unconscious behaviours on the part of frame sponsors – and those that assemble these frames – that work to create frames in media content. These frames are not created in a social, cultural or political vacuum. They are

contested and formed by groups, such as social movements, politicians, business owners, organizations and the media themselves (Gamson & Modigliani 1989). However, in attempting to examine an ideological arc in the media, framing contests normally favour political elites (Kellner 1990; Tuchman 1978). This reliance on elites generally can be traced to journalistic practices that are drawn to frame sponsors with significant resources (Carragee & Roefs 2004). It is important not to overstate the role that media workers have in assembling content, but they are the receptors for competing frames from a variety of sources. These sources are generally tied to capitalistic structures that favour media conglomerates and therefore are more likely to be published. Unless there is a notable and obvious reason to counter hegemonic media practices (Kensicki 2001a), content throughout the media spectrum tends to favour those with power (Atton & Wickenden 2005).

In addition to favouring those with power, the media have been said to encourage a sense of distanced apathy or a lack of individual efficacy (Gamson *et al.* 1992), otherwise defined as a person's belief that she or he can affect political and social events by individual efforts (Bandura 1986). This media-induced political disaffection has been said to put democracy itself at risk (Crotty & Jacobson 1980). There is deep cynicism towards the political system (Caldwell 2006; Capella & Jamieson 1997), widespread lack of caring about the political process (Weintraub Austin & Pinkleton 1995), and a relatively low voter turnout rate (McDonald 2008), which is generally exacerbated by negative political candidate media campaigns (Ansolabehere, Behr & Iyengar 1993) or political horse-race news coverage (Capella & Jamieson 1997). Some of the cynicism in America at least may have given way with the euphoric rise of US President Barack Obama, but voter turnout during his election campaign still did not surpass the 'high' of 63.1 per cent in the Richard Nixon vs John F. Kennedy presidential election campaign of 1960 ('National Voter Turnout in Federal Elections: 1960–2008' 2008). Gamson *et al.* summed up much of the research in this area when they said that 'the media generally operate in ways that promote apathy, cynicism, and quiescence, rather than active citizenship and participation' (Gamson *et al.* 1992: 373). This apathetic ideology has been detected in news media content, which rarely discusses the cause of problems, who are affected by those problems and who is responsible to help solve these social problems (Kensicki 2004). News coverage, such as this, creates an ideological disconnect between problems in society and actual ramifications.

Within the hierarchical model of influences on newspaper content, ideology is the outermost and most comprehensive level of influence. Ideology can be better thought of as a 'relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs, of a kind that can be abstracted as a "world view" or "class outlook"' (Williams 1977). The concept of an ideological form of influence assumes that all the previous levels of influences are actually working together towards 'an ideologically related pattern of messages and on behalf of the

higher power centres in society' (Shoemaker & Reese 1996). Whereas the direction and power of the previous influences remain contestable, a dominant ideology subsumes all other influences on media content. It is at this level that it is important to question who ultimately benefits from certain routines or organizational policies? How are individual identities influenced and created by broader social ideologies? How is the structure of media ownership influenced ideologically? These are very difficult questions to disentangle and require comprehensive, longitudinal studies. But these questions are important to consider when one examines media and their role in society.

Media are more the result of cultural influences (Gitlin 1980; Hall *et al.* 1978) than any objective embodiment of reality, and these cultural influences coalesce to create an ideological perspective over time. The omnipresent cultural and ideological influences on media have led some to believe that mainstream journalism, for example, simply cannot serve its democratic function in society (Tuchman 1978). Media cannot exist outside of ideological constraints and pressures and therefore are constitutive of that very same ideology they represent. For example, it has been found that the media have constructed an ideology that works against citizenship (Hwang *et al.*: 462). In re-presenting governmental activities through governmental sources, the media actually work to align the public with elites (Luther & Miller 2005; McLeod & Hertog 1999). The government, via the media, can reinforce dominant views and potentially reduce any potential for dissent (Crotty & Jacobson 1980; Dionne 1991). This creates a climate whereby media can induce disaffection (Capella & Jamieson 1997). It is undeniable that there is a deep cynicism towards politics (Dionne 1991), a declining faith in democratic institutions (Pinkleton & Austin 2004) and a lack of interest in the political process (Ansolabehere *et al.* 1993). All of these social indicators increase after exposure to media coverage of a political candidate (Hart 1994) or horse-race political coverage (Merskin 1999). Again, however, the path that an individual reader might take to accept any ideological implications behind media content is by no means simple. Given that media exist within a largely cynical, apathetic society, one can't be certain who caused the other to take on such an ideology.

Often, media users may find themselves in disagreement with certain perspectives uncovered in media content. When that occurs, those with oppositional readings to media turn to other sources to find perspectives that align better with their own (Festinger 1957). Individuals with particularly high levels of disassociation with the media will frequently experience feelings of dissonance (D'Alessio & Allen 2002). These people then make individual media selections that align with their own views and support their own perspectives (Shah *et al.* 2001). Therefore, on the individual level, acceptance of media messages can often be refuted or assimilated within previously held beliefs and not immediately accepted as part of one's own reality. This does not refute the systemic ideological biases embedded within all media (Herman & Chomsky 1988).

At the macro-level, one can see ideological consistency throughout society and across media outlets.

Commercialism

Habermas (1984) argued that modern media have contributed to the demise of a deliberative, vibrant public sphere, which existed during the Enlightenment. It was this sphere, Habermas asserts, which helped make parliamentary democracy possible. After much debate and deliberation, these interactive public spheres developed into a democratically driven public opinion. However, the public sphere collapsed under the weight of a bureaucratic industrial society embedded within state-organized capitalism that dictated control of a commercialized mass media (Kellner 2006). As the media shifted into a consumable product, rather than a tool for public discussion, the public sphere began its decline. Habermas argued that as this decline took root in society, individuals began developing consumerist and instrumental substitutes for participatory democracy.

The presence of commercialism within media and social ideology did not emerge as a potent cultural force immediately. There has been ‘hidden advertising’ in newspapers as far back as the nineteenth century (Baldasty 1992). In hindsight, these subversive marketing techniques were the first indicators of a burgeoning commercial media system. However, it wasn’t until perhaps the 1970s that newspapers finally grasped the centrality that advertising would have in increasing their continually declining profit margins (Underwood 1993a). The commercial change in newsrooms was accelerated as masters of business administration (MBAs) moved into media managerial roles throughout the 1980s (Underwood 1993a). The result of these commercial changes is an environment where editorial content is aimed to be directly of use to users within the consumerist system – stories about consumer choices and issues are deemed to be important to consumers (Kunelius & Ruusunoksa 2008). Indeed, in the past few decades, there has been an explosion of non-news editorial content (Picard 1998).

Within a commercial marketplace, whether that be in mainstream media or the alternative press, ‘quality and value are defined by consumers’ and media maintain a hyper-reflexive ‘responsiveness to consumers’. Media must offer immediate ‘self-correction’ according to customer desires. They must operate, however, within an environment of ‘freedom of choice’ (McManus 1994: 4, 5). These are the qualities that define a commercial media marketplace. If there is competition that depends on economic incentives, these qualities will be present. In the newsroom, these commercial qualities herald ‘a move away from reliance on craft norms defining what is newsworthy and how to report,

toward a journalism based on serving the marketplace' (McManus 1995: 301). Contemporary journalism is now situated within the confines of a commercial media system whereby 'market concerns now determinate operation and content' (Picard 2004: 54). Entertaining story elements take precedence over objectivity, accuracy and relevance (Allern 2002). The news, in particular, is now 'packaged' (Kunelius & Ruusunoksa 2008), rather than relayed. There is much more attention on aesthetics and visual content in order to please the reader and hopefully gain audience share. This does not only occur in mainstream media but also across the mediated spectrum where outlets fight for attention in a highly visual and competitive marketplace.

Consumerist ideology in the media also translates to heavy editorial use of market research (Høst 1986, cited in Rolland 2006) to explicitly, and with a singular focus, attempts to satisfy consumer demand (Beam 2003). In doing so, the traditional craft norms of journalism – who, what, where, when, why – are exchanged for 'Who cares about a particular piece of information? What are they willing to pay to find it, or what are others willing to pay to reach them? Where can media outlets or advertisers reach these people? When is it profitable to provide the information? Why is it profitable?' (Hamilton 2004: 7). It may be that consumerism in media also leads to innovation of information (Rolland 2006), but the quality of that information largely remains at only 'adequate' levels in terms of citizenship needs (Graber 2004). Here, there is an obvious argument that alternative media answer questions not asked or ignored in the mainstream press; however, their own commercial pressures necessitate a consumer mandate if they require a profitable return. Those consumer mandates may differ from those in some corners of mainstream media, but they nonetheless remain.

Commercialization has many residual effects on media content. One of the more pressing effects is the increased power of politicians over journalists. However, commercial influences also result in more sensationalistic approaches to journalism and a reliance on entertainment as news (Thussu 2002). This trend towards celebrity and idolatry has reached almost every corner of the developed world. For example, Indian newspapers, such as the *Hindustan Times* and *The Times of India*, have seen remarkable increases in sensational coverage over the past decade (Mishra 2007). In a keynote address to the Press Council of India, the chair of that organization stated without reservation that 'we have commercialized and we have trivialized news' (Ray 2006).

In addition to a steadfast focus on entertainment, commercialization of the media also contributes to content that is largely from the perspective of investors and those with personal financial interests, than from average citizens. Research has found that during the financial crisis that peaked in September 2008 the entire media system failed to probe the global financial institution because of its prolonged entanglement with financial and political elites who played a major role in dictating positive (and false) financial content

(Marron 2010). Again, there may have certainly been a few outlets from within the mainstream and alternative press that signalled some concern with the financial industry, but there was no widespread, systemic condemnation of unethical financial practices from across the entire media spectrum. Just before the collapse, world media was fixated on Kerstin Fritzl's emergence from an induced coma after suffering multiple organ failure in the cellar of her captor's home. The sensational topic of the Austrian incest captor and rapist, Joseph Fritzl, was heavily reported and relentlessly discussed in media outlets, ranging from mainstream ABC Online to the more alternative Earth Times. While this case was no doubt fascinating, the ramifications of the horrific crimes were limited to a select unfortunate few, whereas the financial crisis had a strong global impact that was difficult to measure. Both alternative and mainstream media remained fixated on this sensational topic, albeit to different degrees, because it attracted the attention of fickle readers who have thousands of media choices.

Economic goals gain primacy if the organizational structure and internal policies are oriented towards revenue building and commercialism. Given that stockholders own most media firms, the pressure to maximize profit in exchange for increased share prices is an obvious pressure on content. In August 2008, Fairfax told the Australian Stock Exchange that it would be cutting 550 jobs from its Australian and New Zealand newspapers. This meant a much larger reliance on outsourcing and rotating employment rosters between newspapers that are owned by Fairfax. Attributing the cuts to losses in advertising revenue, the announcement was titled 'Business Improvement Program' and caused Fairfax shares to jump 14 cents on the news (Overington & Lyons 2008). The main constraints on media are no longer political but are economic, commercial interests (Croteau & Hoynes 2001). The economic influence that 'most endangers independent media content is the diminution of the border that separates journalism from advertising' (Harro-Loit & Saks 2006: 312). These relatively smaller media markets are particularly at risk to the intervention of advertising and related promotional interests into media content.

One example of the tension between advertising and content comes from *Mother Jones*. *Mother Jones* is an investigative, non-profit, alternative news magazine that has been publishing 'smart, fearless journalism' (*Mother Jones* 2010) for over 30 years. *Mother Jones* has consistently won major accolades for its investigative work. The magazine itself operates with about half of revenue deriving from subscriptions, advertising and over-the-counter sales. The remaining half is principally from individual donations and foundations. Like most media outlets, *Mother Jones* has seen a recent decrease in revenue, which has led to a reconsideration of operational approach and content. Its CEO Steven Katz said, 'Last year we sat down with editorial and talked about how to extend what we're doing in ways that would appeal to funders' (Katz cited

in Miner 2009). While Katz denies that foundations dictate content, others argue that in many ways advertisers are easier to keep at arm's length than foundations that are investing in opportunities that they believe will have a social impact (Miner 2009). As one critic writes, 'Advertisers spend money to make money. Foundations spend money to make the world a better place, and they deliberate long and hard about how to do that' (Miner 2009). If a foundation feels that its contributions are not generating the kind of return it had hoped for, it will agitate for change or simply pull its donation. This results in a situation where a non-profit, alternative magazine, such as *Mother Jones*, feels the same kinds of commercial pressures, albeit from non-profit entities, as for-profit news magazines, such as *The Listener*.

In 2009, on the eve of the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit, the interim CEO of *Mother Jones*, Steven Katz, announced that media outlets such as *The Atlantic*, *Wired*, *ProPublica*, *Grist* and *Slate* would collaborate their efforts in reporting from the conference. This decision was driven by economic incentives to share resources and increase profits, and does little to highlight the diverse range of opinions reporting from such an important summit. Rather, a collaboration such as this reduces those viewpoints to a select few who are sent on behalf of the consortium to report events. In 2005, *Mother Jones* had embarked on a similar collaboration with a group of Chicago-based independent media titled Media Consortium. As their website states, the consortium aims to increase their 'collective clout, leverage our current audience and reach new ones' (The Media Consortium 2011). They create a yearly report titled 'The Big Thaw' aimed at assisting alternative media. However, Tony Deifell, author of 'The Big Thaw', wondered aloud on the Media Consortium website whether 'what they've created is too pragmatic to be called "progressive," and whether "inclusivity" and "fairness" and a desire for "politically diverse conversations" should lead them to stop trying "to articulate political stances altogether"' (Diefell cited in Miner 2009). In their efforts to increase revenue share, individual contributors inevitably soften or homogenize their message to amalgamate within the collective whole. This process is mirrored in the revenue-building takeover efforts of media conglomerates and their smaller, recently purchased media outlets that must assimilate within the collective. The degree of change required might differ between for-profit and non-profit entities, but the economic necessity behind such collaborative decisions remains the same and has an influence on content across the mediated spectrum.

Collaboration not only allows for shared resources on the part of the media outlet but it also opens possibilities for advertisers who demand reduced rates for multimedia advertising insertions. Technology allows for such multi-platform reach at a personal level. Technological advances have left the public more vulnerable to 'entrepreneurs to appropriate our personal relationships in order to deliver more personalized advertising' (Baym 2009: 722). Technological

development has shifted democratic, public newsgroup sites, for example, into 'proprietary systems such as social networking sites, virtual worlds, and massively multiplayer games in which the users have few rights and limited, if any, ownership of their contributions' (Baym 2009: 722). In some sense, citizens attending to media across the spectrum have become modern indentured servants, generating content for media corporations that will then be profiteered through advertising with no direct economic compensation in return.

Advertising rates charged to companies are calculated based on the number of audience members who can be reached – commonly referred to as 'cost per thousand'. This circuitous relationship indicates that higher advertising rates are beneficial for all involved: advertisers reach more consumers and newspapers get more money to publish their material. However, this reliance on advertising means that higher income audiences are targeted as they are the most attractive to potential advertisers, given that they have more money to spend. An examination of the five daily broadsheets in the United Kingdom – the *Financial Times*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Independent* and the *Guardian* – found that these newspapers are predominantly read by the upper classes of England or by those that make-up about 20 per cent of the population (Richardson 2007). Advertisers find the wealthiest classes as particularly desirable consumers (Gandy Jr. 2000), and media content reflects that interest. There are certainly a few media targeted towards middle-income earners, but there are almost none directed to the lower socio-economic classes because of their relatively small consumer purchasing capacity. This is the case for both commercially minded alternative and mainstream media.

The social relationships that characterize most developed societies around the world are all fundamentally structured around the same basic capitalistic tenets (Richardson 2007). Such global uniformity in structural approaches means that certain claims can be made about the practices of production and how societies are then divided into classes by their economic position in relation to that production process. This means that the principal goal of a capitalistic enterprise around the world is to earn money by selling something in return for the product. Society, or the market in this case, is then divided up according to the money that is available to make purchases. This model of capitalistic exchange is imperative for all modern media. If an audience is purely seen as consumers, then a media outlet itself must be made attractive to them. In order to appeal to a specific market, content is often directed squarely at our most base desires – humour, voyeurism, scandal and fear. Of course, individuals are not all attracted to the same types of stories, and often we are driven by very specific kinds of informational needs. The capitalistic market quickly accounts for this and efficiently aggregates smaller groups into market clusters based on specific kinds of information and calls this process audience fragmentation. This process results in specialty magazines based on individual interests, such

as *Tu Mai*, touted as 'New Zealand's leading indigenous magazine'; *White Fungus*, an experimental arts magazine from Wellington and *Pacific Wings*, a Christchurch-based aviation magazine.

While audience fragmentation is the result of a wide range of media options available to the individual consumer, audience segmentation is when media producers try to group consumers in very specific ways in an attempt to increase advertising revenue. This 'top-down' process keeps advertisers' interests at the forefront and groups audiences according to their economic class alone. Producers create content according to what they think audiences *might* be attracted to – in accordance with advertisers' or foundation interests. In this model, what becomes much more important is the buying power of the audience as a commodity and not their individual interests as media consumers. Segmented audiences for magazines with very small subscription rates but very large personal incomes are highly valued by advertisers who are keen to have a high return on their investment. As an example, *The Listener* reports that 62 per cent of its readers have investments, 24 per cent have household incomes over NZ\$100,000 and 31 per cent are university graduates ('The Listener Reader Profile' 2008). That is why *The Listener* can charge NZ\$13,900 for a double-page spread that reaches just 41,000 subscribers.

Commercialism is obviously evident in the funding models of mainstream media. Yet the depths of commercialism largely remain unexplored – merely accepted within modern society. In 2005, T-Mobile paid Catherine Zeta Jones a multimillion dollar contract to endorse its product through TV and print advertisements; Brad Pitt earned US\$2 million from Heineken for starring in a commercial aired only once during the Super Bowl; Tiger Woods made US\$75 million from endorsements in 2005 alone (Sirak 2006; Soriano 2005; Wenn 2006). The numbers are not only astronomical but also supported by modern society's explosive consumption habits. Paying Tiger Woods US\$75 million in one year to sell products is not ludicrous if sales far exceed that amount. However, the fallout of sponsors after the Tiger Woods sex scandal in 2009 demonstrates how quickly a relationship, built on expected financial returns, can change. Habermas would surely argue that such ridiculously exorbitant endorsements and the spasmodically shifting fisheye lens of celebrity are the result of a society in decline. This decline is traced to our fetishization of consumption.

A consumer culture

The rise of consumerism within media content has been equalled with an 'extensive spread of consumer culture during the second half of the 20th century' (Harro-Loit & Saks 2006: 314). This commercialism has been supported by a media system aimed at promoting the economic interests of

the media itself. Magazines, for example, are often used as tools to 'legitimize' economic activity (Stephenson 2007). 'This situation has promoted self-interested behaviour aimed at exploiting market potential, and there is a growing conflict between the role of newspapers as servants of readers and the exploitation of readers to seek additional commercial gain' (Picard 2004: 54). A central purpose of commercially minded media is to increase profits, which generally come from advertising. This means that commercially minded media exist to encourage users to buy advertised products. Media have become entertaining, safe and homogenized, with a constricted range of ideas and opinions, so that readers connect ease and comfort with the products advertised within that particular media outlet. There is a perception of choice in a crowded marketplace, but these choices are purposefully selected and painstakingly constructed by others to fit within a marketing framework that returns the highest profit (Tomlinson 1990).

Individuals now consider the news and media content in general to be a product that is consumed (Kunelius & Ruusunoksa 2008). Political and social movements, which have long been celebrated for being outside of commercial interests, have also become commodified within commercial culture, and not without negative consequences. For example, girl power 'has been successfully reduced to a commercial slogan, and girl power's ability to inspire change is thereby limited by its commercialism. Its messages of empowerment are so watered down, its message that "girls rule" so inflated, that girl power does not threaten the status quo' (Hains 2009: 106). Agitating for social change, particularly among the young in developed countries, has been largely reduced to participating in ethical consumption (Banaji & Buckingham 2009). Citizens are encouraged to boycott products or purchase items that are seen to be less damaging on the environment or perhaps buy products that are economically helpful to an indigenous population. To the contemporary citizen-consumer, acts such as these are seen as political (Scammell 2000).

In developed societies, there is no cultural influence more potent or continuous than capitalism and, its cardinal constituent, consumption. Commercial pressures subsume the influences of individuals, editors and organizational structures (McQuail 1997; Soloman 2005). 'Both internal bureaucratic forces and external influential audiences work to maintain the validity of private ownership of the news media' (St John III 2008: 113). Capitalism creates an environment where the apparent necessity of private ownership is obvious and supporting actions only reinforce the judiciousness of such an operational framework. The capitalistic drive to increase profit results in an understandable and practical approach to increase much-needed profit share. This pressure to increase profits is felt throughout the media spectrum. Non-commercial broadcast media around the world are facing profound governmental pressure to become more commercial among 'broader critiques that see it as obsolete or irrelevant' (Hackett 2001). Indeed, the commercial

imperative across alternative media has led some media activists to view the entire media spectrum, including radical alternative media, as reproducing the 'dominant spectacle-spectator relation' ('Seizing the Media' 1992) in order to remain commercially viable within a competitive marketplace.

Embedded within the ideology of commercialism is the drive to value profit over any notion of social responsibility. Profit has become a central organizational goal for news outlets (Demers 1996) because of the explosion of media channels and the resulting competition for advertisers and readership share within a consumer culture. Effectively reaching targeted readership has pushed editors and other newspaper management to consider readers first when making content decisions (Schoenbach & Bergen 1998). Gaining readership – at any cost – has been the overriding factor affecting news content, in particular (McManus 1994). While this practice has its roots in broadcast journalism (Curtin 1996), newspapers now question the historically strong separations between editorial and business, which have historically been likened to the division between Church and State (Prochnau 2000). As mass media continue to multiply, some have even argued that newspapers *should* become more 'product like' and employ a marketplace theory (Beaudoin & Thorson 2002). This marketplace mentality pervades every aspect of our consumer culture and, some would argue, should be exploited by media organizations with a clear understanding that it is being celebrated by a majority of media users.

Critics of market-driven media assert that by crafting content specifically for readers of a particular market, journalism, in particular, is ignoring a basic social responsibility function (Bagdikian 2000). It is clear that the desire for targeted readership is intrinsically tied to advertising interests and the socio-economic class of its readers (Schoenbach *et al.* 1999). In defining appropriate news for specific readers, media management often search for 'class appeal' to attract potential and present advertisers (Blankenburg 1992). The allure of advertising revenue can be a strong incentive to streamline editorial content so that it is more relevant to prized upper demographic groups (Koschat & Putsis 2000). Business considerations supersede all other concerns because advertiser and investor interests inherently supplant ideals of social responsibility in a corporate news model (McManus 1994). All media must appear upper class and expensive (even if they aren't), ultimately to appeal to advertisers. Readers are then projected towards products in higher socio-economic brackets. Their product envy increases while satisfaction with their own personal circumstances dwindles. Yet readers continue to purchase that same media product, which makes certain lifestyles appear attainable.

Looking across the media spectrum, broadcasting receives nearly 100 per cent of its revenue from advertisers; newspapers obtain about 75 per cent of their revenue from advertising and magazines about 50 per cent (Herman 1995). The modern media industry, which depends heavily on advertising support, also works to drive out those who depend on the selling price alone, rather than

advertising dollars, for content. Therefore, advertisers and foundations actually have a large influence on those media that survive and fail in the marketplace (Barnouw 1978). Because of the monolithic reliance on advertising dollars in broadcasting, there is a 'strong tendency ... to eliminate programming that has significant public affairs content' (Herman 1995: 85). This tendency towards profit-making is 'essentially corrupting' and 'distorts the ethical values writers and editors might wish to uphold' (Atton 2002a: 130).

The Internet has also seen an explosion in commercialized forces. Business has a strong financial interest in exploiting the Internet for commercial gain. The medium that was heralded as a space for marginalized voices has also been fundamentally exploited towards an 'interconnected regulatory framework with which global electronic commerce might evolve' (Simpson 2004: 50). It is not the medium alone that faces commercial pressures. Those organizations that find space on the Internet to speak about their cause also integrate a marketing focus into their message. In a national survey of more than 1,000 non-profit professionals, 9 out of 10 said that the Internet is an absolutely critical fundraising tool ('Nine Out of 10 Nonprofits' 2005). In 1999, the estimated volume of fundraising achieved over the Internet was 24 per cent of non-profit funding (Stewart 1999). Only four years later, Internet fundraising increased to 48 per cent of total funds raised in the non-profit sector (Wallace 2004). Recent research shows that non-profit organizations are implementing e-commerce at a rapid pace (Boeder 2002).

In 2007, research found that under half (43 per cent) of non-profits had something for sale on their site, such as publications or promotional material (Kenix 2007b). Items for sale were generally presented with a high level of sophistication. For example, Food First, an institute for 'food and development policy' (Institute for Food and Development Policy 2006), sold gift certificates, books, T-shirts, DVDs and videos – all with the familiar consumer-savvy, Amazon-style, online shopping cart. Sixty-five per cent of non-profit organizations sampled online had the ability to raise donations on their website (Kenix 2007b). Some organizations, such as Action Wisconsin, a non-profit, aimed to 'protect the civil rights of our state's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens and their families', signify donation levels by unique label classifications. A US\$35 donation qualified the user as a member, US\$100 as an activist, US\$250 as a freedom fighter, US\$500 as someone in the mayoral circle and US\$1,000 as a participant in the governor's circle ('Action Wisconsin' 2006). These markers of prestige within a consumer-oriented culture are presumably used to encourage higher donation levels through a commercialized 'high-pressure' sales pitch. At each level, one can move higher up the rank of this commercially created society. In the first three tiers, one is merely attempting to struggle against 'the system', but in the last two tiers, one has succeeded and has become a part of it. These commercialized techniques, such as shopping carts and financial prestige levels, suggest that non-profits may have begun to embrace the corporate model

embedded in our market-driven society. These kinds of examples could lead one to wonder if non-profits have now shifted away from the view of the Internet as a potential place for effective advocacy and moved towards the 'inevitable subordination of ideals to material progress' (King, Grinter & Pickering 1997: 5).

Charges of commercialism have long been directed towards mainstream media; yet, as this example of non-profit organizations online seems to suggest, consumption and consumerism are embedded within our entire collective ideology – in spaces where they were not previously seen. For example, one study examined pollution coverage across three decades, from newspapers with high socio-economic readership levels, such as *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, to those with low socio-economic readership levels, including the *San Bernardino Sun*, the *Herald Examiner*, the *Los Angeles Daily News*, the *Los Angeles Herald Dispatch*, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the *Southeast Wave Star* and the *Southside Journal* (Kenix 2005b). The issue of air pollution specifically was chosen because of the finding of several studies that pollution affects those in lower socio-economic classes at a highly disproportionate rate (Bryant & Mohai 1992; Bullard 1994). Thus, one would expect to find a large amount of coverage applicable to those in lower socio-economic classes in newspapers that targeted those specific groups. Yet, regardless of socio-economic readership, newspaper size, type of ownership, geographic location, specific issue or time, coverage concerning the environmental movement appeared invariable in terms of socio-economic relevance to wealthier groups – even though those in the lower socio-economic classes suffer the most from health problems that are caused or exacerbated by environmental degradation (Eckholm 1977). This market-driven media coverage thrives within a deeply embedded commercialist consumer ideology.

Capitalism and consumption have grown exponentially together over the past hundred years. Consumerism is what supports capitalism. Capitalists profit while those who consume reap the short-term benefits of individual consumption. The ability for this circuitous relationship to evolve is largely dependent on technologies that have allowed a global reach of consumer products and the expansion of media conglomerates that promote those products (Paek & Pan 2004). This revolution in technology has contributed to the rise of a global consumerism, which views cultural identity through the framework of materialism (Beabout 2000). One can see this shift in cultural identity occurring in emerging economies around the world. China, in particular, is a fascinating case study of how a society can shift from traditionally held communal values to an individualistic, consumerist value system after exposure to media.

In recent years, the materialist values in China have exploded (Wei & Pan 1999) as consumption of global goods and marketing campaigns continue to multiply in the economically expanding country. These consumerist values have emerged as a sophisticated response to media messages. As Western

films and TV programmes infiltrated Chinese airwaves, it appeared that many in Chinese society eagerly responded with a welcome acceptance of individualistic values (Chaffee, Pan & Chu 1997). This shift to a consumerist society has been directly connected to the exposure of Chinese nationals to Western media content that subsequently has increased 'hedonistic pursuits and individualistic values among urban Chinese, especially the young' (Paek & Pan 2004: 495; Wei & Pan 1999). Exposure to advertising within media and the messages embedded within editorial content have been found to be firmly related to the acceptance of consumerist values in China (Wei & Pan 1999).

Chinese media are now essentially commercial entities that depend on advertising support and rising share-market values (Sun & Liu 2002, cited in Paek & Pan 2004). This is in stark opposition to the traditional state-owned media that operated in China for decades which did not rely on globally marketed products for economic support. The relatively rapid change in culture and the recent introduction of commercial media have led some research to argue that contemporary, capitalist and commercial media in China 'facilitate both the development of consumerist values that emphasize symbolic and status distinctions and an increasingly coherent consumerist ideology' (Paek & Pan 2004). This ideology is expressed through values, such as individual fulfilment and indulgence, an emphasis on desiring and coveting other consumptive lifestyles, individualism and heightened conspicuous consumption. These values are counter to traditional communal values, such as 'egalitarianism, collectivism, self-sacrifice and solidarity' (Meisner 1996: 495).

As is the case in contemporary China, consumerist values pervade the entire media spectrum in developed countries, and because of that 'the media may induce acceptance of such values among individuals who rely on the media to detect societal shifts in value configurations and to adjust their own choices accordingly' (Paek & Pan 2004: 495). Advertising is specifically aimed at selling products and, by default, consumerist values, so it is not surprising that exposure to advertising content over time encourages acceptance of materialistic values (Moschis & Moore 1982). Advertising has been suggested to be principally responsible for the global diffusion of what has been labelled 'affluenza' (de Graff, Wann & Naylor 2001) or a condition typified within people who 'have come to value too much the acquisition of material goods, leaving those persons shallow, unhappy, burdened with debt and living in a world of rapidly depleting resources' (Harmon 2001: 119). Affluenza has been most commonly centred not only in the United States (Horowitz 2004) but it is also theorized to exist broadly in other developed nations (McCormack 2001). It is a manifestation of contemporary commercial, consumptive culture.

While many researchers focus their efforts on the relationship between advertising and consumerism, many others have found that commercial values and consumerist attitudes are connected to media exposure in general. For example, television consumption has been correlated to individual

desires for specific luxury products routinely portrayed and associated with superficial representations of happiness (Twitchell 1999). Those who watch the commercially supported Channel One programme in the United States reported more individual, consumer-oriented responses (Brand & Greenberg 1994). The individualistic, self-satisfying 'me culture' has been 'firmly linked to mass entertainment and consumerism' (Sima & Pugsley 2010: 287). As defined here, mass entertainment spans television, the Internet, radio, texting, newspapers, movies, blogs, social networking and magazines. Blogging, for example, has been found to reiterate the individualistic values that fuel the rather conceited drive to consume. Bloggers routinely associate themselves with consumer-based images that are essential in reproducing their own commercial ideology (Sima & Pugsley 2010). Returning again to the example of China, Zhang argues that rising consumerist attitudes are inherently connected to 'the saturation of the media and the mass culture industry, the constant flow of international fashion and advertising, and the consumption of the latest MTV of Hollywood' (Zhang, Fish & Jameson 2008: 161). This consumptive shift does not mean that there will simply be an increase in spending on specific marketed products but rather that generalized behaviour patterns and attitudes towards a commercial ideology have changed (Humphrey & Mandel 2002). Even juxtaposed against this damning research, it is important to note that the influence is neither monolithic nor one-dimensional. The global rise of consumerism involves variables that interact from within that home culture and from outside (Braman 1996).

A study of vaccinations and ideology

This study examines the discourse of anti- and pro-vaccination in New Zealand alternative and mainstream online media within the social framework of Marxist ideology, which is evidenced by communal, mutually beneficial perspectives in contrast to individual, capitalistic perspectives. Principles of Marxist thought are rooted in models of behaviour that eschew individualized, consumerist ideology and favour communal, anti-consumerist action. Vaccination, as a case study, was chosen because of its explicit dependence on community efforts for overall efficacy. Vaccination schedules are most successful within a society when entire communities are immunized. If some within a community choose not to vaccinate, then others within the community face an increased chance of infection. Vaccination rates in New Zealand are amongst the lowest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). New Zealand ranks 33rd out of 35 developed countries for immunizations, according to UNICEF'S State of the World's Children report ('NZ's Vaccination Rates Lagging' 2009). Such low rates of immunization protection suggest an

examination of both the alternative and mainstream press to uncover what type of discourse exists in relation to vaccination campaigns.

The social praxis and generally accepted theory of Marxist thought, much like vaccination campaigns, depend on egalitarian, anti-consumerist, community-minded ideals. One could assume to find Marxist ideology throughout pro-vaccination discourse and that these perspectives would also be most likely to occur in alternative media, which has been found to depend on these same communal, anti-consumptive, egalitarian ideologies. Alternative media have been seen to traditionally draw from principles of Marxist thought, both in the type of discourse and the manifest or even latent intent of the communication. This is in contrast to mainstream media, which have been labelled 'individualistic' and driven by forces of consumptive capitalism.

Marxist thought

Corporations exist and thrive within a capitalistic, consumptive framework. Corporate entities reinforce capitalistic ideology through their everyday, routinized patterns of behaviour. Often corporations claim that they merely sell products, without taking any responsibility for their final end use in society. Such an ideological position argues that what people do with these products is completely up to the individual and outside of corporate responsibility. Perhaps this is most clearly exemplified by the behaviour of International Business Machines (IBM) who strategically assisted the Nazis, by selling punch card systems directly to them, which were crucial in the monitoring of Jewish victims across large geographical spaces before their final deaths in extermination camps (Black 2001). IBM made 'an international business out of mass killings by making profits from selling data storage and processing machines to the Nazis' (Fuchs 2009: 370). IBM, as a corporation within a capitalist ideology, argued that it made these business decisions solely as a means to increase profits.

Marx argued that corporations must accumulate 'for accumulation's sake, production for production's sake: by this formula classical economy expressed the historical mission of the bourgeoisie' (Marx & Engels MECW: 652). Mainstream media corporations have been found to be no different from corporations selling other, more material products in their corporate sale of information and ideology. Indeed, media are instrumental as an ideological means of communication (Fuchs 2008; McChesney 2007). Corporate 'media and the communication industry are not innocent, but deeply embedded into structures of domination' (Fuchs 2009: 370). The mainstream media are, in fact, central 'pillars of the corporate industrial infrastructure' (Sussman 1999: 86). Readers are engaged within this corporate media sphere as commodities. They are not engaged as equal partners in a communicative relationship.

Rather, they are audience commodities (Smythe 1981/2006) that can be sold to advertising clients as a profit to media corporations.

Media technologies are 'means for producing surplus-value' (Marx & Engels MECW: 371). The machine, as Marx conceptualized it, was the elementary factor of production that had the potential to disseminate a capitalistic message and multiply on itself until the individual worker was found to be redundant. Within the United States, media productivity, or output per hour, increased by 21 per cent from 1997 to 2006, while the number of employees within the field of print media dropped to 615,000 from 815,000 during that same time period. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics surmised that computerization and the expanding use of the Internet have eliminated many prepress and production jobs in the media (US Department of Labor 2008). As Fuchs argues, 'there is an economic interest in the substitution of living labour by technology to decrease the investment and reproduction costs of capital and its turnover time, which in the ideal case increases profit' (Fuchs 2009: 382). The present conglomeration within the media industries is itself representative of an essential component of capitalism (Knoche 2007).

These capitalistic organizational norms manifest into ideological shifts in knowledge. 'As a result of capital's drive for increasing productivity by employing new technologies, production becomes increasingly dependent on knowledge' (Fuchs 2009: 382) or what Marx called 'general intellect' (Marx 1858). Marx argued that social knowledge inevitably becomes a 'direct force of production' and is 'transformed in accordance with [production]' (Marx 1858: 706). This process of development lifts the importance of media within a society dramatically. Corporate media are of 'central importance for capital accumulation' (Fuchs 2009: 382) and for the promulgation of capitalistic ideologies. There has been a strong convergence across media content (Herman & McChesney 1997), which legitimizes capitalist domination.

This capitalist framework leads corporate media to misrepresent reality and create a completely alternate ideology that is inverted from the reality it supposedly represents. This capitalist ideology 'is the expression of dominant class interests' (Fuchs 2009: 390). Corporate media do not represent information that is in the best interest of the masses. Rather, those 'who lack the means of mental production' (Marx & Engels MECW: 59) are subject to the 'ideas of the ruling class' (Marx & Engels MECW: 59). These forms of domination are 'naturalized by the media and are portrayed as being unchangeable' (Fuchs 2009: 391). In explaining his theory of hegemony, Gramsci argued that the masses agree to this domination by 'refusing to resist, by hoping to gain advantages by supporting domination, or by not seeing through the presented lies so that, as a result, they consent to their own oppression' (Fuchs 2009: 391).

Independent media – particularly online media – have the possibility to subvert the corporate interests of capitalistic media (McChesney 2007). An

alternative press, as conceptualized by Marx, serves as a 'public watchdog, the tireless denouncer of those in power' (Marx & Engels MEW: 231). However, such an investigative and antagonistic alternative media are only possible outside the parameters of profiteering. Egalitarian relationships, both within-media and between-media users, can unite individuals through common cause. Individuals and groups can 'centralise the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle' (Marx & Engels MECW: 493). The decentralized network of information exchange through the Internet poses a unique opportunity to circumvent mainstream, capitalistic media and realize the theory of a democratic, participatory medium, first put forth by Marx and Engels 150 years ago.

The existing social roles and routines that alternative media seek to critique generally stem from capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy and the nature of corporations. It is this foregrounding in social critique that has historically placed alternative media in diametric opposition to the capitalistic, mainstream press. Marx and Engels (MECW) argued that relationships based on equality and an even exchange of information are central to a thriving, critical and engaged independent media. The ability of an alternative press to incite change depends on a mutual respect between the publication and its readers. This open form of discourse operates as a challenge to the capitalist media industry (Fuchs 2009). As has already been discussed, blogs have emerged as a democratic space in the mediated landscape. There is an obvious opportunity available on the Internet for individuals and groups to expand the reach of publicized activities, to oppose the framing of mainstream media and to generate a wider base of egalitarian support based on Marxist principles of a shared commonality. However, it remains uncertain whether online content truly is an alternative to mainstream media (Kenix 2009a). This research aimed to explore whether blogs, in relation to vaccination discourse, drew from qualities inherent to Marxist conceptualizations of alternative media or from something more akin to their mainstream counterparts.

There is much about online blog content that would suggest a Marxist relationship in opposition to corporate power. Many scholars believe that blogs can offer a 'radically different kind of news discourse than the one found in mainstream news media' (Haas 2005: 388). This departure from mainstream news content to a Marxist, alternative space is rooted within two unique capabilities of blogs: the possibility for independent, uncensored and non-corporate reporting, which can be based on a wide array of diverse sources (Bruns 2003), and the ability of blogs to exchange information with readers through egalitarian, anti-consumerist, communicative relationships. One could assume that there would be traces of such a communicative approach to pro-vaccination discourse, which is also found to depend on these same communal, egalitarian ideologies.

The case of vaccinations

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States begins its online discussion of vaccination with the headline, 'Disease Prevention – Protect Those Around You' ('How Vaccines Prevent Disease' 2009). This tenet of community-mindedness pervades much of the official discourse about vaccination. Many infectious diseases that were once common have now largely vanished because of the historic near-universal vaccination rates across developed countries. Diseases such as measles, mumps, polio, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), rubella (German measles) and *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) are rarely found in hospitals throughout the developed countries because of successful vaccination campaigns. The CDC states that 'vaccines are one of the greatest success stories in public health. Vaccines have ended smallpox, nearly ended polio, and reduced outbreaks of measles, pertussis, and other illnesses to an all-time low' ('How Vaccines Are Tested and Monitored' 2009).

Vaccines contain weakened antigens of diseases that trigger an individual's immune system to produce antibodies against these diseases (Anagnostakos & Tortora 1981). The cells that created these antibodies continue to hold a 'memory' of the 'original antigen and then defend against it when the antigen attempts to re-infect a person, even after many decades. This protection is called immunity' ('How Vaccines Prevent Disease' 2009). Immunizing individuals has a profound impact on the community, particularly on those who cannot be immunized because of poor health or age. Immunization also helps to protect those who have had a vaccination but, for whatever reason, did not develop immunity to the disease, which is the case in a very small proportion of vaccinated individuals. The Ministry of Health in New Zealand reports that vaccines protect 80–95 per cent of the children who are immunized ('Immunisation: Vaccine Safety' 2009).

Vaccinations, like any medication, have the possibility for adverse risks. Within the United States, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) must license vaccines before their use in the general population. The licensing process begins with computerized tests of efficacy, then moves on to animal testing and finally several phases of clinical trials with human participants. This licensing process generally takes 10 years or more ('How Vaccines Are Tested and Monitored' 2009). Continued monitoring occurs throughout the use of a vaccine as 'rare side effects and delayed reactions may not happen until the vaccine is given to millions of people' ('How Vaccines Are Tested and Monitored' 2009). New Zealand reports a similar standard of testing, whereby vaccines go through three phases of clinical trials until it is 'safe to the satisfaction of Medsafe, a division of the Ministry of Health' ('Immunisation: Vaccine Safety' 2009). The Centre for Adverse Reactions Monitoring (CARM) at Otago University in Dunedin records vaccination reactions to monitor the safety and effectiveness of the immunization. Possible side effects reported by the Ministry of Health are

‘redness and soreness at the site of injections and mild fever’ (‘Immunisation’ 2009). More severe side effects are extremely rare. For example, encephalitis (brain damage) following the measles vaccine has been reported in about 1 per 1 million doses. However, this number is very similar to the ‘background’ rate or the rate that would occur ‘naturally’ in society, so it is not clear whether the vaccine itself causes encephalitis in this single case. However, if one does attribute this case to the vaccine, the risk remains at about ‘1,000 times less than the risk of encephalitis from measles disease’ (Ministry of Health 2006: 377). Any risk of severe disease caused by the vaccination is exponentially less than the risks associated with contracting the disease itself.

Yet, even with rigorous controls and the extremely rare occurrence of serious illness, there is a wide range of anti-vaccination discourse surrounding the safety and efficacy of vaccines. This research aims to explore this range of mediated discourse, particularly given that New Zealand ranks 33rd out of 35 developed countries for immunizations, according to UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children report (‘NZ’s Vaccination Rates Lagging’ 2009). The overall immunization rate in New Zealand is about 83 per cent. The Ministry of Health in New Zealand reports that if vaccinations are to be effective for the entire community, the rates of compliance need to be 95 per cent (‘Low Immunisation Rate Triggers Measles Outbreak’ 2009).

In the middle of 2009, a measles outbreak in New Zealand was declared by the Ministry of Health as a precursor to a ‘potential measles epidemic’ (Ministry of Health 2009) – more than 100 cases in just the Canterbury region of New Zealand alone. In August, the incidence of reported measles for the year was more than 10 times the number of measles for the entirety of 2008 (Ryall 2009). These numbers prompted the Ministry of Health to announce that as of August 2009 all unimmunized children will be excluded from class if a child in their class contracted measles.

The decline in immunization rates in New Zealand could clearly be attributed to many factors: cultural changes, a lack of information received from medical practitioners and religious beliefs are only a few of the myriad possibilities. However, the information in available and accessible media must also be included as a potential barrier to vaccination. This research examines the discourse surrounding vaccinations in alternative and mainstream online media to better understand how vaccinations are reported overall in the online content of New Zealand media. In doing so, this research also questions whether alternative media, which have been found to depend on communal, egalitarian ideologies, represent vaccination differently than the mainstream media, which have been labelled individualistic and driven by forces of capitalism. Vaccinations are a social issue that depends on an effectively communicated community-based intervention to succeed. Without a full understanding of the communal benefits of vaccines, individuals may opt to leave their children without vaccination, thereby reducing the overall efficacy of vaccines and the physical health of society.

Anyone who has spent more than 15 minutes online knows that the Internet has an unparalleled ability to spread innuendo and rumours. Vaccination discourse online certainly falls prey to high levels of misinformation and confusing rhetoric. This research does not aim to substantiate or refute these rumours in any systemic way. Rather, it hopes to examine, through the framework of Marxist praxis, how alternative and mainstream online discourse presents vaccination to better understand the sometimes conflicting nexus between the ideology of an issue and that of a medium. Therefore, this study explores how vaccination is represented in the mainstream and alternative online press of New Zealand and whether the blogs sampled in this study are representative of a Marxist form of alternative media.

This study examined high-circulation New Zealand online newspapers and 100 blogs of the most popular blog postings about vaccinations in New Zealand. Overall, within the top 100 websites listed by Google, there was strong support for vaccinations. A majority of 54 per cent were found to be in support of vaccinations, 31 per cent were against and 15 per cent were neutral. However, there was a strongly significant relationship ($p = .000$) between the type of source and the degree to which it supported or opposed vaccinations. Blogs were far more likely (adjusted residual score of 8.8) than other sources to be against vaccinations. Such a high adjusted residual score suggests a very marked departure from the model of independence (well above +2 or below -2) and a strong demonstrated strength in this relationship. Of mainstream news sources, 85.7 per cent were found to support vaccination, while 93.3 per cent of blogs were found to oppose vaccinations.

Blogs engaged in a highly individualistic narrative directed towards personal gain, rather than the betterment of the community. This level of argumentation does not constitute an alternative media propelled by communal Marxist praxis. In contrast, news reports consistently reminded the readers of how their own personal actions could benefit society. Such stances within the mainstream and alternative press subvert traditional views of the media, which have suggested that Marxist theory is embedded in alternative media content and capitalist tenets remain entrenched in the mainstream press. For example, an article from *The Press*, a mainstream newspaper, on 10th August begins by stating that 'a generation of Kiwi children is at risk of potentially deadly disease due to apathy or parents being wary of vaccination, health experts say'. The use of the term 'generation' gives an expansive scope to the problem ahead and blames the risk of deadly disease on the 'apathy' of parents or, conversely, their wariness of vaccination. The term 'apathy' is equated here with apprehension, and the reporter holds the two in equal disdain. The result of this apathy is death across an entire 'generation' of children. The same article goes on to state that 'in a move to protect children, The Ministry of Health has told GPs to check with patients'. In this case, the general practitioner is positioned as the one who has the best interests of all children in mind and not the individual

parent who only sees the potential harm or benefit on his or her own individual child and not the society at large.

There are conceptualizations of community-mindedness in the alternative media sampled for this study, but they exist as the extrapolated obvious extensions of individual behaviour. For example, *Beyond Conformity* tells the story of a nearby family where the father was a 'known core antigen Hepatitis B carrier for over 30 years' but never passed the disease on to his unimmunized partner or children. This individual instance is then extrapolated to the larger society where individuals are warned of being 'warped' by doctors who are in support of vaccination as immunization was clearly not necessary for anybody given that it was not necessary for this one individual. Unique instances are cited repeatedly through alternative content without any mention of community protection or herd immunity.

Marxist thought hinge not only on communal tenets but also on a strong critique of corporate power blocs. There was a virulent oppositional discourse towards corporate power structures in alternative media content. The blog *Archetype* writes, 'the standard response of the Medical Establishment to any criticism of vaccination is to silence the dissenters'. Authors of alternative media are positioned far outside of mainstream positions of power and write of their 'censure and ostracism'. Yet there was very little in-depth social commentary to corroborate this oppositional discourse. While critical, investigative exploration has been found to be a cornerstone of effective alternative media (Armstrong 1981; Duncombe 1997), the level of analysis and argumentation found in the alternative press for this study remained decidedly superficial with little substantiation.

For example, the *Politics New Zealand* blog, self-labelled as the 'Department of Personal Opinions', wrote bluntly that 'mainstream are so unconscious that most fail to understand what is in these things and the rising tide of complications – it is all a scam'. This statement was made without any supporting evidence or argumentation. The author argued that 'mainstream', which could possibly be interpreted as the majority of society, was simply wrong. There was widespread condemnation in blogs for authority figures and for the medical community. This critique suggests a Marxist praxis, which attempts to sever relevant circuits of capital. Throughout blog discourse, writers were actively trying to 'transform existing social roles and routines by critiquing and challenging power structures' (Atkinson 2006: 252). Yet the level of critique again fell far short of an active, engaged challenge to mainstream structures of power. There was a social critique operating here, but without substantiation; the discourse failed to provide any legitimate, meaningful alternative. Critical, independent quality journalism is fundamental for an alternative media to successfully critique ideologies that legitimate domination (McChesney 2007). A blogger named Alice Dee stated plainly, 'I know what I know. [The medical community] really don't know much, just text book'.

There are repeated instances of bloggers citing 'a growing body of research' without any suggestion as to what that research might be. The *New Zealand*

Anti-Vivisection Society blog writes, 'in fact it has recently been discovered that side-effects were five times the number previously thought and one of these side-effects was a deadly blood disorder'. No substantiation is provided for such a claim. There are also several instances of assumptions in analysis that are asked and answered without support. For example, The NZ Single Parents Trust blog writes that vaccinations were 'promoted so quickly with very little research being given to the public because of elections coming up last year'. The writer here is asserting a blatant subversive act of politicians for personal gain but does not canvass any politicians to support such a stance. Even when a blog was written by a medical practitioner, the amount of substantive support was minimal. A blog called Healthonline, written by a natural medicine practitioner, argued that infectious disease epidemics of 60 years ago have passed but only because of 'improved hygiene and housing'. He made these arguments without any hyperlinks to supporting information or to any peer-reviewed academic research. There was not even any personal, anecdotal support to this claim.

The lack of substantiation found in alternative media was not replicated in mainstream outlets. Quotes were directly attributed to health care representatives that were easily verified through independent searches. Prominent medical representatives, such as Dr Johan Morreau, the paediatrics chairman of the Royal Australasian College, were repeatedly sourced for information. The level of analysis found in blogs did not draw from professional sources, but given the independent nature of alternative media, one would not expect such a correlation. However, one would expect to find investigative support and critical exploration in the alternative press (Armstrong 1981; Duncombe 1997).

Thus, 'alternative' blogs operated as hierarchically determined sites of one-way communication promoting individualistically opportune behaviours contrary to the community-driven model of communication typically found in alternative media. In contrast, mainstream outlets promoted behaviours supportive of community well-being and had equal, but albeit low, levels of egalitarian communication exchange. Yet how these media outlets communicated these divergent messages was complicated within a nexus of definitional characteristics coming from both the mainstream and alternative press. This study agrees with the recent trend in scholarship about alternative media, which has found that alternative media simply can't be explained or understood without placing it in relation to mainstream media (Harcup 2005). This research, much like the other case studies highlighted in this text, further problematizes a clearly delineated alternative and mainstream media.

Alternative media exerted a scathing, yet superficial, critique of corporate power blocks that relied on very little in-depth social commentary to corroborate this oppositional discourse. Thus, the distrust of corporate interests existed but any investigative analysis fell far short of what has defined much of alternative media. There was no meaningful request for a communicative exchange with readers in the alternative blogs sampled. There were also very few instances of

direct encouragement for behavioural change, which would not be expected given the history of alternative media as an agent of social change.

These findings demonstrate the complexity of categorizing one 'type' of media as ideologically capitalistic and the other as altruistic. These labels simply cannot describe the totality of media outlets, whether in relation to geography or topic or readership. Vaccination discourse in what has been labelled alternative media proved to be diametrically opposed to Marxist ideology, which calls for confrontational changes through educated discourse. Relying on highly individualistic accounts directed towards personal gain, alternative media most closely represented what might traditionally be expected from mainstream media. While mainstream news reports consistently reminded readers of how their own personal actions could benefit society, alternative media urged readers to look after their own interests. This ideological reversal again signals the complex overlapping spheres that exist along the media continuum. It should be noted that alternative media presumably made many of their most damning claims in this study based on their suspicions of corporate power. However, none of those suspicions were realized through rigorous examination on the part of alternative media, and thus their level of argumentation was decidedly superficial.