

EVOLUSION OF MASS COMMUNICATION THEORIES

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There has been a great deal of speculation about the way in which mass communication takes place. Although some conceptual schemas have been introduced and discussed in order to shed light on some phase of mass communication or some aspects of mass communication, there has still not emerged one particular mass communication theory, upon which all the social scientists have been agreed.

Throughout the history of mass media enormous effort has been devoted to finding out what effects media have both on individuals and society. In this paper I will try to explain the evolution of mass communication theories by examining these research efforts. Firstly, I would like to examine the theories, classified by DeFleur, concerning the effects of mass media to persuade at the individual level, by matching them with the early research activities. The theories suggested by DeFleur (1970) are the Mechanistic Stimulus Response Theory, the Individual Differences Theory, The Social Categories Theory, the Social Relationships Theory and the Cultural Norms Theory.

After having done this, I will write about the society level mass communication theories following the classification by Macquail,

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which are Mass Society Theory, Marxist Media Theory (including Political-Economic Theory, Frankfurt School and Critical Theory, and Hegemonic Theory), the Social-Cultural Approach and Structural Functionalist Approach.

Studies of the Effects of Mass Communication

Denis Macquail (1991) has classified the early theories of the effects of mass communication in three main stages, each of which indicates to some significant stages in the conceptualization or in approach to the understanding and measuring effects of mass-communication media.

The first phase started at the turn of the century and lasted in the late 1930s. The main characteristic of this period was the almost simultaneously emergence of newly arrived mass media (popular press, cinema and radio), which enormously extended the potential reach of media across society. For the first time in human history these came into being as media of mass communications, affecting the lives of people and being the consequence of industrialization.

Considering the collapse of rural society as a consequence of the industrial revolution, sharply increasing populations in big cities and the loneliness of the individual in those cities, because of the loosening of the traditional framework of family and community, the media were thought to be powerful enough to shape opinion and belief, change habits of life, actively mould behaviour and have a major influence on the political system.

Such views were not based on methodical investigations but were based on general observations of the sudden extension of the audience to include the majority and on the evidently great attraction of the mass media.

In this phase, the Mechanistic Stimulus-Response (MSR) Theory was introduced. This theory, borrowing the term Stimulus-Response from psychology, claimed that the media were able to shape public opinion and to sway the masses towards almost any point of view desired by the communicator.

In the second phase, the period between the late 1930s and the early 1960s, many separate studies of the effects of different tapes of content and media, of particular films or programmes, of entire

campaigns, were carried out. The most significant, perhaps, were the studies of presidential elections in 1940 and 1948 by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and others (1954) and the programme of research into the use of films for training and indoctrination of American servicemen undertaken by Howland (1950). Towards the end of 1940s Lazarsfeld stated that "the effects of mass media are sharply limited by the very nature of the media and their place in society". Advances in psychology, on the one hand, and developments in research methods, particularly in survey methods, on the other, suggested new kinds of variables which should be taken into account. These variables can be roughly classified into two: personal differences and social environment.

The early studies in psychology on "association" and "habit" by William James, contributions of John Watson and newly developed, in the 1920s, classical conditioning experiments resulted in a great deal of emphasis on individual differences. From these studies Individual Differences Theory emerged. "The theory sought to take account of the diversity of the audience, acknowledging that the media contains particular stimulus attributes that have differential interactions with personality characteristics of members of the audience" (DeFleur, 1970). Briefly, this theory claims that different people are likely to respond differently to the same media production because of individual differences.

The Social Categories Theory was extracted from sociology. This theory assumes that there are social categories in urban-industrial societies whose behaviour in the face of a given set of stimuli is more or less uniform (DeFleur, 1970). These categories can be identified by dividing people into groups according to their income level, sex, age, education attainment, or religious affiliation.

Towards the end of this period Katz and Lazarsfeld (1956) shaped the Social Relationship Theory which stresses the significance of informal social relations in mediating the effects of media message on individuals. These scientists stated that "the most likely effects of the mass media was to reinforce pre-existing views and secondarily to mobilize the undecided to move toward their demographic 'predispositions'; that media persuasive campaigns are ineffective and reach mainly those already reached; and that personal influence predominates over media influence via a two-step flow where opinion

leaders use media information to influence other people" (Curran, Gurevitch 1991).

It was the idea that individual behaviour is usually guided by cultural norms, from which the Cultural Norms Theory emerged. This theory asserts that the mass media by selecting and emphasising certain themes create, to some extent, a certain way of thinking within a given socio-cultural structure. But it was also clear that the mass media were unlikely to be major contributors to direct change of individual opinions, attitudes or behaviour or to be a direct cause of crime, aggression or other disapproved social phenomena. Therefore, the Cultural Norms Theory claims that the contribution to any given culture by media may effect some individuals, whether it happens to audiences directly or indirectly, but within the cultural norms, and in turn these effects make a contribution.

The comment by Klapper in 1960 set the seal on this research phase by concluding that "mass communication does not ordinarily serve as a necessary or sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions through a nexus of mediating factors" (Curran, 1979). The conventional belief in the power of the media seemed to be demolished.

The third phase, which is still persist, is one in which effects and potential effects are still being sought. Unlike in the earlier phases, researchers in this period have been dealing with more specific aspects of mass communication processes by using more complex models of media effects and more sophisticated statistical methods. Mcleod, Kosicki and Pan (1991) have examined the latest effects researches in five categories which are: expansion of effects, elaboration of media content, formulation of media production, process models and levels of analysis. Taken together, these categories "reveal an understanding of media effects as a multi-level process connecting media production with outcomes of active reception by audiences" (Curran, Gurevitch 1991).

Social Scientific Mass Communication Theories

As Macquail (1991) stated that "the development of mass communication has implications for several highly important areas of social life - those concerned with freedom and control, with consensus, with the power structure of society, and with social

change". Social scientific media theories have been developed in order to identify and to formulate provisional answers to the questions raised by these implications. Each of the principle social scientific theories has different views about the place and role of the media work in society. This is not only because of differences in the interpretation of evidence, but because there are fundamental conflicts amongst the request of these theories concerning what should be the value and interests of society which the media ought to serve.

Mass Society Theory

The development of the Mass Society Theory went hand in hand with the emergence of the industrial society and the rise of the mass media. During this period of transition philosophers such as Jhon Stuart Mill, and sociologists Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tonnies, Wilhelm Reich and others, sought to evolve hypotheses in order to explain the emerging changes and trends in society. Mill had argued that "the differences between classes, regions and professions have been so blurred by the development of the market, by popular education and by new means and forms of communication as to result in a tendency toward conditions of moral and intellectual uniformity" (Gurevitch, Bennet and Curran, 1982). Considering the transitional period from rural community to urban one and the organization of newly industrialized society, the theory should be rather viewed as the first attempt to define the place or functions of the mass media in the emerging society.

"The Mass Society Theory gives a primacy to the mass media as both cause and maintainer of mass society and rests very much on the idea that the media offer a view of the world" (Macquail, 1991). The theory claims that although the media manipulate people, this should be seen as an aid to their physical survival. The potential created by the media, according to Mill, is "for a form of non-democratic control from above" (Gurevith, Bennet and Curran 1986). Media are considered as an indispensable instrument for 'functional integration', but their contribution to normative integration is low (according to the theory) in quality and reflects the self interests of rulers.

The Mass Society Theory can be seen a pessimistic reaction to the related processes of industrialization, urbanization, the deve-

lopment or political democracy, the beginning of popular education and the emergence of contemporary forms of mass communication.

Marxist Media Theory

Although Marx left very limited notes about the relationships between the mass media and society, because there was only the press as a mass medium in the second half of the 19th century, it is possible to make some inferences from his idea about the mass media. For him, it was possible to understand the structure of society by analysing economic relationships and through the concept of class struggle especially between the rich and the poor. However, he also saw the importance of the mass media as a means of mental production, which supports the survival of the society, since they disseminate the idea of ruling class. Max and Engels stated that "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it" (quoted by Gurevitch, 1986).

Although his ideas have constituted the core of the Marxist approach to the mass media, the developed Marxist theories about the mass media have followed quite diverse ways. I will examine the Marxist inspired media theories under three headlines: 1- Political-Economic Theory, 2- Critical Theory, 3- Media Hegemony Theory.

Political-Economic Theory : According to the classical Marxist view, media work ideologically by disseminating the ideas and world views of the ruling class. And under the influence of ruling class media deny the dissemination of alternative ideas which serves to the bourgeoisie or more generally the wealthy at the expense of the poor, especially the working class.

"The Political-Economic Media Theory asserts the dependence of ideology on the economic base and directs research attention to the empirical analysis of the structure of ownership and to the way media market forces operate" (Macquail, 1991). This theory claims that the media institution has to be considered primarily as part of the economic system though with close links to the political system.

Frankfurt School and Critical Theory: The label of "the Frankfurt School" is usually applied to the collective thought of those theorists

-most notably, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Max Horkheimer associated with the Institute for Social Research founded in Frankfurt in 1923. The Critical Media Theory concentrates more on ideas than on material structures and emphasizes the ideological role played by media in the interests of a ruling class. It asserts that the media reproduce the essential exploitative relationships and manipulation and legitimate the dominance of capitalism and the subordination of the working class. Marcuse stated that "the media define for us the very terms in which we are to 'think' (or not think) about the world. Their influence has to be assessed not in terms of what we think about this or that particular issue, but in terms of the way in which they condition our entire intellectual gestalt" (Gurevitch, Bennet and Curran 1986).

As an characteristic of industrialized society, people work together in factories or offices, vote for political parties and set up local or national associations to realize their aims. They are represented by "mass organizations" like trade unions and political parties. Briefly, almost every aspects of their lives are organized by "mass organizations" at the expense of their under-representation as separate individuals. According to the Frankfurt School, the mass organizations has spoilt the ideals of liberalism, such as creativity, freedom of speech and expression and so on. They blamed the mass media for playing a major role in this process because mass media were believed to have the ability to manipulate (and that did manipulate) the people. Adorno and Marcuse stated that totalitarianism emerged as a result of corruption of social institutions and the decline of liberal principles brought about by the effects of mass media. They also argued that the media had invaded and subverted the world of traditional high or bourgeois culture by making it more widely available to the masses.

Hegemonic Theory: Hegemonic Media Theory has derived from the work of Gramsci and Althusser and is the culmination of the essentially Marxist approach. It postulates a crucial role for ideology in social development in addition to the economic and class factors as defined by Marx. According to Macquail (1991) "Gramsci's concept of hegemony refers to a ubiquitous and internally consistent culture and ideology which is openly or implicitly favourable to a dominant class or elite. The theory has concentrated on ideology itself, the mechanisms by which it survives and flourishes with the

apparent compliance of its victims (mainly the working class) and succeeds in invading and shaping their consciousness”.

According to Althusser, ideology as “the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence, is not dominant in the sense of being imposed by force by ruling classes, but is a pervasive and deliberate cultural influence which serves to interpret experience of reality in a covert but consistent manner” (Gurevitch 1986). The Hegemonic theory gives a crucial role to the mass media which disseminates ideologies, or ideas, to legitimate the social system. Macquail (1991) interprets that “Althusser conceived this process to work by way of what he called ideological State Apparatus, by comparison with Repressive State Apparatuses (e.g., army, police, etc.), enabled the capitalist state to survive without recourse to direct violence”.

The Social-Cultural Approach

Originally this theory was developed at the Centre of Contemporary Studies in Birmingham during the 1970s, and influenced by the work of Stuart Hall. The definition of “culture” for the theory is important. Hall defines it “as both the means and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they ‘handle’ and respond to the conditions of existence: and as the lived traditions and practices through which those ‘understanding’ are expressed and in which they are embodied” (Gurevitch, Bennet and Curran, 1986).

The Social Cultural Approach was emerged from critiques of the Frankfurt School. Unlike the Frankfurt School, the Social Cultural Theory takes a positive approach to the products of mass media and tries to understand “the meaning and place assigned to popular culture in the experience of particular groups in society” (Macquail, 1991). This theory wishes to perceive how the mass media product plays a role in integrating or subordinating the various segments of society, usually deviant (i.e., marginal groups), or oppositional elements such as the working class, the young, ethnic minorities and so on. The theory also seeks to understand the mutual relationships between the media messages and particular social groups in order to find out the patterns of choice and response.

Structural Functionalist Approach

The theory was developed by the contributions of R. K. Merton in the early 1950s. According to this theory society is viewed as a system of linked working parts, of which media comprise one, each of which is making an essential and characteristic contribution. In this context, media constitutes an important part of the society and fulfil significant functions, which are to keep or improve continuity, order, motivation, adaptation and integration between the different parts of the society. According to the Structural Functionalist Theory, media supplies these needs of society because these are also the needs of individuals in order to function harmoniously in society. The theory claims that the media through a variety of products and programmes responds to each separate demand in consistent ways, and by so doing the media achieve unintended benefits for the society as a whole. Briefly, the Structural Functionalist Theory considers the mass media as an important element which contributes to the survival and cohesiveness of society, irrespective of the particular aims or structures of different societies, though in general its assumptions relate to individualist, market oriented systems.

Although the Structural Functionalist Approach does not therefore claim that the media have or follow particular ideological directions, it does claim that the media function within certain politically negotiated institutional rules.

Conclusion

Since the early days of mass media social scientists have been trying to define and conceptualise likely effects of the media on both individuals and society. As can be seen in this paper, in the different phases of the media researches, as they find some ways of answering the issues, concerning with the media effects, new problems always come up, which are more ambiguous and difficult to answer than those of previous ones. In the first phase of the media researches people were regarded to be simple and defenceless in front of the mass media. This allowed easy and direct ways for answering questions of cause and effect. By today, we know that the relationships between mass media and audience are far more complex and require highly complex methods of analysis and the accomodation of a far larger range of variables.

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