

# The Economy of “Symbolic Goods”

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper explores the concept of symbolic goods and their impact on society. Symbolic goods are goods that have value beyond their intrinsic worth, such as art, fashion, and music. The author argues that symbolic goods play a significant role in shaping our identity and social standing. They can also be used to reinforce social hierarchies and create divisions between groups.

**Keywords:** Symbolic goods, Social identity, Media consumption

## Introduction

Symbolic Goods is a broad expression of the value of artistic and other goods for us. When I use the term “value” concerning a product, the immediate tendency is to place it in the category of the economic world, that is, a value of economic significance for us, and the claim is that this is not correct at all. Goods reflect our broad world of values, our beliefs, our social, religious, gender, and political identity and they are a broad expression of who we are in the deepest sense, a product of the course of our lives, class affiliation, the education we received and the education we acquired, our experiences that turned us into who we are.

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In the first section, this article will review the market of goods, its characteristics and the sources of its legitimacy, the process of interpretation and creation of the value, and the significance of the product in the eyes of the receiver.

Let us examine the development of the visual media and its influence on social processes against the background of modernization processes, technological developments, changes in habits of leisure and lifestyle, and the availability of the media to every person in every place and the influence on the interpretation and creation of the reality and “the truth” in the eyes of the receiver.

In the first section, I will review the changes that took place in the communications media as part of the changes in industrialization technologies and modernization which led to growth, diversity, and globalization of the communications media. What is the significance of these processes on the creation of “reality” in the eyes of the receiver? Furthermore, we will examine the independence of the reporters that make information accessible to the public at large and their contribution to the creation of reality in the eyes of the receiver.

In the second section, I will look at and examine the mutual relations between the media in the State of Israel and the social reality and I will claim that despite the diversity and wealth in the quantity of media means, it does not contribute to democratic and social processes but rather preserves them and reflects the existing social political positions, strengthens the truth and presents the diversity, gaps and the fixation that exists in the social positions and classes in Israel.

## **Symbolic Goods**

The link and ties between the preferences and reasons for identity and social standing changed in the course of history and to a great extent reflect the social cultural economic and technological changes that took place throughout the world.

## THE ECONOMY OF "SYMBOLIC GOODS"

The world of goods can be divided into these two categories, those that are geared to a limited audience and those to the broad public.

The market of these limited goods that are geared to small and defined audiences operates with different legality than those geared to the broad public which is mainly commercial and dictated by competition and demand.

The period of patrons on art in the Middle Ages is an example of a narrow market. The aristocratic class wanted and appreciated artworks as part of the class and social identity and detached from the market of demand.

The narrow market exists also in modern society in peer groups that define the standards and rules of evaluation. This market conforms to its rules and logic. This is a community whose source of legitimacy is the standing and opinion of the members of the community.

The narrow market of goods reflects products that function as a component in the creation of a social identity. They could include also groups and organizations that are not established such as in the world of art there are circles, salons, groups around an artist and a publisher, and others who worship his creation.

However, despite being detached from the commercial market of demands, the claim is that the community members are not completely independent. The legitimacy and standing of those created in the limited market are very dependent on the academy, the critics, and even the state. The academy is not independent. The researchers and professors enjoy state support from research budgets, the institution's ongoing funding, and even the standing of recognition and prestige that the state provides them. They are not free to state their opinion without taking into account the atmosphere among the funding entities.

Hence a narrow community is still subject to external influences which it must take into account mainly where its existence depends on financial resources, recognition, and legitimacy which comes from various entities and one must take their standing and opinions into consideration.

It is not possible to compare the narrow market to the broad market. The broad market responds to the competitive market and its demands. These are products that the free market defines their value. This market is

measured by its revenues and therefore it is directed towards diverse publics and cannot be limited to the tastes of community standing or a specific public. For example, take the commercial theater of France that today operates in three configurations: foreign shows in English and French linked to the origin, successful and popular commercial shows that are shown again, and intelligent and witty comedies for the enlightened bourgeoisie. In this manner, the theater reaches a variety of audiences that ensure its economic existence, its legitimacy, and its artistic standing (Elana Abrudan).

The two characteristics of the narrow and broad product are defined as those about the relationships between them. The differences between them define them: the ideological commitment and enthusiasm for art on the one hand, and the market that operates strictly from commercial considerations on the other hand.

Demand and consumption of cultural products are an expression of the social values and identity of standing. The commercial products are fed from the high culture, either they erase it or steal from it and they are seen as inferior but provide a response to the demands of the masses. (Elena Abrudan).

## **Visual Culture**

The processes of modernization and technological industrialization brought about significant growth and expansion of the goods market. The demands grew, the diversity of products increased and the audiences expanded.

The influence of these processes gave expression to the development of the visual culture. Visual includes all of the fields of drawing, art, photography, film, advertising, propaganda, and more. It appeals to everyone. It does not belong exclusively to the elite and museum collections but is everywhere on the computer, in newspapers, on television, and in the shopping malls. Everywhere we shop we experience the visual experience including the public spaces in parks, and street art. Art is not only in museums or in private collections.

The visual culture is part of the global processes that change rapidly from media through texts to media using images. It is made accessible through technological means and requires an interpretive effort both on the part of the individual and on the part of the collective.

## **Reception Theory**

The reader exposed to the written or visual text interprets it and gives it a meaning that is beyond the words of the text or the picture. This theory moves the weight and attention from the creator of the text to the one reading the text and deals with the reader and not the work of the creator. The meeting between the reader, his spirit, soul, values, education, and world outlook with the text gives the text its meaning. (Karolidis 2000). This meeting calls into action the reader. It would not have happened without the meeting. People give interpretations to phenomena and structures in nature, that is how the brain works. The writing or the picture can perhaps be fiction but they stimulate the reality within the reader.

According to the Reception Theory, the text is understood as a media framework. It is the dialogue between the reader and the content of the text. The intention of the creator is not part of the dialogue.

The content of the creation is the place of meeting with the reader while often what is not written or does not exist is of significance to the reader.

The significance is not detached from the text. It is created in the course of the process of reading or watching and so on, it is not creative interpretation detached from the creation (Tompkins 1988).

Advertising markets goods with meaning that corresponds with the experience of the reader. The message is emotions, and cultural values and corresponds with the expectations of the audience by their cultural experiences.

The interpretation of the reader/observer is a reflection of the systems of social relationships. The interpretation is a social practice that releases the reader from the interpretation forced on him by the author/creator. (Jensen 1987).

The social perceptions exist with the reader before he comes across the creation and the significance that he gives to the creation is the dialogue that his perceptions carry out as the result of the meeting with the creation. The experiences of the reader in his life are reflected in the meaning that he gives the creation. That is the reason that different people and different communities will give different meanings and different interpretations to the same text.

The picture of reality is reflected through the brain of the reader while he reads the written text but mainly the visual. Social sciences deal with this greatly. One of the approaches is the “constructivism” theory (in the world of study the theory emphasizes the part of the student in the creation and acquisition of knowledge and it encourages active study and learning while doing so).

Reality is the structure that a person builds to absorb the knowledge that has already passed through the process of filtering by the mass media (not a very authentic process as the media filters information, makes it accessible as appropriate for them according to their worldviews and after that also the reader interprets it according to his worldview and the result is an interpretation of reality that is not authentic). The only reality that is authentic from our point of view is the one that he creates. Only when speaking of incidents in which the reader is not emotionally involved, such as international events, the reality is received from the reports of the mass media, with the commentary of the mass media.

The significance is the meeting between consciousness and the information that is received from the mass media (or from the written or the visual). It is derived from the system of relationships that a person has with the various groups to which he turns, belongs, or identifies.

The fact that in the visual arts, many details are missing requires and invites the reader to complete details and provide his interpretation and significance. That forces the user to have psychological and cognitive involvement.

There is no doubt that the social situation influences how a person gives meaning to written or visual media. The accessible technology expanded and strengthened the visual media through the computer, television, and more.

## THE ECONOMY OF "SYMBOLIC GOODS"

The ability to analyze visual media requires complex abilities and knowledge. John Fiske thinks that one must understand the codes that would enable an analysis of a visual text at three levels: Reality, representation (how it is represented that is understanding the technology), and ideology. The interpretation that the readers/observers give the same creation is so varied that it is necessary to also understand the intention of the creator. In the opinion of Kert Freedman, the interpretation of the creation is dependent on who you are and what your identity is more than what you know that you know. Therefore in the post-modern period, the emphasis is on the identity of the person who is commenting and less on the creator and that significantly broadens the different commentaries and they are varied as the number of readers receivers without relation to the intention of the creator and from here we find that in the post-modern period with the broad variety of interpretations, the truth is complex, and that is the reason that it requires knowledge for the reader to provide some commentary of value and to understand the technology, the social basis and to compare this to other commentaries.

Kerry Freedman claims that the visual media influences man and society and has a value for democratic society. It contributes to the creation of a cultural identity and enriches man spiritually.

The British researcher Ian Heywood thinks that the interpretation that the receiver gives is an expression of democracy as each person gives his opinion through the commentary he gives to the creation.

The fact that it is easy for people to respond to and interpret visual texts has expanded their use and we find them in our daily lives, it is part of our lives everywhere and they empower their social influence.

The process that the receiver goes through is called semiotics, a process of interpretation, marking, and giving it meaning. The media messages pass through using "codes" and the receiver/absorber must identify the "codes".

The codes define what is yes and what is no for example the definition of "tasty" is accompanied by the definition of what is "not tasty".

Charles Peirce defines the process of building the meaning such that it includes three stages: marking, interpretation, and concept. The process of interpretation according to Peirce is personal and individual.

Marking according to Peirce may be a visual matter and may be symbolic. For one picture there may be several symbolic meanings, for example, the Menorah for one person might be the symbol of the Israeli Knesset (Israel's Parliament), for another it might be the popular football team Beitar Yerushalayim and with a third, it might be the Jewish holiday of Chanukah.

Saussure suggests similar ties between the signifier and the signified, that is between the one who marks and the object marked.

The linkage is done by the marking based on the social and cultural experiences that he comes from. The receiver does his interpretation based on his personal experience.

The "chain reaction" is a dynamic matter, it could be an association of anything, for example, Donald Trump – President of the United States – the land of dreams – to be rich, etc."

Every stage may lead to another association which would create a different chain reaction of associations.

According to Peirce, this is an internal process with a person coming from his internal world and the cultural and social experiences he comes from. This is the process of abduction, which is a process of concluding that takes place with the receiver which includes a certain hypothesis as a possible explanation of the facts that do not have a previous explanation.

This process is very appropriate for commentary about abstract or visual things and is different from processes that have logical analogies.

From the discussion and presentation of things one can claim that man is a creature that operates from an internal world with his transformative study processes, that are based on his experience, his consciousness, his life experience, his standing, and social attachment, and does not lean on an informative study that is on objective knowledge which reaches him from the various media (I will return to this further on). The reality is that which he creates, the truth is subjective and changes from one receiver to another.

## Symbolic Goods and Social Status

Various cultural goods are identified with different social classes, different tastes, and different lifestyles. Wealth and higher education are associated with the upper class and high culture. Poor culture is fed by popular culture which is created by cultural entities for profit.

According to Bourdieu, the poor class does not experience culture as the upper class does. Their experience in museums is completely different. He claims that the upper class determines the standard and the cultural tastes of the entire population and to a certain extent that is the only culture that is considered legitimate. On the other hand, the lower class enjoys popular entertainment, a culture that is geared to help them forget the daily difficulties and worries of existence. This culture is a means while the upper-class culture has an inherent value of "culture for culture" (Bourdieu 1984).

Gans claims that modern culture is characterized by sub-groups with public tastes that are chosen from a variety of options according to their world values and their education (Gans 1974).

In the second half of the twentieth century, changes began in the understanding of the social identity of a person that influences his interpretation of visual texts.

Lewis (1980) claimed, as did other sociologists, that cultural taste and social class are no longer linked to each other. According to him, cultural tastes change throughout life as part of the course of life and do not belong to a social class. The limitation of social class no longer exists, lifestyle is the basis for social changes that a man undergoes in the course of life. The person's class in an industrial society is determined among others according to his job and that is his identity it develops throughout his life and dictates his lifestyle.

Bell (1976) with the change in lifestyle and development of a variety of leisure activities, identity is related to these habits. Material matters became even more significant.

Leiss, Kline (1986) - in the world of lifestyle the public chooses goods for purchase as a means that ties them to the value and symbol they identify with.

Mitchell (1983) claims that for every lifestyle the world presents values, beliefs, needs, dreams, and different outlooks.

Different researchers analyzed nearly forty different lifestyles. Also, the media defines its target audience in terms of lifestyle and not social class.

## **Culture and Media Industry Changes**

These processes take place parallel to dramatic and ongoing changes in the mass media market which influences the way the visual and digital media develop and the influence it has on the messages and interpretation of media information that comes to the public in enormous scopes in the world of advancing technology and an overflow of knowledge.

The changes in the culture industry began in the nineteenth century (Penny Press) 1910 the Hollywood studios were established 1920 growth in radio and television developed like a photographed radio, and in the twentieth century, it included universities, and corporate media schools. Big Five included the radio, television, newspapers, films, and magazines and they determined the public dialogue.

The Frankfurt School claimed that the processes of establishing the media world reflect the variety of voices and opinions being heard. Following the roots of the phenomena leads to the British media corporation that Lord Northcliffe established, and to the popular American journalism established by Pulitzer. For Frankfurt, the media's conduct and power is power that corrupts the public.

Giant media corporations were constructed and began to raise money from the public creating a reality of a relatively few giant corporations that control a huge variety of media and are accessible to different countries and the entire world.

In the second half of the twentieth century communication tycoons recruited their communicative strength to create political strength such as Berlusconi in Italy.

On the other hand, the empire of Rupert Murdoch is an example of the success of a man who built a professional empire managed by professionals without political interests but rather communication and economic matters managed well and gave a place and expression for diversity in both audiences and opinions. His empire included many channels that appealed to different groups with different ideas and habits and reflected well the lifestyle changes.

The technology and the internet expanded the ability of vast and varied information to reach all audiences and quality and diversity of information became available to all.

### **Journalist Autonomy**

So how do these powerful media tools function, how do they make decisions, how are they independent, and what is the influence of their operation on the interpretation and means given by the receiver to the information that flows to him from the media?

The claim is that every news site has its preferences and its journalists serve these preferences. The newsroom serves an organization that is larger than it and is part of it, whether private or public. They are not autonomous in making their decisions.

The head organization ensures the appointment of management that would guarantee the realization of the policy and agenda of the organization. They do this through policies of funding and employment. The gatekeepers prefer to budget activities that support the agenda of the head organization. Therefore the decisions for funding and decisions of employment influence the journalistic dialogue that the channel promotes. Therefore this is not only the decision of the editing room and the editors of the channel.

In addition, there are also considerations of deadline and commercial considerations of the advertising and notices department since there are audiences that are not attracted to advertising and are not the clear target audience of the advertisers, an audience that is not a significant consumer

like the working class (Murdock 1978) or the blacks in South Africa (1984 Louw) and they do not receive expression or representation of their positions.

The newspapers are flooded with information and they decide what they want to bring to the attention of the public. The journalists are the gatekeepers as they can give information to the public if they wish to and they can block information from the public if they wish. The journalists become those who set the agenda and so they do something that has social implications (1991 Neumann - Noelle).

Tuchman (1978) claims that journalists create reality and do not expose existing reality. This is like a wall in that the journalists open an opening that presents partial information out of a panoramic picture that is hidden behind the wall, a window of information that they expose reflects their choice regarding what information they prefer to publish. Therefore, making news is the news that is chosen by the journalists and presents a partial picture of reality. That is the routine of employment of a journalist that is taught by everyone before you enter the profession. Everyone must ask the same questions (the five W), excellent methodology to get to the source of the matter but not appropriate for the complex issues. Journalists learn to tell the main part of the story in the opening, otherwise, their information will be edited.

The television brings speakers that can summarize an issue. Public relations personnel write notices to newspapers according to the formula knowing that this is the way to enter the media and put in the information that will serve their employers.

Journalists use contacts regularly to get information for quoting. The contacts need the journalists to promote their profile in public to advance their careers. Every politician develops relationships with journalists. The contacts are a small part of the population but they are the ones who create the picture of the journalistic situation that is presented to the public at large. The use of information sources limits the window of information that is presented to the public, information that is given preference to the elite public that the contacts are among them. So journalism becomes sympathetic to the certain public that presents interests of its own.

Processes of decision-making during editing include the decision of what to publish. Where? What size? These are determined by the hierarchical structure of the editorial board, therefore those who know the process and the people who determine can influence the information given to the public. Public relations people use this well in the manner that the information that is published will benefit their clients.

## **State of Israel**

The State of Israel is a nation of immigrants whose population grew from its establishment in 1948 from 600 thousand residents to over 9 million today.

The growth is mainly thanks to the large waves of immigration of Jews from all over the world, from tens of different countries. Jews who brought with them the local culture of their land of origin find the lifestyle, culture, and language are very different from one country to another. Many Jews came from Arab countries, from Europe after the Second World War, from South America, North America, and the Soviet Union in several waves of immigration the largest was at the beginning of the 90's after the collapse of walls which brought more than a million immigrants to Israel. There were also immigrations from Ethiopia and the various countries in Africa.

Israel was established as a Jewish and democratic State as the founders of the State announced in the Declaration of Independence which reflects the spirit of the young country, its values, and its vision. However, the population of the State has very different social characteristics, different classes, and social gaps that are expressed in education, jobs, places of residence, social and political standing, in positions regarding religion and state. It is a State with high social solidarity as a result of the shared fate that led to the establishment of the Jewish State but with tremendous social tensions and serious disputes regarding religion, state, and security.

The Israeli parliamentary regime reflects well the ethnic social diversity and the differences and multiple opinions. Tens of parties strive for membership in the Parliament creating unstable governments with many parties serving in the Parliament even after the blocking percentage was raised and elections are held on average every two years.

Every community and sector has its cultural roots, its educational institutions that maintain the positions of the public through the heads of the system, whether these are rabbis of the religious systems, professors in the academy, or journalists recruited by opinion leaders who influence the public. Each public is wrapped in diverse sources of legitimacy which preserve the sectorial interpretation and prevent reality as reflected in the eyes of the public in all core issues of their existence as a sector.

Israel is a democratic country with all that relates to the enormous diversity of media working in it. Logic and diversity are to a large extent an expression of the richness of opinions of communities and sectors that live in its midst.

In terms of a society that has so many tools of expression, Israel is a democracy at its best. On the other hand, in terms of free authentic real journalism that expresses reality at its best, there is room for discussion and examination and the answer is complex.

Israel has a large Ultra-Orthodox community with various groups, Ashkenazi, Sepharadi, and Chassidim each with their own *Admor* (Chassidic religious leader) and Council of Torah Wise Elders. There is certainly no democracy there. The media reflects the position of the rabbis and the admiral. Members of the Parliament (*Knesset*) are chosen and/or authorized by the rabbis and are their representatives in the Parliament. A member of the Parliament who expresses an independent position contrary to the position of the rabbis, or a journalist who contradicts the rabbi will find himself pushed away and an outcast as has happened many times. There is only one truth and one reality and it is the one that the religious leader dictates.

Israel has a large Arab population with language, culture, customs, and lifestyle that are unique to it. It differs from the Jewish population on the basic question of existence. Their lifestyle is conservative and the internal dialogue that they carry out through the media in the Arab language ensures to strengthen the Arab identity and its basic positions. There is no room for an independent position that does not reflect the Arab Palestinian narrative. To the extent that such exists, it has no place in Arab society.

The Israeli right-wing religious public that are settlers in Judah and Samaria, enclosed themselves over the years with a system of education and media that preserve the traditional ideas and positions of the public.

From a young age, the children are sent to religious schools where they learn in religious frameworks to obey the rabbis and adhere to the basic values of the public that they belong to. Religious journalism that represents the public is very common and the most popular are the journalists who were raised in a religious nationalistic education and maintain in their writings those positions and ideas. They paint events with the colors of reality that they see and the interpretation accompanying events as it is reflected in their eyes. The newspaper "Makor Rishon" expresses the position of this public and its editor, Chagai Segal, is a resident of the settlement of Ofra which was settled in the past by the members of the Jewish Underground and his son, Amit Segal, is the right-wing commentator of the central news channel in commercial television. Both journalists are appreciated but with a clear agenda that they do not hide.

Also, the secular left has a system of media that supports journalists with clear right-wing positions that support Prime Minister Netanyahu. The freebie "Israel Today" was established by the Jewish American billionaire Sheldon Edelson to give a platform to the positions of the right-wing public in Israel and it is spread for free in every place to reach every possible place.

On the other hand, the old newspaper "Haaretz" gives a platform to journalists who are on the left side of the political map. They are great critics of the Prime Minister and reflect the positions of the newspaper's publishers, the Schoken family.

Many internet channels reflect clear positions that support these sectors and others in Israel. Many television channels and three leading media systems broadcast at the same time every evening. Two of them are commercial television channels and one is a public corporation channel funded by the State. These channels that appeal to the broad public try to capture the viewers and therefore their panels include persons with opinions from all sides to enable the public to hear their position through their speakers.

The media reality is such that the public is flooded with news information from various places. It chooses the information that matches the positions and the reality in which it lives. It chooses who to listen to and who to believe. There is no one truth in media but rather there is one truth that he believes in and one reality in which he lives.

This complex reality creates a political stalemate because the public fortifies itself in its positions with the system of education and the media backing it that strengthen the legitimacy of its positions and the truth and reality in which it lives. Is this democracy at its best? Doesn't the fact that the media is a collection of opinion leaders with agenda and reality in which there is not one agreed-upon fact in essential issues show us the crisis in which we live?

My claim is that the development of the media dramatically influences society's dialogue, contributes to the deepening of rifts, raises the level of alienation fuels social tensions, and empowers them and so it threatens the democratic existence. There is not enough autonomous journalism, there is journalism that promotes an agenda.

The development of technology provides the ability of every person who holds a smartphone to send his position out into the void without filtering, inhibitions, or rules of ethics. The fact that journalists are recruited to maintain the religious and political sector on the side of the funding entities who write their agendas, raises doubt regarding the function of journalism as a keeper of democracy. There is indeed complete freedom of speech. A person says what he has in his heart but as the review shows us, what he has in his heart is his unique reality, what he interprets as a result of his education. Objective journalism has almost disappeared completely from the world.

In Israel, there are many opinions on different matters and the disputes are enormous. To prevent heated arguments we usually quote a sentence from the book of Havakook (Havakook b, d), "A righteous man lives in his faith". In other words, I will not succeed in convincing you so you might as well maintain your position and I will keep mine.

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