Middletown Lives through Middle-Class Eyes: *Hillbilly Elegy* and the Problem with the "Liberal Media"

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Abstract

J.D. Vance does not become Senator Vance without the success of *Hillbilly Elegy*, his best-selling memoir (and later, film) about growing up in, and getting out of, rural Appalachia. Initially praised by media critics for its ability to challenge middle-class assumptions about the "white working class," the book assuaged both liberal anxiety and conservative outrage by providing demographically appropriate explanations for the election of Donald Trump. However, the book, feature film and subsequent political campaign are also part of a much larger, lucrative culture industry built upon the commodification and fetishization of the white working class, one driven by middle-class tastes and prejudices. This was most apparent in the promotion of the book and film by the so-called liberal media establishment, represented by the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, Netflix, Imagine Entertainment, HarperCollins, and Harpo Productions, to name a few. However, the reinforcement of the false binary between liberal and conservative media obscured how the corporate media system helped elect a candidate who will work most certainly against the interests of actual working people, further alienating them from each other and a shared labor platform more generally. Examining *Hillbilly Elegy* through the five filters of the Propaganda Model will help to explain the ideological and material effects of the corporate media's agenda upon the growing class divide.

Keywords

Class, Propaganda Model, stereotypes, ideology, corporate media, *Hillbilly Elegy*

When J.D. Vance asked Ohio voters "Do you hate Mexicans?" in a political ad, one might have wondered what happened to the "never Trump," mild-mannered author of *Hillbilly Elegy*. That guy, according to the *Washington Post*, had been "radicalized." That guy, once a bi-partisan voice of reason on all matters concerning the "white working-class," was now a "hypocrite," a "fraud," a "dangerous authoritarian" who suffered a "moral collapse." Actually, J.D. Vance was never really "that guy" to begin with, but rather a middle-class conjuring of what the white working class *could* be, a cultural construction forged in ideology rather than materiality. His journey from author to senator owes much to how he was exalted by the so-called liberal media and more importantly, the middle-class biases that are embedded in corporate media more generally.

The public perception of media companies as leaning left, or right is not new. Herman and Chomsky (1988) debunk the "myth of the liberal media" through their Propaganda Model. For

them, corporate news media, under the guise of objectivity, actually marginalize dissent by providing no viable alternatives to a capitalist status quo. They demonstrate this through a comprehensive analysis of foreign policy coverage in the *New York Times*, to show how the news media support foreign policy actions that promote the economic interests of the United States. Their model contains five filters—ownership, advertising, experts, flak, and ideology—through which media content are analyzed to demonstrate that the "liberal media" are corporate media, advocating from a center to center-right political position that mostly serves the interests of economic elites.

The value of such a model in today's heterogenous media culture may seem limited at best. Certainly, the internet and social media platforms allow for an infinite number of opinions to be expressed on any issue, for better and for worse. It has allowed movements devoted to social justice as well as hate, to proliferate. Unlike traditional television, radio and newspapers, the internet allows for continuous, unfiltered, decentralized public interaction. The Propaganda Model, under these circumstances, might be seen as reductionist or outdated. Yet, scholars continue to revisit the Propaganda Model and confirm its usefulness as a framework to evaluate corporate media, legacy and new (Pedro, 2011; Klaehn, 2018). If data are the new oil, companies like Meta and X may have even more power to shape media content in support of capitalism through their use of algorithms and surveillance.

However, the contemporary media environment has also complicated what was once understood as the "liberal media." The decline of the mass audience and the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine established an official "conservative" media ecosystem. As such, the former "liberal media" represented by mainstream print and broadcast companies, would become categorized as such simply because they existed in contrast to those media that were now openly conservative. For example, CNN may be more liberal than FOX news, but it is merely left of FOX news, not leftist in its agenda (openly critiquing or advocating for alternatives to, capitalism). As such, when the *New York Times* blamed liberal Hollywood for electing Vance, they were only partly correct (Tracy, 2022). Conveniently, the public's mostly blind acceptance of media outlets as liberal or conservative has helped deliver reliable, predictable demographics to advertisers in an increasingly fragmented media marketplace. The normalization of this political branding has served corporate media well.

The practice of political branding in popular culture may have other effects, such as establishing a commodity's novelty. In the case of *Hillbilly Elegy*, it is clear that the book's bipartisan appeal allowed it to momentarily transcend the dominant political binary and break through a crowded cottage industry of books also committed to analyzing the white working class after the election of Donald Trump. What it also achieved was an ideological effect, whereby the promotion of shared political interests over economic ones does what the Propaganda Model suggests: conceals how media reinforce capitalist values, in this case through the privileging of middle-class norms and the misrepresentation of working-class people. Although the five filters of the original Propaganda Model were used to analyze newspaper coverage of foreign policy in the *New York Times*, they may also be used to better understand how other forms of media (entertainment, social) confirm or resist those dominant ideologies in support of a "white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2000). Examining *Hillbilly Elegy* through this framework will demonstrate

the ideological and material effects of the corporate media's political branding on the growing class divide.

An Agenda Setting Effect (for the Middle Class)

Ownership and Advertising

It is no secret that media conglomerates control the flow of information, even if users have the ability to create unlimited content today. In the first edition of *The Media Monopoly*, readers were alerted to the limited number of companies controlling the distribution of media content, at that time, less than fifty (Bagdikian, 1983). Diversity in ownership patterns and perspectives (and by extension, democracy) was threatened by the consolidation of media power enabled under deregulation in the 1980s. At that time, media activists were concerned that so few companies were controlling the production and distribution of information. To be sure, the arrival of the internet offered to remedy this through the promise of a more democratic and pluralistic media system. The ownership filter, used to explain how media consolidation and conglomeration resulted in a media system beholden to advertisers and government agendas produces an agenda setting function, whereby the media do not tell us what to think, but what to think about (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). In this case, it was positive reviews and best seller lists from "respectable" corporate media that first put *Hillbilly Elegy* on the national agenda.

Hillbilly Elegy seemed to appear out of nowhere when it was released on June 28, 2016, but it had not. The corporate media's propaganda campaign began much earlier, as Vance was already a regular contributor to the *National Review* and a verified opinion leader within conservative media. By August, the book had reached number one on the *New York Times* Best Seller List. The media's preoccupation with the white working class had grown steadily since the election of Barack Obama in 2008 (remember Joe the Plumber?) but had become an obsession by the time Donald Trump arrived on the campaign trail. This demographic already dominated the corporate media agenda, so it was not a surprise to see a number of books published right before and immediately after the election of Donald Trump to provide insight and to capitalize on this unexpected event. *Educated*, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, *White Trash*, *American Rust*, *The New Minority* are but some of titles made popular during this time, yet it is *Hillbilly Elegy* that surpassed them in sales and popularity. This, even though other books were said to provide more accurate representations of the complexities of working-class life.

As mentioned previously, one explanation for the success of *Hillbilly Elegy* was its supposed bipartisan appeal.   This narrative appears in book reviews from corporate media outlets, representing voices across the political spectrum, but it is the endorsement by the *New York Times* that is especially important.   The role of "high status news organizations like the *New York Times*…is the most consistent and dominant" in setting the media agenda, still (McCombs 2018, p. 3). In its first review, "A Compassionate Analysis of the Poor Who Love Trump," Vance is praised for writing "a civilized election guide for an uncivilized election and he's done so in a language intelligible to both Democrats and Republicans" (Senior, 2016). He is credited in the same review with being a conversation starter, someone who is able to bridge the divide between liberals and conservatives by explaining why the white working class voted for Donald Trump. This review cements the larger cultural role the book and author will play initially as bipartisan

bridge builder. This thread will be picked up by other corporate media and repeated by pundits reinforcing and confirming the legitimacy of the text, the author, and the stories they tell.

After it is positively reviewed by the *NYT*, the book was promoted horizontally across other "liberal" media platforms, such as the broadcast networks, PBS, NPR, CNN, and TED, continuing the propaganda campaign begun by conservative outlets years earlier. All of this original content lived on indefinitely, aggregated and then distributed online by Google, Meta and X. The book remained atop the best seller lists of the *NYT,* Amazon and *USA Today* for months. Imagine Entertainment secured the books rights to produce a feature film that would be released in theaters and streamed on Netflix. Millions of copies of the book were sold, and by 2022, Vance had earned over $400,000 in royalties from HarperCollins (Hall, 2022), money which could be used to support his Senate campaign.

The promotion of the book across multiple, inter-related media platforms (HarperCollins is a subsidiary of News Corp., for example) and its movement through the corporate media ecosystem more generally, confirms how the ownership filter confers legitimacy upon cultural commodities. The more the book circulates, the more it seems to matter, but to whom?

The initial buzz around *Hillbilly Elegy* occurred almost exclusively within middle-class, corporate media culture. Positive reviews from the *NYT* and the *National Review* were written for their middle-class readers. The book told a story that propped up, rather than critiqued, their privilege. A bootstraps narrative of Vance's life and escape from rural Appalachia is told with little consideration for the structural issues that determined most of his community's misery. Yes, there are enough nods to the scourges of poverty--violence, drug addiction, and deindustrialization--to explain some of what happened to the white working class but ultimately, it was their learned helplessness, and his grit and determination, which enabled him to get out, and make it all the way to Yale. In American popular culture, this is one of the greatest stories ever sold.

The advertising filter addresses direct and indirect modes of selling. Indirect modes include the retelling of familiar tales through media texts, the ideological labor of cultural production. Instead of bridging the political divide, the book's social mobility narrative actually creates distance between the middle-class reader and the actual working class. The book assuages anxiety all elites may feel toward the growing class divide, not only those living in blue states. Reassured as early as the Introduction, it lets them know that this "book is…a history of opportunity and upward mobility" (Vance, 2016), two things the middle class can get behind.

Jack Metzgar (2021) explains this another way when he identifies the values that are characteristics of professional middle-class and working-class cultures. For him, working-class culture is often associated with the values of "being and belonging," consistent with the Marxist adage, a "class for itself." Vance pays homage to his working-class Appalachian roots throughout the book, crediting it for instilling in him traditional values such as the necessity of hard work, the promise of education, and the strength of the nuclear family. Yet, he does not miss an opportunity to criticize those who do not live up to his moral code, often invoking degrading stereotypes about poor people as welfare cheats. His memories include recollections of neighbors who would "buy two dozen-packs of soda with food stamps and then sell them at a discount for cash" as they "went through the checkout line speaking on their cell phones" or how his "drug addict neighbor would buy T-bone steaks" paid for by the taxes taken from Vance's meager paycheck (Vance, 2016, p.

139). This type of rhetoric goes far in encouraging resentments toward real people living in poverty.

Vance did acknowledge the devastating effects of the opioid epidemic on his childhood and on the residents of Middletown, Ohio in particular. His mother's struggle with addiction provided him with a unique opportunity to perhaps understand how structural issues and family trauma contributed to it. In response to the problems outlined in his book, and further capitalize on its success, he created a non-profit called "Our Ohio Renewal" whose mission was to help "disadvantaged children achieve their dreams." However, instead of helping Ohioans, Vance used the organization to pay a political consultant and to gain a foothold in a state he no longer lived in (Farenthold, 2022). The nonprofit shut down after two years, but by this time he was already a bipartisan media darling.

Vance's life story is told through middle-class eyes in so far as it privileges the values of "doing and becoming." He is achievement oriented, future oriented, and individualistic, values that are also likely held by many of the book's middle-class readers (even if ventures like the non-profit, fail). The middle class are socialized to have implicit biases against working-class people to be sure, regardless of political affiliation. Middle-class conservatives also showed disdain for the white working class, especially those belonging to Trump's base.   A critic from the *National Review* stated that they "can be grateful that a voice as eloquent as Vance's has emerged to give a firsthand account of their world." An eloquent voice enhanced by an Ivy league education. Vance was given the authority to speak for people who are typically stereotyped as ignorant. The use of such condescending language to is not exclusive to liberal elites, as conservative elites often claim, although when the *NYT* referred to Vance as a "civilized voice" for an "uncivilized election," the same type of class-bias was invoked.

Experts and Flak

According to the original Propaganda Model, experts consulted in the news media often have ties to government or other organizations that will support a capitalist status quo. Provided by public relations firms and/or government think thanks, the role of such experts is to limit public dissent by providing many opinions on an issue, but few actual political alternatives (Herman & Chomsky 2002, xii). The role of social media does not alter this much, as the traditional media still set the agenda and cases of reverse agenda setting are rare (Neuman et al., 2014). Vance achieved the role of bipartisan expert based on the original narrative promoted by corporate media. This made him especially appealing to organizations such as the New York Times Company who continued to struggle against charges of liberal bias and widespread mistrust. He also became a highly sought after speaker at colleges and universities, where many instructors required his book as a conversation starter during challenging political times. Pushback against the text in the form of crowd sourced reading lists, for example, was common, although a wider embrace of the text and its problematic views on rural poverty seemed to be the norm more often (Catte in Harkins & McCaroll, 2019). This is not so surprising, as the book and author were endorsed by the types of corporate media consumed by many college-educated liberals.

The falsity of the liberal/conservative media binary is further underscored when considering how Vance was intentionally repackaged as acceptable to center-leaning liberals. He was not in fact, a

new voice of moderation, but simply a non-MAGA one. Moreover, Vance's role as an established conservative pundit was mostly ignored by the propaganda campaign that promoted the book. This, although his previous contributions to the *National Review* expressed solidly conservative opinions about issues such as school choice, the marriage crisis, degree inflation, but did so in a rational, respectable (non-MAGA) tone, apropos of the publication and its target audience. An interview he gave with the *American Conservative* about the white working class even crashed the internet for a time. Vance's political affiliation was no secret, and it was not concealed in his book. He praises the work of Charles Murray in the beginning and refers to himself a "modern conservative" by the end. By what magic then, does he become a legitimate bipartisan voice?

Through, perhaps, the magic of political branding and the tendency for corporate media to move even more to the right, as conservative traditional and social media become more extreme. The inclusion of Vance as a contributor to the *NYT* and CNN is consistent with the news media's need for balance, but it undermines this same need simultaneously. The insights of the Propaganda Model again prove useful here. If the liberal media were actually liberal, leftist views would dominate. If it were truly balanced, leftist views would exist alongside others, and not be anomalies. Since the corporate media exclude actual leftist views, the center is viewed increasingly as the left. As openly conservative corporate media become tolerant of more extremist views, it becomes natural for the public to categorize mainstream corporate media as liberal.

For example, when the *NYT* and CNN actually hired Vance, they attempted to restore balance in response to a growing public concern that they have a liberal bias. Instead, though, this type of move only confirms the bias, or why else would they hire a conservative? Some of this public criticism, against the *NYT* especially, is unfair as they continue to provide consistently rigorous comprehensive, investigative reporting (and distanced themselves from Vance, eventually). However, this does not mean they are immune to this particular identity crisis stemming from the increasingly problematic role balance or "both-sideism" continues to play in journalism. A.G. Sulzberger, the publisher of the *NYT,* addresses this issue in a recent essay for the *Columbia Journalism Review*. In it, Sulzberger passionately defends the tradition of independent journalism conducted by the *NYT*, while also acknowledging the issue of its perceived bias by those on the left and right. Of particular relevance to the claims made by the Propaganda Model is his acknowledgement that today, a majority of journalists are college-educated and live in big cities. This is a commonly repeated fact, often used to prove that the *NYT* and others have a liberal bias against rural audiences who do not hold college degrees. This fact is not at issue, but it is a form of propaganda, or flak, designed to keep the liberal/conservative binary in place.

The flak filter addresses media criticism that comes from external sources, primarily the government or conservative media watchdog groups that police the media for offensive or controversial content. Today, one might add the conservative media and internet trolls that label any content they do not agree with as "fake news" to that list. When the *NYT* and CNN turned against Vance once he aligned himself with MAGA, the arguments about their bias against rural audiences who do not hold college degrees was only strengthened. However, what often gets overlooked in this type of critique is the way in which the actual working class has been ignored by corporate news media altogether, for decades.

The argument that most journalists are college educated and live in cities, ergo, the media have a liberal bias, is a distraction from the conscious choices made by the newspaper industry to cater to a more niche, upscale audience beginning in the 1960s. This shift was precipitated by the arrival of television and declining circulation, but also consolidation within the industry and the rise of newspaper "chains" with an increased responsibility to stockholders. Conservative media filled the gap left by news media that once catered to not only a mass audience, but also, a working one. Christopher Martin (2019) chronicles the disappearance of the working-class from the news and its impact:

> When US newspapers deemed the working class no longer newsworthy, they helped create the situation they would eventually chronicle for an upscale audience: the increasing economic and political division of the United States. Working-class people (urban and rural, white and people of color) were left without a journalistic voice in public life, while middle-class people (and the more affluent) were treated to journalism that overstated their activities, overrepresented their numbers to the community and over-catered to their interests. (p.68)

Therefore, the argument that the liberal bias is caused by college educated, cosmopolitan, journalists works as a form of flak in so far as it also preserves the false binary.

Sometimes, this type of flak is generated internally, passing as a self-reflective or social critique. In a recent opinion piece for the *NYT*, David Brooks (2023) discusses the elitism of "anti-Trumpers" and those who belong to the privileged "educated classes." This included journalists, who were not only "college grads" but "elite-college grads" who have "locked everyone else out" of this profession and others. This has resulted in a type of class-cluelessness among the educated classes, and justifies the rage felt by many Trump supporters. However, in acknowledging his own privileged position, and the problems with (white) male privilege more specifically, he fails to mention the poor or working class. The victims in his story are the middle class, who are losing opportunities to graduates from elite schools. The precarity associated with middle-class status is real, but this is not the focus of Brook's essay. Instead, it is another example of elites talking to elites. Brooks uses the language of class to avoid a critique of capitalism, supporting the Propaganda Model.

Ideology

In some ways, all of the filters discussed thus far work "ideologically" as they all support, for this analysis, a cultural misrepresentation of the working-class that has suppressed meaningful public discourse about them, by them. The middle-class norms that they are measured by and judged against are often invisible, until they violated. Then, it is common to see the resurrection of harmful stereotypes that normalize essentialist ideas about class, strengthening the class divide. The role that the media play in this process is significant. The filters of the Propaganda Model have shown how the promotion of *Hillbilly Elegy* by the corporate media established the credibility J.D. Vance as a trusted opinion leader. His book provided a comforting narrative of social mobility to middle-class readers who were already ideologically positioned to see poor and working-class people as others.

The ideology of anti-communism is the fifth filter in the original Propaganda Model, which makes sense for the time in which it was written (even though the communist "threat" to the United States has never really gone away). The filter works to "help mobilize the populace against an enemy" (Herman & Chomsky, 2002, 29). As such, it has been useful in demonstrating how media stereotypes are used to support the dominant systems of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Whoever the enemy is, they are most likely constructed in the popular culture as a threat to one or more of these institutions.

The success of *Hillbilly Elegy* required fitting into the dominant narrative about social class in the United States, and the stereotypes it relies upon to preserve the class divide. The most consequential were the stereotypes about Appalachia and rural poverty invoked by Vance himself. The most normalized of these ideas characterized the poor as violent, paternalistic, and ultimately responsible for their circumstances:

> I believe we hillbillies are the toughest people on earth. We take an electric saw to those who insult our mother. We make young men consume cotton under garments to protect a sister's honor. But…are we tough enough to look ourselves in the mirror and admit our conduct harms our children? Public policy can help but there is no problem that can fix these problems for us…These problems were not created by governments or corporations or anyone else. We created them, and we can fix them. (p.255-256)

The corporate media's obsession with the white working class, as well as the classist language they used to discuss the book, only contributed to these misrepresentations. However, when the feature film was released, a different kind of class bias was exposed, one which positioned audiences against critics.

It is often typical for a movie adaptation of a popular book to be criticized if it strays too far from the original text, disrupting the expectations of the audience. Although *Hillbilly Elegy* adhered to the basic contours of Vance's life as he depicted them in the book, official reviews were mostly negative, despite good box office numbers. Several critics cited that the movie had been "depoliticized," some critics focused on the stereotypes and others panned the entire movie, save the two Oscar-worthy performances by Glenn Close and Amy Adams. These criticisms, while seeming to want to defend the real people being misrepresented in the film, conceal other kinds of class biases.

Much of the criticism against the film is wrapped up in its supposed middle-class bias, which is the opposite of how most critics perceived the book. Reviewers disliked the lack of a political message, the focus on family, the melodrama. It was "a rich person's idea of what it is like to be a poor person, a tone-deaf attempt to assuage a very particular kind of liberal guilt" (Keegan, 2020). Yes, and no, as liberals do not represent all rich people. The *NYT* conveyed a similar message when it accused the film of being "too tasteful" and "respectable." Again, this addressed a middle-class bias, but in using this particular language, also invoked the stereotype that poor and working-class people lack taste and respectability. Depicting them as such would have been more "accurate."

Hillbilly Elegy belongs to a long tradition of popular culture that demeans and degrades poor and working-class people, subjecting them to a bourgeois gaze (Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 2004). This gaze works in a contradictory way when considering the amount of attention given to the appearance of Glenn Close, who played Vance's beloved, cantankerous Mamaw. Critics described her as unrecognizable, campy, in her "fright wig" and generally "deglamorized" to the point of being an offensive hillbilly stereotype. Every review seemed to contain an image of Close in it, as to emphasize her "shocking" transformation into a poor person. Other media reported specifically on her appearance, as if it were a noteworthy achievement in special effects. Mamaw memes went viral. It is perhaps her excess that people found so offensive, an excess associated with disgust and waste (Skeggs, 2004). This, despite the fact that a picture at the end of the movie revealed Close to be made to look quite like the real Mamaw. What this points to, perhaps, is the general lack of awareness about how stereotypes work.

While it is noteworthy to point out the ways in which the film stereotyped the poor and working class, but without understanding how those images are connected to real-world inequality, such a critique remains superficial. What material conditions are responsible for poor people "looking" like poor people? How do people "wear" the trauma of poverty? As the white working class continues to substitute for actual working people in the media, these questions will remain unanswered.

In speaking for the white working class, *Hillbilly Elegy* also supports their often racist and misogynistic assumptions. In the book, Vance does not address the issue of race, but for some passing comments about Michelle and Barack Obama's elitism. His misogynistic views are expressed more consistently through the hypermasculinization of Mamaw and demonization of his mother, whose moral failings include drug addiction and promiscuity. Her trauma is never acknowledged. She is portrayed as a bad mother who was loved but lacked the will to do better. These themes are addressed less frequently in official media narratives but continue to be discussed through counternarratives, including poetry, art, and social media (Harkins & McCarroll, 2019). Nevertheless, as the corporate media still set the agenda, liberal voices such as these will continue to be marginalized.

From Clark Kent to SuperMAGA

If J.D. Vance really spoke for working people, he would first acknowledge that the global working class is mostly female and POC. He would remind voters that being working-class means having little control or autonomy over one's work (Zweig, 2000). He would support unions, a living wage, universal health and childcare, and the environment. He would be a true voice on the left. But he is not. By the time Vance is elected to the Senate, Clark Kent had become SuperMAGA. According to govtrack.us he has already sponsored legislation that is xenophobic (The Timely Departure Act), transphobic (The Protect Children's Innocent Act) and anti-environment (The Drive American Act). Even if their chances of being enacted are slim, they represent where he stands, and echo the extremist positions currently passing for mainstream politics in the United States.

In conclusion, the Propaganda Model is intended to demonstrate how corporate media maintain the capitalist status quo. The propaganda campaign for *Hillbilly Elegy*, when examined through

its five filters, show how this process occurs. It also highlights the illusion of media diversity and the permanent limitations of a corporate media system, legacy and new.   Ultimately, it demonstrates the power of the media to influence the political fate of Ohio's working class.

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