



Brunel
University
of London

**Does capitalism constrain or encourage
a diversity of media content?**

——The game of diversity in the nature of capital

Word count: 2915

1.0 Introduction

In the context of globalization today, the capitalist economic system has become the leading system all over the world, profoundly influencing all areas of society (Harvey, 2005). Since the emergence of capitalism in the 16th century, through the stages of free competition capitalism and monopoly capitalism, it has grown to a highly complex and mature economic system (Braudel, 1984). The role of the media also evolved throughout this long process of development, from a simple tool for the dissemination of information in the early days, to an important force in influencing social opinion and shaping public consciousness (Curran, 2010). The relationship between the media and capitalism has become closer and closer, and the forms and contents of the media have become ever more varied.

Under the capitalist market mechanism, as media continue to attract audiences through innovative forms and contents, the diversity of media content seems to have been expanded (Napoli, 2011). However, behind this apparent diversity, the logic of capitalist profit-seeking profoundly influences the production and dissemination of media content. As an industry, the core goal of the media is to maximize profits, which not only promotes market competition, but also limits to some extent the real sense of diversity. Against this background, the impact of capitalism on media diversity has become an issue of great concern, and there seems to be some kind of inherent contradiction between the profit-seeking nature of capitalism and the development of media diversity. On the one hand, to meet the needs of different audiences, the market competition mechanism of capitalism may prompt the media to pursue differentiation and pluralism, which will promote the development of media diversity (Picard, 1992). On the other hand, the trend towards the centralization of capital and the drive for commercial interests, may lead to the homogenization of media content and the viewpoints, which may limit media diversity (McChesney, 2008).

This study aims to explore the relationship between capitalism and the media, and how capitalist market mechanisms influence the development of diversity in media content. By analyzing the case of the casting of black actors in the Disney film *The Little Mermaid*, the study examines

how capital conceals the logic of profit-seeking in the promotion of apparent diversity, and reveals the potential limitations that this logic of capital imposes while promoting diversity.

Media is not only a carrier of information dissemination, but also a reflection of social power structure and economic interest relations, and it is of great significance to study the impact of capitalism on media diversity. From a theoretical perspective, an in-depth understanding of how capitalism acts on media diversity helps us better understand the development rules of the media industry under the capitalist system, and further deepen our understanding of the essential attributes and functions of the media in a capitalist society (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). From a practical perspective, through this study, media practitioners can better recognize the influence of capital on the media, so that they can focus on maintaining the independence and diversity of the media while pursuing commercial interests. For the general audience, it can help them view media information more rationally, improve their ability to analyze information, and avoid being misled by one-sided or commercialized media content.

2.0 Capitalism and Media, the Ideological Connection

According to Marx's theory of capitalism, capitalism is an economic system based on private ownership and the pursuit of surplus value (Marx, 1867). In a capitalist society, the means of production are appropriated by capitalists, laborers earn wages by selling their labor, and capitalists accumulate and add value to capital by exploiting the surplus value of laborers. This economic basis determines the class structure and social relations in capitalist society, and also has a profound impact on the media.

From the perspective of economic base determining the superstructure, the media, as a kind of superstructure, is necessarily subject to the constraints of the capitalist economic base (Althusser, 1971). In a capitalist society, media is an important economic sector, whose development is governed by the rules of the market. In order to maximize profits, media companies need to constantly expand their market share and increase advertising revenue and ratings (Herman & Chomsky, 1994). This results in the media often putting priority on business interests in the process of content production and dissemination.

Many large media conglomerates are controlled by multinational corporations or financial oligarchs, who decide the content and direction of media stories based on their own economic interests and political positions (Bagdikian, 2004). In the early twentieth century, the U.S. media conglomerate Hearst built a huge media empire through the takeover of a number of newspapers, and the content of its stories directly serves the company's economic interests and political stance. This ownership structure made the media to a large extent the voice of capital, serving to maintain the capitalist system and the interests of the bourgeoisie. The ruling class, on the other hand, spreads ideologies and values that favor them through the media, exercising ideological control and cultural infiltration of the ruled class, thus weakening the sense of resistance of the ruled class (Althusser, 1971).

3.0 In What Ways does Capitalism Promote Diversity

In capitalist society, the social structure is shown to be diversified, and different social classes and groups have different interests, cultural backgrounds and consumption capacities, and this diversified social structure leads to the diversification of audience needs. Media dependency theory suggests that the extent to which audiences rely on media messages depends on the social structure, the media system and individual needs (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). There is a strong link between the media, as the main channel of information dissemination, and the social structure and needs of the audience. This connection profoundly affects the diversity of media content and the role capitalism plays in it.

The critique of commodity fetishism also helps to understand the nature of capitalist media. In capitalist societies, the value of commodities is alienated, and the worship of commodities transcends concern for their use value (Marx, 1867). And the media produce news, entertainment programs, advertisements, and other content that are packaged as commercially valuable commodities to be exchanged in the marketplace.

Audience segmentation theory is an important application of marketing in the media industry, which is based on the diversity and differences of consumer needs, divided the overall audience

into segments with similar characteristics and needs, this theory is widely used in the production of media content and the design of communication strategy (Webster and Phalen, 2013). Audience creates economic value for media companies by purchasing media content or receiving advertising information. In order to gain more economic benefits and attract more audiences and advertisers, media companies have to create more and more business opportunities for their customers. This diversified audience demand provides the market basis for the diversity of media content, which in turn influences the capital strategy.

In terms of market structure, the capitalist media market is marked by the existence of various types of media enterprises, including large media conglomerates, small and medium-sized media companies, and emerging Internet media start-ups. Large media conglomerates take up an important position in the market by virtue of their strong financial strength, extensive resource channels and powerful brand influence (Croteau and Hoynes, 2006). In order to maintain their competitive advantage, these large media groups will continue to invest heavily in content innovation and technology development, launching innovative and attractive media products. Small and medium-sized media companies, on the other hand, seek opportunities for growth in niche markets by virtue of their flexibility and specialization. They usually focus on a particular field or audience group and meet the needs of specific audiences by providing personalized and specialized content. Some media companies focusing on financial news reporting provide in-depth market analyses, reports on industry developments and investment advice, targeting investors and financial practitioners. These small and medium-sized media companies have attracted a loyal audience and contributed to the diversity of media content by differentiating their content strategies in competition with large media conglomerates. With the development of Internet technology, new Internet media startups are springing up. Taking advantage of the Internet platform, these companies have broken the time and space limitations of traditional media, providing users with more convenient and personalized media services (Jenkins, 2006). These emerging Internet media startups have brought new vitality to the diversity of media content through innovative business models and technology applications.

4.0 The Shadow Behind the Promoting

Driven by the supremacy of commercial interests, media shows a certain degree of diversity, but behind this diversity often follows the same logic of capital. According to the theory of the political economy of communication, media content tends to favor content that attracts a large amount of traffic over the expression of true diversity, and “apparent” diversity is subject to “hidden” restrictions (Mosco, 2009). As soon as some diversity fails to generate economic benefits, media may limit the dissemination of such content. This also leads to a high degree of homogenization of content even when the media are constantly exploring new directions of diversity, as content that attracts a large audience tends to have similar characteristics and patterns (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). This suggests that in their pursuit of profit, capitalist media may sacrifice some of the diversity of their content in order to ensure the maximization of their economic interests.

Disney's decision to cast black actress Halle Bailey as Ariel in the lead role for its live-action *The Little Mermaid* movie, to be released in 2023, has become the center of global debate. In an official statement, Disney stated that the intention of this casting was to reinterpret the classic story through “inclusivity and diversity” to reflect the diversity of modern society (Disney, 2023). However, in-depth analysis reveals that behind the superficiality of this diversity lies the logic of profit-seeking capital.

Analyzed from the perspective of box office and marketing strategy, *Mermaids* has attracted great attention for its “controversial diversity”. According to the data, in its first week of release, *The Mermaid* made \$118 million in the North American market, accounting for 66.5% of its global first-week gross. However, this performance was uneven in other global markets. The Chinese market contributed only \$3.8 million, while the South Korean market grossed \$4.8 million, which is significantly low compared to the global box office performance of Disney's previous live-action films (Box Office Mojo, 2023).

This regional market variation reflects how capital capitalizes on the acceptance of diversity in different markets to adapt its business strategies. Disney's marketing in North America focused on the groundbreaking nature of “black actors in white roles” and promoted the “black princess”

hashtag on social media to appeal to younger audiences and the African-American community. In markets such as China and South Korea, marketing de-emphasized this focus, focusing on the film's music and visuals. Such tactics suggest that capital's drive for diversity is not motivated by social equality or cultural expression, but rather serves market segmentation and commercial interests.

While the casting of a black actor as the lead character is a superficial expression of diversity, the choice fails to break the framework of the classic story in terms of content delivery. The movie does not incorporate any narrative elements related to black culture, and even Ariel's family members remain predominantly white actors. This apparent diversity also has a negative effect on diversity support in society. According to The New York Times, since the release of the *Mermaids* trailer, the video has received more than 1.7 million “stomp” ratings on YouTube, making it one of the most controversial movie trailers on the YouTube platform (The New York Times, 2023). This suggests that capital-driven ostensible diversity not only fails to equalize the dialogue between races, but rather weakens the public's acceptance of the concept of diversity through controversy.

In the case of *The Mermaid*, despite the introduction of diverse casting in the movie, the core narrative remains a traditional story based on white culture. This not only reflects capital's preference for “safe diversity,” but also highlights capitalism's suppression of genuine cultural expression in response to market demand. Through this strategy, Disney has not only gained high box office revenues in North America, but has also generated global buzz, further expanding its brand influence. However, this profit-seeking model simultaneously suppresses the depth and breadth of cultural expression, making it difficult for true diversity to develop under the manipulation of capital.

5.0 The Ultimate Purpose of Capitalism - Cultural Hegemony

The theory of cultural hegemony, put forward by the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, argues that in a capitalist society, the ruling class does not rely solely on coercive power to maintain its domination, but, more importantly, on cultural and ideological leadership, or cultural

hegemony, to gain the approval and consent of the dominated class (Gramsci, 1971). From the perspective of the theory, capitalism, by controlling the media, tries to shape the public ideology that conforms to its interests and bring the diversity of media content into the framework of the logic of capital. In this process, the media, as an important vehicle for cultural communication, has become a key area in the bourgeoisie's struggle for cultural hegemony.

Capitalism shapes the public's ideology through the media, mainly in the dissemination and guidance of mainstream values. Through extensive reporting and promotion of capitalism's core values, the media infiltrate these values into the public's daily life, so that they are gradually internalized into the public's way of thinking and code of conduct (Fairclough, 1995).

Consumerism is a value strongly promoted by the capitalist media, which shows the public colorful material life and consumption scenes to stimulate the public's desire to consume. Advertisements constantly emphasize the brand, quality and fashion sense of commodities, implying that consumers can improve their social status and quality of life by purchasing these commodities. Under this influence, the public gradually develops a lifestyle of consumption as a means of satisfying their needs and realizing their self-worth, further consolidating the economic foundation of capitalism (Baudrillard, 1998).

Media also play an important role in political communication and have become a tool of capitalism to maintain political domination. During elections, the media influence the public's political attitudes and voting behavior through coverage of candidates, broadcasting of debates, and release of opinion polls. The media tend to report on candidates in a biased manner according to their own political stance and economic interests, highlighting the merits of certain candidates while ignoring or downplaying the performance of others. Some media will collude with specific political forces or interest groups to publicize and build up momentum for the candidates they support, and to help them win elections by creating public opinion hot spots and guiding public opinion. This type of political communication makes it difficult for the public, who are often influenced by the media, to make objective and rational judgments in elections, thus ensuring the stable operation of the capitalist political system.

By controlling the media, capitalism uses the diversity of media content as a tool for spreading its ideology in an attempt to shape a public ideology that serves its interests. The formation of this cultural hegemony has led to the gradual acceptance of capitalist values and lifestyles by the public along with media content, thus realizing capital's total control over society.

6.0 Conclusion

Through an in-depth exploration of the relationship between capitalism and media content diversity, this study finds that the impact of capitalism on media content diversity is twofold.

From the aspect of promotion, the market competition mechanism and profit-seeking nature of capitalism promote the development of media content diversity to a certain extent. In the fierce market competition, media enterprises, in order to pursue profit maximization, constantly carry out content innovation to meet the diversified needs of different audience groups (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). However, the limitations of capitalism on the diversity of media content cannot be ignored. The profit-seeking nature of capital makes media enterprises often prioritize commercial interests in the process of content production and dissemination, and screen and exclude those diverse contents that do not meet profit expectations. The influence of capitalist ideology and political factors also makes media content subject to a certain degree to ideological infiltration and interference by political forces, making it difficult to reflect social reality in a comprehensive and objective manner.

This study has achieved some results in revealing the complex impact of capitalism on media content diversity, but it also has some limitations. In terms of sample selection, although reference is made to the case of the Disney's Little Mermaid movie, the coverage of the sample is still relatively limited and fails to comprehensively cover different regions and stages of development around the world. There are differences in the level of capitalist development, cultural background, and political system in different countries and regions, and these factors may lead to different characteristics of the impact of capitalism on media content diversity (McQuail, 2010). Future research can further expand the sample scope to include media cases from more countries and regions, and conduct cross-cultural and cross-regional comparative

studies in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between capitalism and media content diversity.

The impact of capitalism on media content diversity is complex, with its facilitating and limiting effects intertwined. In exploring the relationship between capitalism and media content diversity, it is important to fully recognize the premise of capital's profit-seeking role and its dual impact on media content diversity .

7.0 Reference

Althusser, L. 1971, *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, Monthly Review Press, London;New York;.

Bagdikian, B.H. 2004, *The new media monopoly*, Beacon Press, Boston.

Ball-Rokeach, S.J. & DeFleur, M.L. 1976, "A Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects", *Communication research*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 3-21.

Baudrillard, J. & ProQuest (Firm) 1998, *The consumer society: myths and structures*, Sage, London;Thousand Oaks, CA;.

Braudel, F. 1984, *Civilization and capitalism, 15th - 18th Century: Volume 3, The perspective of the world*, Collins, London.

Box Office Mojo. 2023. The Little Mermaid (2023) - Box Office. Retrieved from Box Office Mojo Website

Croteau, D. & Hoynes, W. 2006, *The business of media: corporate media and the public interest*, 2nd edn, Pine Forge Press, London;Thousand Oaks, California;.

Curran, J. 2010, *Media and society*, 5th edn, Bloomsbury Academic, London.

Disney. 2023. Press Release: The Little Mermaid and Diversity. Retrieved from Disney Official Website

Fairclough, N. 1995, *Media discourse*, E. Arnold, London.

Gramsci, A., Hoare, Q. & Nowell-Smith, G. 1971, *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Lawrence and Wishart, London.

Hallin, D.C., Mancini, P. & ProQuest (Firm) 2004, *Comparing media systems: three models of media and politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge;New York;.

Harvey, D. 2005;2007;, *A brief history of neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, New York;Oxford;.

Herman, E.S. & Chomsky, N. 1994, *Manufacturing consent: the political economy of the mass media*, Vintage, London.

Hesmondhalgh, D. 2019, *The cultural industries*, Fourth edn, SAGE, Los Angeles.

Jenkins, H. 2006, *Convergence culture: where old and new media collide*, New York University Press, New York.

Marx, K. 1867. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*.

McChesney, R.W. 2008, *The political economy of media: enduring issues, emerging dilemmas*, Monthly Review Press, New York.

McQuail, D. 2010, *McQuail's mass communication theory*, 6th edn, SAGE, London.

Mosco, V. & ProQuest (Firm) 2009, *The political economy of communication*, 2nd edn, SAGE, Los Angeles.

Napoli, P. M. 2011, *Audience Evolution: New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audiences*. Columbia University Press.

Picard, R.G. 1992, "Media Economics: Concepts and Issues", *Canadian journal of communication*, vol. 17, no. 2.

The New York Times. (2023). The Little Mermaid Controversy: YouTube's Most Disliked Trailer. Retrieved from NY Times Website

Webster, J.G. & Phalen, P.F. 2013, *The mass audience: Rediscovering the dominant model*, .