Keywords for Media Studies

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27

Hegemony

Justin Lewis

Hegemony is a way to describe people or ideas that become—and seek to remain—dominant in society. The development of the term "hegemony" in media studies follows the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Stuart Hall (1973/1980, 1982, 1996), and generally refers to "soft" rather than "hard" power. Gramsci and Hall were concerned with the way in which certain groups and ideologies maintain their power in democratic societies. They were interested in dominance achieved by consent rather than by force, maintained by ideology rather than repression. In this context, hegemony's tools are words, images, rituals, and practices rather than weapons, courts, and prisons. Indeed, Hall's interest in the media stems from his view that, in modern democracies, media and cultural forms are central to the maintenance—or disruption—of hegemony.

Hegemony is not merely a description but a process, one that makes the dominance of certain groups or ideas in society seem normal, natural, or inexorable—even to those in subordinate positions. Hegemony often involves masking or solidifying various forms of inequality so that they seem part of everyday life, making customs and contrivances that favor some people over others *appear to be* common sense. Indeed, hegemony is often at its most effective when it is least visible, when ideological work goes on without our noticing it.

We see this in many forms of media representation. Take, for example, a fairly routine advertisement. An attractive women in her late thirties—perhaps she has a stressful job—is worrying about finding the time to prepare a meal for her family. Salvation comes in the form of a highly processed ready meal, which, in the rapid

denouement of the thirty-second TV commercial, we see served to an appreciative husband and children in a contented domestic setting.

There is nothing especially remarkable or unusual about this story. Most people would watch it without dwelling upon the assumptions it promotes. Change the script slightly and it could be for an appliance or a cleaning product. But imagine, for a moment, that we change the gender of the central character: we see, instead, a man worrying about what to cook his family for dinner. There is nothing strange or unnatural about a father cooking for his wife and children, and yet in the highly gendered world of TV commercials it looks odd. We might expect to see a comic reference to the man's ineptitude in the kitchen, or some other acknowledgment that gender stereotypes have been upset. But to simply replay the script portraying male rather than female domesticity disrupts our expectations. This reveals hegemony in action: advertising tends to reinforce expectations that domestic duties are performed by women rather than men.

In much the same way, we may accept most TV drama or factual programming, in which a majority of those on-screen are male, as "normal" representations of the world. So while we may know that there are roughly equal proportions of men and women in society, we do not necessarily notice it when men dominate time on screen (which, surveys show, they do across most genres). If programs occasionally reverse the gender bias we are more likely to notice the gender imbalance. The overrepresentation of men on television thereby reinforces assumptions that male dominance is the norm.

These assumptions are enshrined within a set of patriarchal attitudes that tend to favor men. The fact that gender bias in media portrayals may wash over us almost without our noticing is, in part, because of a long history of gender stereotyping. The processed dinner advertisement attaches itself to this history, thereby reinforcing an ideological notion that favors one group over another.

Like most forms of hegemony, the assumptions behind these stereotypes have long been contested. Feminists have, for some time, campaigned for media representations that present equal choices for men and women. And yet the persistence of gender stereotypes in

advertising (and in many other media domains) represents a victory for patriarchy over a counterhegemonic, feminist critique of gender inequality.

If we look a little closer, we can see that the advertisement also takes a hegemonic position in relation to the politics of food. It reflects—and normalizes—the dominance of a particular system of food production and consumption. This system tends to favor the manufacture of processed food, which has more potential for "adding value" to cheap ingredients and is often more profitable than, say, selling fruit or vegetables. It may be healthier to avoid eating too many processed ready meals, but in the world of advertising we are far more likely to see a pitch for precooked lasagne than for lettuce, leeks, or lentils. With no sense of irony, advertising has thereby naturalized the buying and selling of processed, less natural food.

This form of hegemony is more difficult to identify, because it favors a system rather than a particular class, race, or gender. It favors profits over palates and fast-food outlets over healthier alternatives. The "slow food" movement, which developed in response to the increasing dominance of processed food chains, is in this sense counterhegemonic. An advertisement for slow food—showing us someone buying a set of ingredients and cooking them—is unlikely to appear unless it involves shopping at a supermarket chain large enough to fund a TV ad campaign.

In a more general sense, the advertisement is also part of the hegemony of consumer culture (Lewis 2013). It is part of an ad world where good things—whether happiness, respect, popularity, friendship, love, security, or fulfillment—always come with a price tag. In advertisements, a scene of family harmony is always linked to a specific product. Hence, in our ad, the consumption of a brand of processed food is linked to happy family life. The fact that this link could be (and is) made to market almost *any* product—from a car to a breakfast cereal—tells us that these associations are fairly arbitrary. Indeed, the way in which advertisers can link their products with positive social values (connecting, for example, Coca-Cola with

happiness) without it seeming bizarre or preposterous is part of a hegemonic process in which we accept such connections as routine.

Ads will never propose the more plausible idea that happy family life comes from a set of social relationships (rather than which car you drive or what kind of prepared food you eat). Consumerism thereby presents a narrow view of the world, one that always connects the good things in life to the purchase of goods. This idea is hegemonic is most capitalist societies. It sustains a whole set of economic and cultural priorities, where governments focus on trying to deliver more consumer choice through economic growth rather than organizing societies in ways that more directly create human fulfillment and well-being.

The advertisement—like most commercials—is also hegemonic in focusing not only on the pleasure of consumption but on the *moment* of consumption. Production is usually invisible—on the few occasions when we do see working conditions, they are invariably romanticized. This is, in part, because many of the things we buy may be made in ways that involve poorly paid groups of workers, or manufactured using an array of toxic chemicals and greenhouse gases. And, in the case of our processed dinner, a set of unwholesome ingredients and industrial processes. The fact that the low cost of consumer goods often depends upon forms of inequality and exploitation (only a tiny percentage of purchases are certified as fair trade) is hidden in the world of advertising, something to be skipped over or ignored as we carry on consuming.

The mountains of waste produced by all this consumption are also invisible. There will be no camera shots lingering over the discarded fast-food or soft-drink containers that pollute our urban and rural environments, or pictures of people in the third world rifling through exported toxic piles of waste, or any inkling of the increasing *public* cost of waste disposal. Waste, in the ad world, is somebody else's problem, something that is generally *not* built in to the cost of the product, leaving the taxpayer to pick up the tab. This is another aspect of the hegemony of consumerism, in which environmental

problems are seen as subordinate while the needs of a consumer culture are dominant.

In all these cases, the processed dinner advertisement is typical of the way in which hegemony works in media representations. It forms part of a system that repeats certain kinds of images, roles, and ideas while neglecting others. And, in so doing, it makes certain dominant views of the world seem natural or simply part of ordinary life.