Hegemonic Masculinity Portrayal in the Media:
Analysis and Critique of a Cultural Studies Ideology

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We live in a world that is inescapably bound to culture and more specifically, the dogma that the media want to depict through their numerous culture industries. This idea is most widely noted by Stuart Hall, a critical paradigm theorist, and is known as Cultural Studies (Griffin, 2011). According to Hall’s work, these culture industries consist of the producers of television, radio, film, fashion, magazines, and newspapers, so it is not surprising that the media have such a significant voice in our lives. “The media are watchdogs, the guides, the informants, the messengers, the participants and, at times, the comrades” (Khunou, 2013, p.191). A couple of the benefits that they display as a result of all these titles are the ability to teach society who deserves what, and to provide guides that outline our awareness of the world (Griffin, 2011). Since the media can inform us of who we are in civilization, their culture industries are seen as influential apparatuses of social control that ultimately produce hegemony, and although it is not a conscious plot, the mass media are able to preserve the dominance of the most powerful members of society. Using multiple case studies and research gathered from reality television, political campaigns, sitcoms, sports, and news, examples of how the media projects masculinity-related encoded messages, scholar’s research approaches, media presentations of traditional hegemonic masculinity, and even media displays of opposing masculinities will all be reviewed and analyzed.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemony, a piece of Cultural Studies, is connected to many smaller, more precise ideologies. The one that will be focused on in regard to media portrayal is hegemonic masculinity, a concept that came into popular perspective in the 1970s and refers to a dominant
type of masculinity that has been glorified as the most prosperous in United States culture (Hardin, Keuhn, Jones, Genovese & Balaji, 2009). Clarkson (2005) states that hegemonic masculinity is the embodiment of an ideal form of masculinity that can really only be recognized through heroic figures in fantasy. The traditional hegemonic masculine man demonstrates physical force and authority, career achievement, family patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality as the five key components necessary to foster this construct. Masculinity gains its power through the performance of these characteristics, so, “performing power is performing masculinity” Hatfield, 2010, p. 528).

Even though the five main factors surrounding hegemonic masculinity do a decent job illustrating its approach, it can be argued that this form of masculinity is so intriguing because it is based more on the exclusion of certain attributes than it is the inclusion (Hardin et al., 2009). To be more in-depth, these aspects that are shunned by hegemonic masculinity, featuring adjectives such as weak and subordinate, are the subject of defamation because they are considered to be characteristics of two out-groups: women and gay men. Anything deemed as feminine is the opposite of what hegemonic masculinity stands for. This notion is able to thrive since no concrete definition for heterosexual effeminacy exists, and even when the concept is acknowledged, it is correlated to gay (Hatfield, 2010). Gayness has been translated to be hegemonic masculinity’s composite of all its neglected male features, and femininity is one of these features (Hardin et al., 2009). A satirical scholar writes, “A ‘real man should not act like a ‘sissy.’ He must seemingly be clean of all femininity” (Kian, Mondello & Vincent, 2009, p. 394).

A few of the key segments of hegemonic masculinity have been discussed, so now the critical paradigm’s outlook towards the topic will be given a closer review. The critical
paradigm, an amplified portion of the interpretive paradigm, seeks to view all people as subjects and examine power differentials (Griffin, 2011). The archetype is designed to create understanding, inspire aesthetic appreciation, and manage qualitative research. Most importantly, though, is that the research is seen as useless if it does not make the world a better, fairer place.

**Media Influence and Research**

**Control of Encoded Messages**

Khan and Blair (2013) argue that the media play a compelling role in how society sees and creates power relations. But how? The first question that needs to be answered to unmask hidden powers in society deals with the different forms of media that house a positive connotation of hegemonic masculinity. Along with this, how does this masculinity maintain its power? According to Henson and Parameswaran (2008), critical scholars believe the entire idea of hegemony is based on how cultural portrayals can pretend they alter power discourses but in reality do not disturb the initial institutional power.

As noted earlier, “The media are watchdogs, the guides, the informants, the messengers, the participants and, at times, the comrades” (Khunou, 2013, p. 191). These roles allow the media to control every part of society’s perceptions of life. For example, John Amaechi became the first NBA player to come out as gay, which would have provided momentous threats to hegemonic masculinity in sports and media (Hardin et al., 2009). However, instead of recognizing this, sports journalists ended up adjusting the story to make sure the norms of masculinity were upheld while feigning acceptance. The columnists actually ended up portraying Amaechi as inadequate for professional sports because he was weak and passive despite playing several years in the league. Due to these framed attributes, the media was able to establish that Amaechi could not possibly represent masculinity in the NBA and that the only
accepted masculinity in professional sports was hegemonic. The Amaechi story insinuates that sports columnists, who are mostly acclaimed as reliable sources, help assure that progress in expanding sexual norms in athletics will remain limited.

Sports columnists are not the only members of the media that aid in maintaining the masculinity status quo. Dr. Phillip “Phil” McGraw is framed as a successful, strong, heterosexual therapist on his show through use of rhetorical elements that complement his down-to-earth therapy style (Henson & Parameswaran, 2008). During Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign in 2008, Bill Clinton held the spotlight instead of his wife due to the media’s depiction of his political success, which exposes the emphasis on hegemonic masculinity in presidential politics and on recentering men who hold these masculine traits (Khan & Blair, 2013).

Even though these cases of sports, reality television, and politics all show the media’s power to project hegemonic masculinity, the media has also used its control to question this model. Queer Eye for the Straight Guy was a reality show that removed physical domination from the list of desirable male characteristics and instead used its homosexual stars to stress the importance of physical perfection (Clarkson, 2005). The media promoted the idea of homosexual men guiding a heterosexual man in attracting women, which sheds light on a new, conflicting form of masculinity that weakens masculine hegemony’s fortress.

**Research Methods**

The diverse techniques the media use to frame various channels of communication into whatever upholds and restores social norms, or in some cases challenge them, truly testify to the overall influence the media possess. Now, the examination deals with the data gathering strategies designed to spot the concealed power differentials. In order for critical scholars to spot these encoded hegemonic messages, a common tool is narrative thematic analysis. Hatfield
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(2010) utilizes this method in the analysis of *Two and a Half Men* because it keeps a story together while other research draws from multiple cases. This way, all of a case can be analyzed and not solely the dialogue. Observing how Charlie gets rewarded for embodying hegemonic masculinity through his actions, expressions, and words while Alan epitomizes the opposite, is intensified with the usage of the whole story.

Similar to this approach, the investigation done on CBS SportsLine, ESPN, and *Jackass* feature content analysis. The research on the former two looked at descriptive categories such as physical appearance, sexuality, and personal relationships to find disparities between men’s and women’s college basketball in an attempt to reveal gender descriptors (Kian et al., 2009).

The procedure with *Jackass* dealt with divisions like bodily experimentation, animal domination, and phallocentrism, all to be evaluated on whether the stunts were done to prove that the characters are hegemonic or that they were performed out of a sense of machismo (Lindgren & Lelievre, 2009).

The study executed by Henson and Parameswaran (2008) on *Dr. Phil* used an analogous form of content analysis labeled as semiotic analysis, the breaking down of texts to decode their symbolic meanings. In this particular case, it was discovered that bodily enactments, visual conventions, and oral conventions are all used to promote his success as a masculine man. The main point is that content analysis is the preferred and overarching data collection method used when studying hegemonic masculinity in the media no matter what the medium, primarily because hegemony, and its benefits, can be displayed in plentiful forms of communication and expression.

**Hegemonic Masculinity as Ideal**
Using the measures listed above, several results imply the ongoing promotion of hegemonic masculinity in the media. The depiction of Phil McGraw’s mission to save the nation’s families represents his heroic masculinity, which puts him in the same category as Charlie from *Two and a Half Men* for Charlie’s lifestyle of carefree accommodation, and Bill Clinton for the former president’s political success (Henson & Parameswaran, 2008; Hatfield, 2010; Khan & Blair, 2013). These three are seen as near fantasy figures that embody the ideal form of masculinity, a notion that the media exhausts.

Going back to the concept of the media covering up underlying hegemony by initially appearing progressive, the Clinton saga was no different (Khan & Blair, 2013). Originally Bill Clinton’s support promoted a liberal feminist agenda, but this was overthrown by the presidency being framed as a hegemonic masculine role. The same sort of cover up can be said of McGraw’s talk show since on the outside, his performances back a new, emotionally in sync version of masculinity, but further analysis proves he is popularized as a result of characteristics of traditional masculinity like his career success and redemption of less fortunate men (Henson & Parameswaran, 2008).

**Glitches in Hegemonic Discourse**

Despite the sometimes seemingly impenetrable idea of hegemonic masculinity, there have been subtle opportunities for change in the construct. The presidency is one example of a circumstance of conceivable innovation since gender norms dictate politics and when Hillary Clinton became a candidate, she became a hazard (Khan & Blair, 2013).

As for slight modifications, studies have shown that different dimensions of masculinity have been discovered and slowly added over time. Hatfield (2010) claims that *Two and a Half Men* carves a more modern version of hegemonic masculinity with the addition of the bachelor
lifestyle. The study done by Clarkson (2005) on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* notes that in today’s world, straight men must be comfortable with homosexuality while remaining confident in their own sexuality. Kian et al. (2009) recognizes that in newer forms of media, such as the college basketball articles analyzed, the skill level and athleticism were identified just as much for the women as they were for the men, leaving uncontested ground in one realm of media. All these small lapses in hegemonic discourse allude to the realization that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed construct and that it is constantly emerging (Kian et al., 2009).

There have been other, stronger cases of this as put forth by Clarkson (2005). As previously mentioned, in the breakdown of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, it is decided that the show celebrates consumer masculinity and that the new man is supposed to be attentive and compassionate towards his partner. This newfound metrosexuality in a man leads to a figure who participates in spa days, high-class urban events, and tanning salons, which are all vast differences compared to traditional hegemonic masculinity. Clarkson (2005) comes to the conclusion that men are stuck between the original homophobic and misogynistic form of masculinity, and the newer form that is routed in feminine consumption.

A similar kind of dilemma is present in *Jackass* according to Lindgren and Lelievre (2009). The reality television show could be seen as either a critique of major masculinity norms in society or a confirmation of their acceptance. However, the authors argue that the show illustrates and blends both hegemonic masculinity and subordinated masculinities, suggesting that the overall message is a renegotiation of gender and masculinity. The possible revisions of masculinities in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Jackass* confirm that hegemonic masculinity is a delicate concept that can be bent (Hardin et al., 2009).

**Hegemonic Masculinity in Television Drama**
A near flawless example of hegemonic masculinity being promoted by media lies within the popular AMC drama, *Mad Men*. The show is set in 1960s New York City and focuses on the employees of a fictional advertising agency. The central character in the program, and at hand, is Don Draper, the creative director of the agency, who exemplifies physical authority with his muscular and tall figure, career achievement of an upper class salary, family patriarch with his wife and kids, frontiersmanship by building his own life, and heterosexuality by sleeping with numerous women throughout the course of the show (Weiner & Pierson, 2012). Since Draper is a replica for the five components of hegemonic masculinity, as defined by Clarkson (2005), he is a perfect character for the media to glorify.

In “Signal 30,” the fifth episode of the fifth season of *Mad Men*, success resulting from Draper’s power is very prevalent. At a social gathering hosted by a coworker, Draper is complimented and idolized by his male coworkers and praised for his good ideas. This cannot be said of the other, less hegemonic masculinities in attendance (Weiner & Pierson, 2012). Later in the evening, the host’s sink breaks and Draper is quick to fix it, taking off his shirt and visibly flustering the women as he saves the day and even gets called “Superman.” After the night out, he seduces his wife and she claims his advancements only worked because of how much she enjoyed watching his heroics. Draper’s physical appearance, blue-collar knowledge, and sexual prowess net him prosperity in this scenario.

The social get-together example is a strong representation of hegemonic masculinity at work, but there is another point in the episode where Draper displays his family values (Weiner & Pierson, 2012). He attempts to convince a coworker that he should not have slept with a prostitute at a brothel they went to for business because “you don’t get another chance at what you have,” as in a loving wife and child. Draper as a fantasy figure completely works for the
advancement of hegemonic masculinity because he demonstrates four of the five key aspects and gets rewarded for it, while the other male characters who do not or cannot foster these conditions are not portrayed to be as outstanding. *Mad Men*’s “Signal 30” encourages masculine hegemony and does not hold any weaknesses to the notion of Cultural Studies.

**Cultural Studies Critique**

Going by the interpretive standards for theory evaluation, Cultural Studies is strong but not perfect. It offers a new understanding of people because it inquires about media influence and how the occupied power of the people in charge is preserved (Griffin, 2011). Newswriters and television producers are kingpins of this phenomenon according to the case studies, which insists that as long as we are tuned into the media, their voices affect the human condition.

The next point to review is the clarification of values for Cultural Studies, which comes into question because of Stuart Hall’s possible overcommitment to finding evidence (Griffin, 2011). However, the case studies do not stretch to find data that supports hegemonic masculinity in media and generally have clear guidelines for what constitutes hegemony. Even though the research has to have some degree of bias, the specific descriptors of content analysis make it difficult to claim everything as hegemony. As observed, some of the data did not even assist the notion of hegemonic masculinity. This also plays into the qualitative research criteria, which is certainly well-supported. The content analyses utilize interpretation of all parts of the subjects including body language and camera focus.

Cultural Studies is able to capture readers’ imaginations and spark appreciation because it gives insight into their lives and how the media impacts their role in society (Griffin, 2011). This is where readers learn their relation to media characters and figures, comprehending why they
emulate specific people. They see how power is regulated throughout society in sports, politics, and television.

In the realm of community agreement, Hall is not always seen in the most positive light (Griffin, 2011). Some claim that he does not adhere to ethnic minorities and women enough. And as noted before, his techniques are questionable because of his strong obligatory feelings toward the subject. Despite these factors, Cultural Studies has undoubtedly become one of the most extensively researched theories, as shown by the cases and various topics.

The most substantial critique, though, is that the theory does not offer a way to change the media’s perpetuated power imbalances (Griffin, 2011). The theory itself may not address methods of reforming society, but some of the case studies do. Clarkson (2005) asserts that alternative masculinities can be discovered and supported by the combination of the hegemonic and consumption forms of masculinity, while Hardin et al. (2009) believe the “equal playing field” metaphor in sports, an idea that compares the “right” gay athlete breaking barriers to Jackie Robinson and his accomplishments, needs to be shattered in order to fathom the discrepancies between sexuality and race in the media. These examples show that there are plausible options to help improve on these power inequalities even if they seem farfetched.

Concluding Remarks

Overview

All the elements that culture industries throw at society serve the purpose of bounding people to definite power roles (Griffin, 2011). Hegemonic masculinity, an ideology of Cultural Studies, is part of this process and can be viewed as a concept that mainly prospers because of the absence of homosexuality and femininity (Hardin et al., 2009). From a critical standpoint, the most effective way for the media to bolster hegemony is by disguising it as enlightened and
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tolerant material (Henson & Parameswaran, 2008). Hillary Clinton’s campaign, Phil McGraw’s show, and John Amaechi’s revelation of homosexuality can all account for this (Khan & Blair, 2013; Henson & Parameswaran, 2008; Hardin et al., 2009). The best method for uncovering this encoding is through the use of content analysis and accounting for all forms of communication. Even though hegemonic masculinity is the most rewarding in the media, it still gets touched up by the addition of new characteristics like the bachelor lifestyle and comfort with homosexuals (Hatfield, 2010; Clarkson, 2005). Along with new, positive portrayal of consumption and subordinate masculinities, it is noted that hegemonic masculinity can be angled (Clarkson, 2005; Lindgren & Lelièvre, 2009; Hardin et al., 2009). Surely this does not disable all traditional masculinities in the media, as Mad Men’s Don Draper is still a prime embodiment of it (Weiner & Pierson, 2012). Cultural Studies is a sound theory that, with help from outside sources, is able to suggest and foresee some inroads for critical scholars (Clarkson, 2005; Hardin et al., 2009).

**Personal Outlook**

The research project allowed me to gain experience in finding sources and analyzing them. It was a huge stride towards the future, as this was one of the first papers that truly challenged my work ethic. I learned that papers like this require diligent effort and numerous hours of preparation before actually writing since the topic is so broad and there are seemingly limitless resources to employ. The topic also opened my eyes to forms of hegemonic masculinity in media outside of the paper. As for recommendations for future researchers, it would be wise to stay updated with evolving forms of masculinity because as Lindgren and Lelièvre (2009) state, gender norms are always changing. They also make it clear that some programs alter masculine discourses in faint manners, so intent examination is required to genuinely unearth social progress.
References


