

REPRESENTATION OF ELITE POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES IN MEDIA SOURCES

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In our current society, the media serves as one of the primary sources for information that fuels arguments surrounding the deep political divides that have become characteristic of politics in the United States. This stream of information is increasingly available to the public, especially with modern technology and the increased usage of social media. G. William Domhoff's writings on the influence and economic power of the power elite theorize that our media sources are subject to influence from power elites. This study explores the extent to which these elite political ideologies are present in media sources. Drawing on evidence collected through an analysis of the boards of directors for *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, this paper argues that the political ideologies of the power elite associated with media corporations are not always consistent with the overall political ideologies expressed by the respective media corporations' opinion and editorial publications.

Literature Review

This idea that society's elites have great influence over the general population is not new. Karl Marx argues that the ruling class has control over both the material and intellectual forces of society.¹ He further discusses that these intellectual ideas promote the ideal expression of material relationships.² In other words, Marx says that elites control and influence common ideologies (such as moral beliefs and values) that support their own ideal material relationship – which according to Marx is the division of labor that contains massive

¹ Marx, Karl, "Ideology and Class." *Social Stratification*, edited by Grusky, (1970): 141.

² Ibid.

inequalities between owners and workers.³ In a similar manner, Antoni Gramsci's writings on hegemony also argue that the economically dominant class has the means to create conditions in which lower classes will consent to inequality.⁴ Both Marx and Gramsci argue that the elite's influence over common ideologies support the elite's control over the working class. While they both see elite ideologies as a means of controlling lower classes, a more contemporary expression of this in the modern United States' post-industrial society could be political ideological influence over the lower classes. The values and biases of media organizations may be unintentionally drawn from the values and biases of their elite leadership, which are then spread to the public through media platforms.

G. William Domhoff offers a more modern take on this idea that elites control the intellectual forces of society. In "The Class-Domination Theory of Power," Domhoff identifies individuals who have predominant power in the United States are those who have economic power.⁵ Since the majority of economic power in the United States is concentrated in corporations, Domhoff argues that unity among these powerful businesses can be distinguished by examining "interlocking directorates," defined as individuals who sit on the board of directors for more than two corporations.⁶ Examining interlocking directorates has the potential to shed light on the strong social cohesion that is present in the upper class and can also act as a means of examining dominant ideologies. In addition to serving on corporate boards of directors, many power elites are members of policy-discussion organizations.⁷ Domhoff notes that these policy-

³ Marx, Karl. "Classes in Capitalism and Pre-Capitalism." In *The Inequality Reader*, edited by D.B. Grusky and S. Szelenyi, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1847): 38.

⁴ Gramsci, Antonio. (1971) "Excerpts from Gramsci's Prison Notebooks (1929-1935)." *Social Theory: Continuity and Confrontation*, ed. Roberta Garner and Black Hawk Hancock, (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2014): 411.

⁵ Domhoff, G. William, "The Class-Domination Theory of Power." (February 2012): 1.
https://whorulesamerica.ucsc.edu/power/class_domination.html.

⁶ Ibid, 5.

⁷ Ibid, 6.

discussion organizations give “executives the ability to influence public opinion through the mass media and other outlets, to argue with and influence experts, and to accept appointments from government service.”⁸ This paper will further study if elite leadership in media organizations influence the ideologies represented in the opinion and editorial publications of their affiliated organizations.

Media can also reflect the interests of the wealthy elite by selectively deciding which stories to cover. Benediktsson investigates how media outlets choose what stories to cover, specifically focusing on how the media contributes to the identification and construction of white-collar crimes. Benediktsson’s findings show that large publicly owned media companies did not suppress the coverage of corporate crime and that social ties between scandal companies and media companies did not affect newspaper coverage.⁹ The later of these findings is of particular interest because Benediktsson used interlocking directorates and geographical proximity to identify social ties between scandal corporations and media corporations.¹⁰ While these findings show that media coverage of corporate crimes is not affected by elite social ties, it does not address how elite ideologies impact the overarching political ideologies that are represented in opinion and editorial publications.

Furthermore, much of the everyday news that citizens consume is related to the current political climate. There are many studies that address the high prevalence of political content in news sources, but most tend to do so by examining the ideologies of reporters, not those of the power elite in charge of the news organization. One study by Christopher A. Cooper and Martin Johnson does this in its analysis of how reporters’ political orientations reflect the political orientations of their audiences.¹¹

⁸ Ibid, 6.

⁹ Mike Benediktsson, “The Deviant Organization and the Bad Apple CEO: Ideology and Accountability in Media Coverage of Corporate Scandals.” *Social Forces* 88, no. 5 (2010): 2203.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2010.0032>

¹⁰ Ibid, 2193.

¹¹ Cooper, Christopher, A. & Martin Johnson. 2009. “Representative Reporters? Examining Journalists’ Ideology in Context.” *Social Science Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2009): 387-406. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2009.00623.x>.

Findings show that reporters tend to have similar political beliefs to their audiences – reporters in liberal states were more liberal, while reporters in conservative states were more conservative.¹² The significant results of this study may help explain the role that reporters have in maintaining political ideologies, but it does not address the role power elites have in influencing what ideologies are represented in newspapers.

Race has also been a strong focus of sociological research, and the media plays a large role in the discussion of racial ideologies. Jane L. Towmey examines how racial ideologies were conveyed in the media coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles uprising in response to the verdict in the Rodney King case.¹³ Specifically focusing on *The Korean Times* (a daily Korean-language newspaper) and the *Los Angeles Sentinel* (a weekly African American-owned newspaper), Towmey found that both publications constructed news coverage that sought white validation and “thereby supporting the superior position of whites and reducing the possibility of any inter-ethnic alliance that might substantially challenge white hegemony.”¹⁴ Like Cooper and Martin’s study, this study also does not address how power elites played a role in constructing this ideology, but it does show how media outlets can maintain ideologies such as white hegemony.

It is clear that there is a wide variety of literature on the topic of media influence in American society, but much of this research focuses on individual reporters’ influence over ideologies. Current research largely fails to address how the political ideologies of the elite are represented in media sources. The question remains, do elite ideologies influence what is represented in opinion and editorial pieces of publications? Drawing primarily from Domhoff¹⁵ and Benediktsson,¹⁶ this paper contributes to our understanding of how elite interests impact the publications of media corporations in

¹² Ibid, 388.

¹³ Jane L. Twomey, 2001. “Newspaper Coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising: Race, Place, and the Story of the “Riot”: Racial Ideology in African American and Korean Newspapers”. *Race, Gender, and Class* 8, no. 4 (2001): 140-154. Accessed April 13, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41674999>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Domhoff.

¹⁶ Benediktsson.

modern America through analyzing interlocking directorate structures and political contributions data.

Data and Methods

Data

To study elite ideologies in the media, members of the board of directors were first identified from two large newspaper media corporations, *The New York Times* (NYT) and *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ). These media organizations were chosen because they are two national newspapers available for free to Creighton students, which signals their significance and broad availability. Since Domhoff defines power elites as the leadership group of the upper class that are “active working members of the upper class and high-level employees in profit and non-profit institutions controlled by members of the upper class...,”¹⁷ power elites in this study were considered to be all members of the board of directors for each news company. The sample from the NYT included all twelve board members listed on the company website¹⁸ (NYTco, n.d.). Sampling the board of the WSJ was more complicated due to the fact that it is owned by Dow Jones, whose parent company is News Corp. Given this ownership hierarchy, the sample from the WSJ consisted of the eleven board members of News Corp¹⁹ (News Corp, n.d.) and the CEO of Dow Jones (who is also publisher of the WSJ) (Dow Jones, n.d.),²⁰ for a total of twelve identified power elites. The small sample size of 24 power elites between the two corporations was necessary given the time constraints of this study, but it was the primary limitation of the study.

Methods

¹⁷ Domhoff, 7.

¹⁸ The New York Times Company. n.d. “Board of Directors.” The New York Times Company. Accessed May 1, 2020.

¹⁹ News Corp. n.d. “Board of Directors: News Corp.” News Corp. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://newscorp.com/corporate-governance/board-of-directors/>.

²⁰ Dow Jones. n.d. “William Lewis – CEO of Dow Jones.” Dow Jones. Accessed May 1, 2020.

Once a sample of directors was obtained from each organization, a brief profile of each board member was created through analyzing member biographies listed on the respective news organization’s website. Class and education backgrounds were not included in data analysis. Instead, these profiles were mainly used to identify interlocking directorate structures that exist among board members.²¹ This was done by recording how many board members currently served on the board of at least one other organization. The number of such interlocks was also included in the data and can be found in Table 1. To identify a board member’s political ideologies, the Donor Lookup feature on [opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org) was used to identify any campaigns, PACs, or SuperPACs that members had donated to.²² Open Secrets, run by the Center for Responsive Politics, is a non-profit, nonpartisan research group that compiles public disclosure data related to political influence. Since 1983, Open Secrets has been widely understood by researchers to be the most comprehensive and accessible way to track money and lobbying in American elections and public policy; it is important to note that using Open Secrets to track political contribution data is only one method of identifying political activity and ideology. Donations from the 2016, 2018, and 2020 election cycles were included in data analysis. The political party that benefited from donations was used as a measure to determine the political ideology of the power elite individuals (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Interlocking Directorates and Elite Political Ideologies

Media Org.	Measure	(F)	Percent
<i>NYT (NYT Board Members, n=12)</i>			
	Interlocking Directorates	6	50%
	# of additional boards		
	0	7	58.33%
	1	2	16.67%
	2	2	16.67%

²¹ NYTco, n.d.; News Corp, n.d.; Dow Jones, n.d.; Wall Street Journal Markets. n.d. “News Corp CI B.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/market-data/quotes/NWS/company-profile/executive-profile/29224>.

²² Open Secrets. 2020c “Open Secrets: Donor Lookup.” Center for Responsive Politics. Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.opensecrets.org/donor-lookup>.

4	1	8.33%
Donations to Political Orgs.	7	58.33%
Democrats (n=7)	5	71.43%
Republicans (n=7)	2	28.57%
Non-Partisans (n=7)	0	0%
<i>WSJ (News Corp. Board Members & WSJ CEO, n=12)</i>		
Interlocking Directorates	10	83.33%
# of additional boards		
0	2	16.67%
1	2	16.67%
2	2	16.67%
5	2	16.67%
6	1	8.33%
7	1	8.33%
10	1	8.33%
12	1	8.33%
Donations to Political Orgs.	5	41.67%
Democrats (n=5)	2	40%
Republicans (n=5)	2	40%
Non-Partisans (n=5)	1	20%

Notes: Data compiled from NYTco (n.d.), *WSJ Markets* (n.d.), News Corp. (n.d.), and “Donor Search” on [opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org) (2020c).

To compare the political ideologies of the power elite with the ideologies represented in the media organizations, All Sides’ Media Bias Ratings were used to determine the political ideology of each media source’s opinion and editorial publications.²³ These ratings of media bias are determined using All Sides’ patented, scientific, multi-partisan analysis technology and do not reflect the accuracy or credibility of the source. Media bias ratings of each the *NYT* and *WSJ* were then compared to the political ideologies identified in the power elite members of each organization to better understand the connection between elite ideologies and ideologies represented in the media source

This methodology allows for an analysis of both interlocking directorate structures and political ideologies between the power elite and their respective media corporations. However, the study is limited in the amount of data analyzed as contributions to federal campaigns is only one method of measuring political activity. Using a larger time frame of when political donations occurred and

²³ All Sides. 2019. “Media Bias Ratings.” (2019). <https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-ratings>.

incorporating additional indicators of political ideology (e.g. local elections, class background, educational background) into data analysis would create a more accurate understanding of individual political ideologies. The small sample of news media corporations and power elites also made it difficult to identify trends in political ideologies of power elites and news corporations. However, the findings from this study still provide insight into elite political ideologies, particularly in the relationship between elite ideologies and the ideologies that are published through their affiliated news organizations.

RESULTS

Interlocking Directorates

The analysis of interlocking directorates showed that various board members of both the *NYT* and *WSJ* also serve on the board of other companies. However, there is a slight difference in the frequency of this occurrence between the two companies. As displayed in Table 1., six out of twelve board members of the *NYT* are on the boards of other organizations, whereas ten out of the twelve *WSJ* board members (New Corp’s board of directors and the Dow Jones CEO/*WSJ* publisher) serve on additional boards (*NYTco* n.d.; *News Corp* n.d.; *WSJ Markets* n.d.). Both of these findings support Domhoff’s concept of interlocking directorates and social cohesion among members of the power elite.²⁴ The ten out of twelve power elites connected to the *WSJ* demonstrate this particularly well with the high number of members serving on multiple boards on. Furthermore, the high number of additional boards that members serve on, with the highest being twelve, also demonstrates strong social cohesion among the elite (see Table 2.).

Table 2. List of Interlocking Directorates by Organization

Media Org.	Other Boards Directors Also Serve On
<i>NYT</i>	Chewy, Inc. Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY Fomento Económico Mexicano Frontdoor, Inc.

²⁴ Domhoff.

GoDaddy, Inc.
GrubHub, Inc.
McDonalds
Mohonk Preserve
Nike
Teladoc, Inc.

WSJ

Afiniti Ltd.
BAE Systems, Inc.
Blackstone Group Management LLC
Blink Health LLC
Boston Properties LP
Boston Properties, Inc. (x2)
Caterpillar Inc.
Credit Suisse Group AG
Dia Art Foundation
Foundation for Excellence in Education
FOX Business Network
Fox Corp (x2)
Fox News Network LLC
Ghetto Film School, Inc.
Center for a New American Security
Harvard Lampoon
International Republican Institute
Kunumi Ai
McCain Institute for International Leadership
Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney
Naya (GP) Ltd.
Nova Entertainment Investments Ltd.
Nova Entertainment Pty Ltd.
REA Group Ltd.
Ruby NewCo LLC
Satmap, Inc.
Sky Global Holdings, Inc.
STAR Group Ltd.
StudentsFirstNY
Suzano Holding SA
Suzano SA
Swim With A Mission, Inc.
Teach for America, Inc.
Tesla, Inc.
The Blackstone Group, Inc.
The Children's Investment Fund Foundation (UK)
The One Campaign
The Paley Center for Media (x2)
The Partnership for New York City
TrueX, Inc.
Veteran Count
VICE Media LLC

VINCI SA
Stanford University Brazil Association
Wine Country Music Awards
Winning For Women, Inc.
Yankee Global Enterprises LLC
Yankees Entertainment & Sports Network LLC

Notes: Data compiled from NYTco (n.d.), *WSJ Markets* (n.d.), and News Corp. (n.d.).

As Domhoff further notes, several studies describe the 15-20% of board members who sit on two or more boards are referred to as the “inner circle,” which connects 80-90% of the largest corporations in the United States.²⁵ Data collected from the *WSJ* shows that 88.33% of corporate elites connected to the *WSJ* can be considered to be a part of the “inner circle”. These strong social ties may contribute to the formation of each member’s political ideology and thus, the influence they have in mass media. However, this paper does not contain the necessary data that would allow for this analysis. Future research should seek to further track and analyze this interlocking directorate.

Political Contributions

Data from the analysis of political contributions showed that a low number of power elites in the identified media organizations donated to political candidates and organizations. Seven board members from the *NYT* and five board members from the *WSJ* had data on [opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org) covering their political donations from the 2016, 2018, and 2020 election cycles.²⁶ Of the seven members of the *NYT* board, two members donated to Republican candidates/organizations and the other five donated to Democrat candidates/organizations. *WSJ* board members displayed a similar pattern to those associated with the *NYT*. Of the five *WSJ* elites who contributed to campaigns and political organizations, two donated to Republican candidates/organizations, two donated to Democrat candidates/organizations, and one donated to a Non-Partisan PAC. A breakdown of specific candidates and organizations that received these donations along with their political affiliation can be found in Table 3. Given these findings, the political elite of the *NYT* can be considered to have a leans left political ideology (with 71.43% of

²⁵ Domhoff.

²⁶ Open Secrets. 2020c

donations going to Democrats) and the *WSJ* can be considered to have a center focused political ideology (with 40% of donations going to Democrats and 40% going to Republicans).

Table 3. List of Donor Recipients from 2016, 2018, and 2020 Election Cycles

Media Org.	Recipient	Political Ideology
NYT (n=7)	Aguilar, Pete	D
	Allred, Collin	D
	Barragan, Nannette	D
	Bennet, Michael	D
	Biden, Joe (2020 Presidential)	D
	Black Economic Alliance (PAC)	D
	Buttigieg, Pete (2020 Presidential)	D
	Campa-Najjar, Ammar	D
	Chevron Corp. (PAC)	R
	Cisneros, Gil	D
	Clinton, Hillary (2016 Presidential)	D
	Congressional Black Congress (PAC)	D
	Congressional Leadership Fund	R
	Fletcher, Lizzie	D
	Hegar, MJ	D
	Jones, Doug	D
	Kopser, Joseph	D
	Lance, Leonard	R
	Lieu, Ted	R
	Malinowski, Tom	D
	O'Rourke, Beto	D
	Off the Sidelines (PAC)	D
	Fair Fight PAC	D
	Porter, Katie	D
	Progressive Change Campaign Cmte	D
	Ramirez, Cristina Tzintzun	D
	Rouda, Harley	D
	Sanchez, Loretta	D
	Sherman, Brad	D
	Young, Tammy	D
	WSJ (n=5)	21 st Century Fox PAC (FOX PAC II)
Ayotte, Kelly		R
Buttigieg, Pete (2020 Presidential)		D
Citizens for Responsible Energy Solutions (PAC)		R
Clinton, Hillary (2016 Presidential)		D
Democratic Senatorial Campaign Cmte		D
DNC Services Corp		D
Donnelly, Joe		D
Franken, Michael		D
Graham, Lindsey		R

Heitkamp, Heidi	D
Hickenlooper, John	D
Manchin, Joe	D
McCaskill, Claire	D
Morelle, Joseph	D
Murphy, Patrick	D
Nelson, Bill	D
New Day Independent Media Cmte (SuperPAC)	R
News Corp PAC	-
Paul, Ran	R
Tester, Jon	D
United Together (Super PAC)	D
Democratic Parties in 36 Different States*	D

*All Donations made by a single board member– states include: DE, MA, MN, TX, OK, ID, IA, MS, NH, PA, MI, ME, NJ, KY, SC, TN, WI, OR, FL, MT, SD, VA, NC, WY, UT, LA, AK, RI, MO, NV, OH, NM, AR, CO, GA, IN

Notes: Data compiled from “Donor Search” on [opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org) (2020c).

Additionally, there are some more interesting findings surrounding donation recipients of the *WSJ* that are worth noting. The most important of these to point out are the News Corp PAC, owner of Dow Jones and the *WSJ*, and the 21st Century Fox PAC, News Corp’s previous sister company.²⁷ These PACs are directly associated with the company that owns the *WSJ*, are not affiliated with a political party, and have donated to both Republicans and Democrats. A summary of the funding distribution of the News Corp PAC and the 21st Century Fox PAC for the 2016, 2018, and 2020 election cycles can be found in Table 4. Also of note in the *WSJ* elite donation recipients is Kelly Ayotte (R). Further investigation showed that two donations were made to Ayotte in the 2016 election cycle by Rupert Murdoch, the media mogul and Chairman of News Corp and Co-Chairman of Fox Corp.²⁸ This particular donation is interesting given that Ayotte is also a member of the News Corp board of directors.²⁹ Further investigation of Ayotte’s political ideology may provide deeper

²⁷ Open Secrets. 2020a. “21st Century FOX Summary.” Center for Responsive Politics. Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.opensecrets.org/pacs/lookup2.php?strID=C00330019&cycle=2020>; Open Secrets. 2020b. “News Corp Summary.” Center for Responsive Politics. Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.opensecrets.org/pacs/lookup2.php?strID=C00546101>.

²⁸ Open Secrets. 2020c.

²⁹ News Corp, n.d.; *WSJ* Markets, n.d.

insight into how her role on the board shapes the ideologies represented in the *WSJ*.

Table 4. Distribution of Funding for News Corp PAC and 21st Century Fox. PAC

PAC	2016	2018	2020
FOX Corp. PAC	D 39%	D 52%	D 45%
	R 61%	R 48%	R 55%
News Corp. PAC	D 62%	D 56%	D 61%
	R 38%	R 44%	R 39%

Notes: Data Compiled from “21st Century Fox Summary” and “News Corp Summary” on [opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org) (2020a; 2020b).

Elite ideologies in relation to general media ideologies.

Analysis of All Sides’ Media Bias Ratings placed *The New York Times – Opinion* in the “left” category and placed *The Wall Street Journal - Opinion* in the “leans right” category.³⁰ The left leaning *NYT* rating is similar to the ideologies of its board members in that of the directors who had donated, 71.43%. contributed to candidates/organizations in support of Democrats.³¹ The *WSJ*’s leans right rating is not as similar to their directors’ ideologies – 40% of directors who donated contributed to Republican candidates/organizations, 40% donated to Democrat candidates/organizations, and 10% donated to Non-Partisan candidates/organizations. However, The News Corp and 21st Century Fox PACs suggest that the elites connected to the *WSJ* may have somewhat similar ideologies to the newspaper’s opinion and editorial publications, given the PACs distribution of funding between both Republicans and Democrats. Two of the News Corp board members donated to either the News Corp PAC or the 21st Century Fox PAC. Overall, these results show that elite ideologies may be present in the opinion and editorial publications of the *NYT*, but further analysis is needed to show more conclusive results for the *WSJ*.

³⁰ All Sides.

³¹ Open Secrets. 2020c.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that the political ideologies of the power elite in media corporations sometimes reflect the ideologies represented in the affiliated publications. Data gathered from the *NYT* suggests that political ideologies of the power elite and the organization's opinion and editorial publications both lean left/Democratic. On the other hand, the *WSJ* elite ideologies are more center/mixed than the paper's opinion and editorial publications which are rated as leaning right/Republican. Additionally, data gathered on the interlocking directorates of board members of the *NYT* and *WSJ* support Domhoff's theory on interlocking directorates. Further analysis of these interlocking directorate structures may help explain the political ideologies of the power elite and thus, their influence in media. Future studies should also consider conducting qualitative research (such as interviews) with members of the power elite to gain better insight into their political ideologies. Sociological research often focuses on the lower end of the social hierarchy but exploring the upper end of the hierarchy is necessary for understanding the system as a whole. In the current argumentative political climate of the United States, it is important to understand how the political ideologies of the American elite influence (or are influenced) by the media.

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