

Neoliberalism, Media Hegemony, and Socio-Cultural Change: A Political Economy Analysis

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Original Article

Abstract

Background and Aim: Adopting a critical-analytical approach within the framework of the political economy of communication, this article examines the neoliberal project of social change, with a specific focus on media and cultural transformations. It investigates how neoliberal mechanisms alter the social fabric by capturing and dominating the realm of meaning production.

Data and Method: This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) integrated with a political economy framework to deconstruct the mechanisms of neoliberal social change. Data were gathered through a purposeful sampling of foundational and contemporary scholarly literature, institutional reports, and theoretical texts on cultural industries and media systems.

Findings: The analysis reveals a tripartite mechanism (economic, structural, and discursive) driving a self-reinforcing "economic silence cycle," where market deregulation facilitates media monopolization, leading to the commodification of cultural meaning. This cycle leads to institutional metamorphosis—subverting media into entertainment and transforming art into a mere commodity—consequently eroding the public sphere and threatening cultural diversity. The ultimate consequence of this process is a profound shift in the social fabric, characterized by weakened social solidarity and reduced diversity.

Conclusion: The study concludes that breaking this vicious cycle requires simultaneous, strategic action on three fronts: economic (promoting non-profit models), structural (enforcing anti-monopoly legislation), and discursive (redefining the public interest). Consequently, rethinking cultural-media policies emerges as an indispensable necessity for preserving collective cohesion.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Social change, Commodification of culture, Political economy, Media monopoly.

Key Message: This study argues that neoliberalism drives profound social change by transforming media and culture into instruments of market logic. Through this vicious cycle of commodification, monopoly, and the naturalization of discourse, Neoliberalism progressively erodes the public sphere, threatens cultural diversity, and undermines foundational social solidarity.

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Introduction

As the dominant paradigm of the past four decades, neoliberalism—with its core emphasis on market liberalization, privatization, and the reduction of state intervention—has brought about fundamental transformations. These shifts extend beyond the media to the entire landscape of cultural and artistic production, distribution, and consumption (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). While neoliberal discourse claims to expand media freedom and foster artistic creativity through market competition, critical scholars argue that, in practice, this paradigm leads to the systematic negation of freedom, the subjugation of art and culture, and social changes dictated primarily by the logic of capital accumulation and profit maximization (McChesney, 1999, p. 15).

Proponents of neoliberalism argue that the state should merely guarantee monetary stability and private property rights so that the market, as a self-generating and self-regulating institution, can efficiently allocate economic resources alongside cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Mammadov & Hasanov, 2016, p. 293; Hayek, 1944/2007, pp. 36-38). Within this framework, neoliberalism emerged largely as a concerted effort to remove interventionist state apparatuses from the economy. This was driven by the premise that state intervention stifles competitive markets and prevents the equitable distribution of wealth across social strata (Harrison, 2005, p. 1330). Furthermore, advocates contend that free trade, operating in the absence of state interference, ensures that any nation—particularly within the cultural and media spheres—can effectively compete in the global marketplace (Arndt & Richardson, 1987, p. 12). From this perspective, neoliberalism inherently prioritizes individualism, individual rights, free choice, civil liberties, and democratic accountability (Kasongo, 2005, p. 11).

Conversely, critics argue that this proclaimed "freedom" is inherently reductive and constrained. Neoliberalism separates the individual from their socio-historical context, defining freedom within this atomized gap (De Lissovoy, 2015, p. 52). By naturalizing its own logic, this paradigm renders alternative perspectives seemingly impossible, presenting itself as the only viable formula for governing society, the economy, and the cultural sphere (Mulligan, 2021, p. 80). Critics often invoke Marx's critique of capitalist liberties: "Freedom is liberation from constraints, not freedom within limitation. This type of freedom, favored by capitalism, causes the growth of capital because, under the banner of individual freedom, it fosters competition for acquiring capital. Thus, it is not individuals who become free in free competition, but rather capital that becomes free" (Marx, 1973, p. 650).

Examining this fundamental contradiction forms the core of the present research. While neoliberalism promotes the deregulation of society, media, and cultural industries under the banner of defending freedom and creativity, in practice it fosters monopolistic structures that severely limit both content diversity and social plurality, as well as the multiplicity of artistic and cultural discourses (Bagdikian, 2004, p. 45). In this process, the social and cultural spheres undergo systemic engineering, transforming into technical mechanisms dedicated to marketing and attention capture (van Dijck, 2013, p. 12). Because media must fulfil their social responsibility while balancing this duty with freedom (Richards, 2005, p. 10), delineating a precise boundary in this regard is critical; failing to do so inevitably causes a deviation from the media's democratic duties. For instance, contemporary geopolitical critiques suggest that even regional media, such as the Arab media system, remain historically influenced by colonialism, with major news infrastructure still tethered to Western frameworks (Mellor, 2005, p. 50). In this regard, the neoliberal system has developed a new structure within informational capitalism, wherein the media plays an important role in the collection of information in order to generate wealth (Castells, 2023, Vol. 3, p. 407). Virtual spaces and digital mass communication are also used as primary instruments in this regard (Goudarzi, 2024, p. 36). Under this commercialized framework, the holistic dimensions of well-being—including mental, spiritual, and social health—are also marginalized. Rather than addressing critical social anxieties like workplace alienation and psychological distress, the media system perpetuates these structural vulnerabilities by transforming them into mere objects of attention-capture rather than subjects for genuine social reform (Seddighi, 2024, p. 430)

Consequently, the transformations of the last four decades across various social arenas signal the occurrence of profound social change driven by the dominant neoliberal paradigm. This shift is not confined to macroeconomic structures; it has radically transformed the symbolic, communicative, and cultural life of the community. Therefore, the central question of this article is: How do the mechanisms of neoliberalism, through transformations in the realm of media and culture, lead to social change in contemporary societies, and what are the structural consequences of this change?

Literature Review and Theoretical Considerations

In the international literature, previous scholarship on the intersection of neoliberalism, media, and culture can be categorized into three interrelated domains. In his classic work, Harvey (2005) analyzes neoliberalism not as a neutral economic theory but as a political project for the reconsolidation of class power. This analysis provides a foundational

framework for understanding how this paradigm operates in specific spheres such as media and culture; in essence, he offers a fundamental critique of neoliberalism.

A significant number of researchers have addressed the impact of neoliberalism on the media landscape. McChesney (1999) demonstrated how the intrinsic link between neoliberal deregulation and the creation of media monopolies undermines the foundations of democracy. Fuchs (2014) and Zuboff (2019) have extended this analysis into the digital age, examining new mechanisms of subjugation, such as surveillance capitalism and data extraction, that violate media independence. This body of research focuses specifically on the critical relationship between neoliberalism and the media.

At the same time, important research has examined the consequences of neoliberalism for culture and the arts. Hesmondhalgh (2019), in analyzing the "cultural industries," shows how the logic of mergers and ownership concentration has become dominant not only in news media but also in sectors such as music, film, and publishing, thereby threatening expressive diversity. McRobbie (2016) focuses on the conditions of "cultural work" in the neoliberal economy, demonstrating how the ideology of "individual entrepreneurship" pushes artists and cultural producers toward job insecurity and destructive competition. Yúdice (2003) also argues that within this paradigm, culture is reduced to a "resource" for economic development or a tool for urban marketing, losing its intrinsic and critical value. This body of research falls under the critique of the relationship between neoliberalism and culture. In the meantime, the perspectives of Castells (2023) warrant closer examination. He posits that in the contemporary era, the Internet serves as a platform for toxic communication that favors specific political groups, who have essentially made the network available to the public for this purpose, using it as a strategic tool. In this regard, Han (2019) similarly argues that individuals voluntarily surrender their freedom by "liking" and providing their personal data to the neoliberal system. He maintains that the neoliberal order operates as a system of "likes," thereby dominating individuals and compromising their freedom.

Among Iranian studies, valuable research examining various aspects of this issue can be cited. Goudarzi (2024), by analyzing the Instagram platform, describes it as a technology complementary to the neoliberal order, which, while disseminating market discourse, also contains possibilities for minor forms of resistance. Taham and Amiri (2024) have addressed neoliberal mechanisms for constructing consumerist subjects within digital marketing networks. Monazah and Najafzadeh (2023) have also demonstrated the devastating consequences of structural adjustment policies in a regional context (Iraq), providing an empirical example of this paradigm's macro-level effects on the socio-economic fabric of societies. Niazi and Goudarzi (2023) observe that the media exerts a significant influence on

the lifestyle of Iranians, characterizing this impact as moderate-to-high; therefore, paying close attention to media dynamics remains critical. Furthermore, Rouhani (2021) argues that neoliberalism in mass communication and media representation, although rhetorically championing support for minorities, ultimately serves the capitalist system and operates primarily in the interests of a specific elite minority.

This rich body of literature indicates that although valuable studies have separately critiqued neoliberalism in the spheres of media, economy, politics, and culture, a systematic and integrated analysis has received less attention—specifically, one that demonstrates how the identical economic, structural, and discursive mechanisms of neoliberalism simultaneously target media freedom and the autonomy of the cultural and artistic sphere, and, consequently, drive structural transformations in the social fabric of diverse societies. Drawing on the framework of the political economy of communication and presenting a three-layered analytical model (economic, structural, and discursive), the present research seeks to fill this gap. This article argues that these three layers do not operate in isolation but, through dialectical interaction, form a "vicious cycle of social change." The primary objective is to delineate a coherent causal chain illustrating how the neoliberal project, through the co-optation of the spheres of meaning production (media and culture), leads to profound shifts in the fabric of social relations and collective identities.

Methods and Data

This study aims to analyze the causes and consequences of social change resulting from neoliberalism, grounded in the fundamental transformation of media and culture. It employs a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and informed by critical social theory and the political economy of communication. The purpose of the research is to explain the mechanisms through which neoliberalism contributes to social change by transforming media and cultural institutions. Data were collected through documentary analysis of relevant scholarly literature, including books, journal articles, and theoretical works addressing neoliberalism, media systems, cultural industries, and social transformation. The analysis focused on identifying recurring discursive patterns, institutional logics, and structural mechanisms through which neoliberal rationality reshapes cultural production, media ownership, and public communication, with the required data extracted from four distinct layers of sources:

- **a) Foundational Theoretical Texts:** Examining the works of classical and contemporary neoliberal theorists (such as Hayek) and their critics (such as Harvey) to identify the ideological and paradigmatic causes of change.

- **b) Policy and Economic Reports:** Citing reports from international institutions, deregulation laws, and statistics on ownership and revenue in the media and cultural industries (such as Noam, 2019) to trace structural causes and mechanisms.
- **c) Critical Media and Cultural Studies:** Drawing on reputable research in the political economy of communication (such as McChesney and Fuchs) and in neoliberal cultural studies (such as Hesmondhalgh and McRobbie) to identify operational mechanisms and consequences.
- **d) Empirical Evidence:** Objective data, such as ownership concentration statistics, platform revenue models, and case studies on content effects (e.g., reduced coverage of specific topics), serve as exemplifications of the analytical findings. The approach to this evidence has been interpretive, providing a deeper explanation of macro processes.

The central argument of this study is that the observed change is neither accidental nor gradual; rather, it is the direct result of the deliberate implementation of a policy package that, through specific mechanisms, has produced predictable (and often anti-democratic) consequences in the realm of media and culture. This process has led to unintended changes across various societies, diverting them from their principal trajectories toward a direction desired by neoliberal hegemony.

The criteria for selecting sources were, first, direct relevance to neoliberalism, media, and cultural changes; second, publication of scientific findings within the last 20 years for foreign sources and within the last 10 years for domestic sources; and third, adherence to valid scientific referencing and publication in reputable journals or academic publications.

The analytical method also draws on critical discourse analysis to identify how neoliberal values and norms are reproduced in the media (Mandiberg, 2012; van Dijck, 2013). Additionally, the structural analysis examines the concentration of ownership, revenue models, and platform rules, as well as their impact on content production. Finally, the economic analysis examines the commodification of data and revenue and its subsequent impact on media content and culture.

It is worth noting that the simultaneous use of theoretical sources, official reports, and empirical data enables robust data triangulation and thereby increases the construct validity of the research. The three-layer framework of analysis clarifies the cause-and-effect relationship among neoliberalism, media, and social change.

Accordingly, this article seeks to demonstrate, through a three-layered analytical model (economic, structural, discursive), how a defective cycle of social change is formed—a cycle in which commodification leads to ownership concentration, ownership concentration constructs the dominant discourse, and this discourse provides the legitimacy needed to sustain commodifying policies. The structural outcome of this cycle is the transformation and hollowing out of rich, diverse cultures into the homogenized culture desired by neoliberalism, namely consumerism. Therefore, understanding this cycle and its multifaceted consequences is essential to envisioning an alternative paradigm and taking concrete action to reconstruct media and cultural spheres based on the principles of democracy, plurality, and the public interest.

Ultimately, the central question of this research is: How do the mechanisms of neoliberalism, through media and cultural transformation, lead to social change in contemporary societies, and what are the most significant consequences of this change?

Findings

The findings of this research, derived from the analysis of documents and dominant discourse within the political economy framework, indicate that the observed changes in the realm of media and culture are neither accidental nor isolated; rather, they constitute a systematic chain of causes, mechanisms, and consequences. This chain can be delineated at the following macro levels:

1. The Ideological Cause: Neoliberalism and the Reduction of Freedom

The central pole of freedom in neoliberal thought is Friedrich von Hayek. In 1974, he jointly received the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences with Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish socialist economist. He advocated individualism and free markets and was a staunch critic of socialism and interventionist economic policies. In his view, alongside neoliberal globalization, nation-states have been weakened while the influence of international institutions and multinational corporations has increased (Küçük, 2024, p. 1325). Hayek defines freedom primarily as the "absence of coercion":

"We are concerned with that condition of men in which coercion of some by others is reduced as much as is possible in society. This state we shall describe throughout as a state of liberty or freedom" (Hayek, 1960/2011, p. 57).

He specifically locates the ultimate manifestation of this freedom in the economic domain, asserting that "the fundamental moment of freedom in contemporary society lies in the

economic sphere" and linking the growth of trade to the deepening of freedom in modernity (Hayek, 1944/2007, p. 70). Ultimately, this definition extends so far as to accept even severe adverse consequences as part of the price of freedom: "To be free may mean freedom to starve, to make costly mistakes, or to run mortal risks" (Hayek, 1960/2011, p. 69).

According to Hayek, natural selection operates on group order throughout cultural evolution. Selection indirectly influences traits that may be acquired, as members' adherence to rules partly determines order. Imitation, unlike natural selection, is the primary process through which cultures evolve. The mechanism of imitation holds that individuals either move from lower-income organizations or join more prosperous groups or follow their rules and traditions (Vanberg, 1986, p. 85). Therefore, group selection is the sole basis for cultural change (Hayek, 1984, p. 318).

Mises also launched extensive attacks on planned socialist economics (Mises, 1981, p. 475). He opposed Karl Marx's ideas of a collectivist economy, arguing that "anyone who wishes society to exist and develop must accept private ownership of the means of production without restriction" (Gane, 2014, p. 1093). Another thinker with a significant perspective is Nozick. He emphasizes individual freedom, believing that individuals have inalienable rights and that "there are things that no individual or group can do to them (without violating their rights)" (Nozick, 1974, p. ix). In his view, there is a minimal role for the state and a wide scope for voluntary consent and agreement between individuals (Scanlon, 1976, p. 3). An individual can choose to allow another to do anything to them, unless they have a prior commitment to a third party not to do or allow it (Nozick, 1974, p. 98).

This conception of freedom has two fundamental consequences for the sphere of culture and art, and, subsequently, for profound changes in society. First, by reducing freedom to economic freedom, the cultural sphere inevitably becomes subject to the same logic that governs the commodity market. Within this framework, the value of an artistic or cultural work is increasingly defined by its exchange value and profitability in the market, rather than by its aesthetic, critical, or identity-forming value. Second, the extreme individual responsibility implied by Hayek's definition (freedom even to starve) creates conditions of structural insecurity for cultural producers and artists, and ultimately for the target domain, which is society itself. In this situation, the economic failure of an artist or an independent publisher is considered not as a sign of market structure failure or the need for support for public cultural goods, but as the natural consequence of individual "unsuccessful choices" and a failure to adapt to "market competition." This discourse delegitimizes public support policies for art and culture (such as subsidies, support for non-profit institutions, and public

media) by presenting them as a form of "coercion" and a violation of market freedom. Consequently, a space is created in which only those cultural productions that are either highly profitable or can compete in the attention market with the help of major advertising capital have a chance of survival and visibility. This leads to the systematic marginalization of genres, themes, languages, and cultural voices that are non-commercial yet vital for societal plurality and social health.

2. Neoliberalism and the Operational Mechanisms of Change

Policies grounded in these intellectual foundations have advanced objective changes in the realm of media and culture through three interconnected mechanisms; together, these three mechanisms form the model of the "economic silence cycle." Therefore, it must be noted that these mechanisms are themselves the direct causes of the current situation:

2-1. Economic Mechanism: Radical Commodification

Srnicek argues that late capitalism is focused on a specific type of material called "data." This data serves some of the fundamental functions of capitalism (Srnicek, 2021, p. 50). Platforms offer new forms of competition and control, but profitability ultimately remains the best measure of success (Srnicek, 2021, p. 122). Clemons predicted in 2009 that advertising could no longer serve as the primary revenue source for internet companies (Clemons, 2009, p. 16). Thus, in the dominant financial model, more than half of digital media revenue comes not from audience support for valuable content production but from the sale of user data (Simchon et al., 2024, p. 35).

For example, one can refer to Facebook, one of the world's most prominent social networks. Facebook reported that advertising revenue accounted for 88% of the company's total revenue in the second quarter of 2013 (Melanson, 2013), increasing to 93% in the fourth quarter of 2014. This revenue growth coincided with the introduction of new advertising rules, which prompted this mass communication medium to significantly update its terms and data policies. Users had to accept these changes to continue using the service. These changes helped Facebook become more efficient in online behavioral advertising by automatically collecting user information from various websites through cookies.

User-related advertising is the more common type today. It is a form of targeted advertising that uses user data to personalize displayed ads with the aim of increasing click-through and conversion rates. This includes elements of user data (e.g., language and location), browser history (via cookies stored in browsers), and social media activities (Bühler et al, 2015, p. 186). All these social media-related activities are tracked, recorded, and logged in a social

graph that provides relevant data to advertisers. This directly affects content; for instance, media outlets on average devote 40% less coverage to important but non-profitable topics such as the environment (Baker, 2007, p. 156). That is, neoliberal policy, using the tool of media, takes control of societal sensitivity and, based on user information, charts a course against the users themselves to determine in which cases they should react and in which they should remain silent. In other words, changes in society are based on corporate benefit and needs, not the true will of society. Today, it seems that nothing exists outside the utilitarian logic of neoliberalism, all areas have failed against neoliberal values, and the space of resistance has become quite noticeably fragile (Goudarzi & Niazi, 2024, p.590).

2-2. Structural Mechanism: Ownership Concentration and Monopolization

By imposing market logic on media, neoliberalism has fundamentally transformed the nature and function of media by prioritizing the "exchange value" over the "use value" of information (Fuchs, 2014, p. 112). This transformation is evident in the following objective evidence: structural monopoly (ownership concentration), changes in financial models (data commodification), and the adaptation of content to profit logic. On the one hand, contrary to the slogan of free competition, the very nature of neoliberalism has led to a decrease in independent owners (a 25% reduction from 1980 to 2020) and the concentration of media power in the hands of a few mega-corporations (e.g., control of 85% of U.S. content by six companies) (Noam, 2019, p. 127). This structural monopoly limits the diversity of perspectives and voices and imposes changes desired by a specific group onto society. As Freedman notes, media policymaking in the neoliberal order should be seen as a political and ideological process influenced by the invisible lobbying of large corporations, not as neutral actions serving the public interest (Freedman, 2014, pp. 12-13).

2-3. Discursive Mechanism: Naturalization, Internalization, and Hegemony

Globalized platforms like Facebook are not neutral carriers of culture while facilitating communication. They are both the product and promoters of a specific cultural model—primarily American—that emphasizes individualism, consumption, and personalized entertainment, and they seek to expand their cultural-ideological sphere of influence (Jakubowski, 2020, p. 155). This implies that what these media portray is natural, and anything contrary is unnatural and heterogeneous; thus, even local media become subject to the will of neoliberalism, presenting content aligned with that policy to their audiences, who are often in traditional societies, and wittingly or unwittingly leading to societal change.

3. An Integrated Model: The "Economic Silence Cycle"

The term "social media" has been associated with hopeful concepts such as "user-generated content," "participatory culture," and the empowerment of "people who were previously considered merely passive audiences" (Mandiberg, 2012, p. 2). In this idealism, the mission of these platforms was imagined as providing a ground for free communication, collective creativity, and civic activism, outside of traditional institutional frameworks and centralized direction (Shirky, 2008, p. 20). This promise seemed particularly hopeful in the realm of culture and art: any artist, musician, filmmaker, or writer could share their work directly with the world at minimal cost and be seen or heard. The traditional gatekeepers of the cultural industries (major publishers, studios, reputable galleries) no longer held a monopoly on discovering and distributing talent.

These three apparent features (ease of use, facilitation of collective communication, and free access to publishing tools) painted a picture of a spontaneous and equal cultural democracy (Lovink, 2011, p. 5). When people share content on "spreadable" media, the potential to see and be seen becomes available to all. Thus, "many such videos quickly go 'viral' and attract millions of views" (Baym & boyd, 2012, p. 321).

The interaction of the above mechanisms produces a cyclical pattern of social change that both sustains the status quo and intensifies its ultimate consequence. This pattern, in the form of the "economic silence cycle," operates at the micro level as follows: editors and producers evaluate topics and projects based on profitability criteria. Therefore, the reactions of investors, advertisers, and mass audiences (as reflected in algorithmic data) are predicted. Subsequently, complex, critical, non-commercial, or minority-culture topics (such as local community cultures) are set aside as "economic risks," resulting in an increased volume of entertainment-focused, apolitical content aligned with the dominant discourse. Finally, the elimination of alternative voices strengthens the dominant discourse, and that discourse provides the necessary legitimacy for the continuation of the same economic, political, social, and cultural policies. In general, the findings corroborate the proposition that neoliberal social change in media and culture originates from an ideological cause (the reduction of freedom), is driven by three economic, structural, and discursive mechanisms, and is ultimately solidified in the form of a self-reinforcing vicious cycle.

The findings of this research reveal a clear chain of ideological causes, operational mechanisms, and social consequences within the neoliberal project of social change. The following discussion aims to elaborate on the theoretical implications of these findings and to

analyze the complexity of this transformative process across several key axes. This discussion is organized around the following core themes.

4. Inherent Contradiction as the Driver of Change: From Formal Freedom to Structural Coercion

A central point in analyzing neoliberal social change is recognizing that the contradiction between the discourse of freedom and monopolistic practices is not an executive error but an inherent characteristic and the primary driver of this project. By defining freedom merely as the "absence of direct state coercion," neoliberalism effectively creates a space in which indirect, structural market coercion becomes the most potent ordering force (De Lissovoy, 2015). This shift from "freedom from the state" to "freedom within the market" marks a paradigmatic change in the sources of social authority. Authority is transferred from (albeit imperfect) democratic political institutions to unaccountable economic institutions.

Consequently, outcomes such as the marginalization of independent voices are not accidental violations of ideals but the logical result of this displacement of authority and rationality. Within this framework, media freedom is reduced to "the freedom of media enterprises to compete in the market," even though this competition—due to its networked nature and high capital requirements—inevitably culminates in monopoly. Thus, the promise of "plurality through the market" in practice results in the production of "pseudo-plurality"—a multitude of channels and platforms offering content that is essentially uniform and aligned with the dominant profit logic. By eliminating genuine competitors, this system ultimately replaces competition over ideas with competition for attention, thereby depriving society of substantive freedom and initiating a gradual process of social and communal change.

5. The Tripartite Mechanisms: Interconnected Engines of Change

The identified mechanisms (economic, structural, and discursive) do not operate linearly; rather, they function in a dialectical, simultaneous relationship, forming an integrated system of change. The first layer, the economic dimension (commodification), constitutes the necessary condition for material change. This layer alters the "rules of the game" and redefines success through purely monetary criteria. This shift in operational rules directly catalyzes the transformation of motivations among both individual and institutional actors.

The subsequent layer, the structural dimension (monopoly), is both the inevitable consequence and an intensifier of the economic layer. This layer constructs a new institutional framework in which the socio-economic cost of resisting profit logic (e.g., producing critical content) is structurally prohibitive. By controlling distribution channels, monopoly secures

the power of discursive selection. Finally, the discursive layer (naturalization) serves to legitimize and conceal, rendering the outcomes of the two previous layers rational and inevitable. For instance, when concepts such as the "cultural entrepreneur" permeate the dominant discourse, the job insecurity of an artist is framed not as a structural failure but as an opportunity for self-actualization and market validation. At this juncture, change occurs at the level of subjectivities and social norms, rendering the system immune to systemic critique.

The consequences of this process extend beyond industrial transformations, deeply altering the symbolic fabric of society. When culture and art—the primary spheres for producing meaning, collective memory, and social critique—are reduced to mere commodities, several profound social transformations occur:

- **a) The redefinition of value:** aesthetic and social criteria are replaced by market metrics such as sales, clicks, and instant fame;
- **b) The individualization of responsibility:** the failure of a cultural project is attributed to "individual inefficiency," leaving the inequitable structures of resource and attention distribution invisible; and
- **c) The erosion of the public sphere:** the space for critical, reason-based dialogue degenerates into a marketplace of transient, personalized emotions, severely weakening its capacity to generate consensus or critique power. This directly erodes the social capital rooted in trust and shared dialogue.

6. The "Economic Silence Cycle": An Operational and Self-Reinforcing Model of Change

The "economic silence cycle" model introduced in the findings is not merely descriptive of a situation but rather an objectified, micro-level model of the macro logic underpinning neoliberal social change. This cycle shows how macroeconomic (first layer) and structural (second layer) pressures are translated into the daily actions and seemingly autonomous choices of editors, producers, and artists. In this model, economic self-censorship functions as an invisible disciplinary mechanism that, through anticipation of market reactions, compels actors into preemptive conformity.

This process obviates the need for the direct application of sovereign force; power is embedded within the economic system itself and internalized in actors' mindsets. From this perspective, the diminished coverage of critical but low-audience topics (such as environmental crises or experimental arts) is a systematic and entirely predictable outcome of this cycle. Neoliberal social change is a profoundly structure-building and identity-erasing

project. By seizing the tools for producing and circulating meaning (media and culture), this project transforms not only economic relations but also our very epistemologies of society, success, and the good life.

Understanding this multi-layered mechanism is essential to reclaiming political and social imagination. Breaking this vicious cycle requires bold, simultaneous interventions at the three identified levels: establishing nonprofit and cooperative economic spaces for cultural production; enacting and enforcing radical anti-monopoly and transparency laws tailored to the digital age; and, most importantly, engaging in the cultural work of reclaiming language and rationality from the stranglehold of totalizing market metaphors. Only through such a comprehensive approach can the groundwork be laid for an alternative trajectory of social change—one oriented toward plurality, equality, and the deepening of democracy.

7. Consequences of Change: From Institutional Transformation to Social Erosion

The systematic consequences identified in this research can be analyzed as distinct layers of an integrated process of social change that begins with the transformation of institutions and proceeds to the deepest layers of collective life and individual consciousness.

7-1. Institutional Metamorphosis and Change in Social Function

At the institutional level, neoliberal logic, by altering the structural "rules of the game," fundamentally transforms the nature and primary mission of cultural and media institutions. On one hand, the media is transfigured from a "fourth estate" into an "entertainment-information industry," whereby its critical watchdog and radical functions—historically serving as mechanisms for critiquing power and promoting public enlightenment—are severely diminished under the hegemony of profit-driven logic. Within this market-centric framework, the "audience" is reduced to a "customer" and "news" to a "commercial product." Priority is assigned to maximizing public attention and generating content that either maximizes advertising revenue—which is predominantly entertaining, emotionally provocative, and intellectually unchallenging—or minimizes operational costs and financial risks for owners and investors. Consequently, this leads to the gradual elimination of resource-intensive yet vital genres, such as in-depth investigative journalism, complex social documentaries, and independent political analysis. This structural shift ultimately reconfigures the media from an active agent in cultivating an informed citizenry into a passive provider of cultural fodder for consumers, thereby inducing profound structural alterations within society.

On the other hand, art is reconfigured from a vehicle of "expression and critique" into a "symbolic commodity." Within this paradigm, the intrinsic value of an artwork—namely, its capacity to interrogate reality, articulate collective suffering or hope, and enrich the symbolic life of society—is systematically overshadowed by its "market value." Under these conditions, "successful" art is defined primarily by its ability to command premium prices at auctions or function as a luxury asset and a signifier of class distinction. This commercialization leads to the systematic marginalization of conceptual, critical, indigenous, and non-commercial artistic expressions. Concurrently, artists are compelled to recontextualize their professional identity, shifting from public intellectuals to "self-employed entrepreneurs" and managers of their "personal brand," whose viability depends heavily on aligning with volatile market tastes and digital platform algorithms. Ultimately, this apparatus reshapes collective tastes and desires, steering societal consciousness in a deliberately planned direction

7-2. Social Erosion and Identity Fracture

Changes in institutions directly impact the quality of social relations and the structure of collective identities. In critical theory, the public sphere is conceived as a rational-dialogical space for the formation of public opinion, independent of both state intervention and market forces; however, the collapse of this sphere and its replacement by a "space of communicative consumption" demonstrate how neoliberal mechanisms systematically evacuate this domain. Commercialized media have no structural incentive to host complex, polyphonic debates. Concurrently, digital platforms, driven by hyper-personalized algorithms, confine users within "echo chambers" where they primarily encounter like-minded perspectives and ideologically homogeneous content. Consequently, this induces a fragmentation of society into isolated ideological enclaves, intensifying polarization and severely diminishing the capacity for cross-cleavage dialogue and collective problem-solving. This trajectory ultimately signifies a profound erosion of social capital, which is fundamentally predicated on generalized trust and mutual understanding.

Furthermore, non-dominant, minority, or localized cultures—such as Kurdish culture and other indigenous cultures—confronting the pressures of globalization—experience a potent hegemonic onslaught that precipitates a precarious paradox of survival. On the one hand, the dominant global discourse pressures them toward cultural homogenisation and dissolution into the mainstream consumerist current. On the other hand, monopolistic distribution structures systematically deny them equitable access to institutional resources and mass audiences, thereby condemning them to isolation within localized cultural ghettos of limited reach. Even when attempting to preserve their distinct identities, these communities are often

compelled to commodify their heritage, marketing cultural alterity as a unique "ethnic commodity" within the global cultural marketplace—a process that constitutes a secondary layer of commodification and symbolic exploitation. This dynamic not only jeopardizes global cultural diversity but also fundamentally violates the right of marginalized groups to participate equitably in the production and consumption of societal meaning.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study, aligned with the theoretical frameworks of Richards (2005), Castells (2023), and Han (2019), posits that neoliberalism instrumentalizes the media as ideological apparatuses. Contrary to the emancipatory claims inherent in neoliberal rhetoric, this systemic disposition actively deprives users of authentic agency and freedom. By analyzing neoliberalism as a deliberate project of social change, this study demonstrates that profound transformations within the cultural and media realms stem from a systematic matrix of structural antecedents, operational mechanisms, and predictable outcomes. The foundational catalyst for this shift lies in the philosophical reduction of human freedom to mere market freedom, alongside the ideological legitimization of deregulation. This conceptual substrate establishes the necessary preconditions for deploying three interconnected mechanisms: radical commodification (acting as the economic engine), monopolistic ownership concentration (serving as the inevitable structural outcome), and the naturalization of market discourse (functioning as the primary legitimizing tool).

The interaction of these mechanisms produces a defective cycle of social change, termed here the "economic silence cycle." Within this loop, the preemptive calculation of the financial costs associated with addressing critical or non-commercial content leads to its proactive omission. This exclusionary practice, in turn, reinforces the hegemony of a dominant discourse that legitimises the status quo, thereby naturalizing market dominion over cultural production as both rational and inevitable.

The macro consequences of this process signify a fundamental paradigm shift in the social functions of media and culture. This includes the transformation of the media from an institution of public oversight into a market-driven entertainment industry; the reduction of art from a vehicle for identity articulation and social critique into a symbolic consumer commodity; and the displacement of a dialogue-centric public sphere by a highly individualized, consumptive space. These systemic shifts not only neutralize media freedom in practice but also severely jeopardize cultural plurality, placing the symbolic survival of

non-dominant cultures—such as Kurdish culture—at acute risk of structural marginalization or dissolution.

The ultimate consequence of this process is a change in the social fabric of societies, operating across three distinct dimensions:

1. **At the institutional level:** The metamorphosis of the media from a watchdog institution into an entertainment industry, alongside the reduction of art from a collective expressive medium to a consumer commodity.
2. **At the communicative and identity level:** The erosion of the public sphere as a domain for critical dialogue and its substitution by a space of communicative consumption, which weakens social solidarity and reduces rich cultural identities to individualistic consumerist patterns.
3. **At the power level:** The transfer of authority from democratic political institutions (however flawed) to unaccountable economic institutions that engineer social tastes and normative frameworks through their hegemony over communication and cultural infrastructures.

In conclusion, neoliberalism, in its radical form, operates not merely as an economic doctrine but as a powerful process of social change that, by monopolizing the tools for producing culture and meaning, severely restricts the possibility of imagining and realizing democratic and pluralistic alternatives. Consequently, resisting these destabilizing shifts and revitalizing the public sphere demands synchronized, radical interventions across three primary frontiers:

- **a) In the economic realm:** Devising and implementing non-profit, cooperative, and public ownership models for media and cultural production, thereby decoupling these entities from revenue streams reliant on advertising and data mining.
- **b) In the legal and structural realm:** Codifying robust anti-monopoly regulations and transparency mandates tailored to the platform economy, while guaranteeing equitable distribution channels for marginalized viewpoints.
- **c) In the discursive and educational realm:** Cultivating critical media and cultural literacy, and reclaiming socio-political language from totalizing market metaphors, so that concepts such as "society," "public interest," and "plurality" can be re-conceptualized beyond the restrictive parameters of profit and consumption.

Only through such a holistic strategy can the vicious cycle of neoliberal social transformation be disrupted, carving out a trajectory towards an alternative future—one in which media and culture serve not as conduits for monopoly and homogenization, but as foundational sites for dialogue, collective creativity, and the enrichment of shared social life.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with Ethical Guidelines

This study utilized secondary data from neoliberalism theories. Consequently, direct interaction with human participants was not required, and individual informed consent was not applicable. The researchers strictly adhered to all ethical guidelines, ensuring data confidentiality and citation accuracy throughout the study.

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Authors' Contributions

Rouhollah Oshrieh: Data collection, data analysis, and manuscript writing. Ramezan Mahdavi Azadboni: Research design, data analysis, and manuscript writing. Both authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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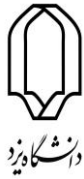
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نئولیبرالیسم، هژمونی رسانه‌ای و تغییر اجتماعی - فرهنگی: تحلیلی از منظر اقتصاد سیاسی

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مقاله پژوهشی

چکیده

زمینه و هدف: این مقاله با رویکردی انتقادی-تحلیلی در چارچوب اقتصاد سیاسی ارتباطات، پروژه تغییر اجتماعی نئولیبرال را با تمرکز بر تحولات رسانه‌ای و فرهنگی بررسی می‌کند. این مقاله بررسی می‌کند که چگونه سازوکارهای نئولیبرال، با تسخیر قلمرو تولید معنا، بافت اجتماعی را تغییر می‌دهند.

روش و داده‌ها: این مطالعه از یک طرح تحقیق کیفی مبتنی بر تحلیل گفتمان انتقادی بهره می‌برد که با بهره‌گیری از نظریه اجتماعی انتقادی و اقتصاد سیاسی ارتباطات تدوین شده است. هدف از این تحقیق، توضیح سازوکارهایی است که نئولیبرالیسم از طریق آنها با دگرگون کردن رسانه‌ها و نهادهای فرهنگی، به تغییر اجتماعی کمک می‌کند. داده‌ها از طریق تحلیل اسنادی متون علمی مرتبط، شامل کتاب‌ها، مقالات مجلات و آثار نظری که به نئولیبرالیسم، سیستم‌های رسانه‌ای، صنایع فرهنگی و تحول اجتماعی می‌پردازند، جمع‌آوری شده‌اند.

یافته‌ها: این تحلیل، یک مکانیسم سه‌جانبه (اقتصادی، ساختاری و گفتمانی) را آشکار می‌کند که یک «چرخه سکوت اقتصادی» خودتقویت‌کننده را هدایت می‌کند. در این چرخه، مقررات‌زدایی از بازار، انحصار رسانه‌ای را تسهیل می‌کند و منجر به کالایی شدن معانی فرهنگی می‌شود. در نتیجه، منجر به دگردیسی نهادی - تبدیل رسانه به سرگرمی و تبدیل هنر به یک کالای صرفی - می‌شود که در نتیجه حوزه عمومی را فرسایش می‌دهد. پیامد نهایی این فرآیند، تغییر عمیقی در بافت اجتماعی است که با تضعیف همبستگی اجتماعی و کاهش تنوع فرهنگی مشخص می‌شود.

بحث و نتیجه‌گیری: این مطالعه نتیجه می‌گیرد که شکستن این چرخه نیازمند اقدام همزمان در سه جبهه است: اقتصادی (مدل‌های غیرانتفاعی)، ساختاری (قوانین ضد انحصار) و گفتمانی (بازتعریف منافع عمومی). بازاندیشی در سیاست‌های فرهنگی - رسانه‌ای برای حفظ انسجام جمعی، ضرورتی انکارناپذیر است.

واژگان کلیدی: نئولیبرالیسم، تغییر اجتماعی، کالایی‌سازی فرهنگ، اقتصاد سیاسی، انحصار رسانه‌ای.

پیام اصلی: این مطالعه استدلال می‌کند که نئولیبرالیسم با تبدیل رسانه‌ها و فرهنگ به ابزارهای منطق بازار، تغییرات اجتماعی عمیقی را به پیش می‌برد. نئولیبرالیسم از طریق چرخه معیوب کالایی‌سازی، انحصار و طبیعی‌سازی گفتمان، حوزه عمومی را فرسایش می‌دهد، تنوع فرهنگی را تهدید می‌کند و همبستگی اجتماعی را تضعیف می‌کند.

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