

Lecture- 07



Uses and Gratifications Theory

Practitioners of the uses and gratifications theory study the ways the public consumes media. This theory states that consumers use the media to satisfy specific needs or desires. For example, you may enjoy watching a show like *Dancing With the Stars* while simultaneously tweeting about it on Twitter with your friends. Many people use the Internet to seek out entertainment, to find information, to communicate with like-minded individuals, or to pursue self-expression. Each of these uses gratifies a particular need, and the needs determine the way in which media is used. By examining factors of different groups' media choices, researchers can determine the motivations behind media use (Papacharissi, 2009).

A typical uses and gratifications study explores the motives for media consumption and the consequences associated with use of that media. In the case of *Dancing With the Stars* and Twitter, you are using the Internet as a way to be entertained and to connect with your friends. Researchers have identified a number of common motives for media consumption. These include relaxation, social interaction, entertainment, arousal, escape, and a host of interpersonal and social needs. By examining the motives behind the consumption of a particular form of media, researchers can better understand both the reasons for that medium's popularity and the roles that the medium fills in society. A study of the motives behind a given user's interaction with Facebook, for example, could explain the role Facebook takes in society and the reasons for its appeal.

Uses and gratifications theories of media are often applied to contemporary media issues. The analysis of the relationship between media and violence that you read about in preceding sections exemplifies this. Researchers employed the uses and gratifications theory in this case to reveal a nuanced set of circumstances surrounding violent media consumption, as individuals with aggressive tendencies were drawn to violent media (Papacharissi, 2009).

Symbolic Interactionism

Another commonly used media theory, symbolic interactionism, states that the self is derived from and develops through human interaction. This means the way you act toward someone or something is based on the meaning you have for a person or thing. To effectively communicate,

people use symbols with shared cultural meanings. Symbols can be constructed from just about anything, including material goods, education, or even the way people talk. Consequentially, these symbols are instrumental in the development of the self.

This theory helps media researchers better understand the field because of the important role the media plays in creating and propagating shared symbols. Because of the media's power, it can construct symbols on its own. By using symbolic interactionist theory, researchers can look at the ways media affects a society's shared symbols and, in turn, the influence of those symbols on the individual (Jansson-Boyd, 2010).

One of the ways the media creates and uses cultural symbols to affect an individual's sense of self is advertising. Advertisers work to give certain products a shared cultural meaning to make them desirable. For example, when you see someone driving a BMW, what do you think about that person? You may assume the person is successful or powerful because of the car he or she is driving. Ownership of luxury automobiles signifies membership in a certain socioeconomic class. Equally, technology company Apple has used advertising and public relations to attempt to become a symbol of innovation and nonconformity. Use of an Apple product, therefore, may have a symbolic meaning and may send a particular message about the product's owner.

Media also propagate other noncommercial symbols. National and state flags, religious images, and celebrities gain shared symbolic meanings through their representation in the media.

Spiral of Silence

The spiral of silence theory, which states that those who hold a minority opinion silence themselves to prevent social isolation, explains the role of mass media in the formation and maintenance of dominant opinions. As minority opinions are silenced, the illusion of consensus grows, and so does social pressure to adopt the dominant position. This creates a self-propagating loop in which minority voices are reduced to a minimum and perceived popular opinion sides wholly with the majority opinion. For example, prior to and during World War II, many Germans opposed Adolf Hitler and his policies; however, they kept their opposition silent out of fear of isolation and stigma.

Because the media is one of the most important gauges of public opinion, this theory is often used to explain the interaction between media and public opinion. According to the spiral of silence theory, if the media propagates a particular opinion, then that opinion will effectively silence opposing opinions through an illusion of consensus. This theory relates especially to public polling and its use in the media (Papacharissi).

Media Logic

The media logic theory states that common media formats and styles serve as a means of perceiving the world. Today, the deep rooting of media in the cultural consciousness means that media consumers need engage for only a few moments with a particular television program to understand that it is a news show, a comedy, or a reality show. The pervasiveness of these formats means that our culture uses the style and content of these shows as ways to interpret reality. For example, think about a TV news program that frequently shows heated debates between opposing sides on public policy issues. This style of debate has become a template for handling disagreement to those who consistently watch this type of program.

Media logic affects institutions as well as individuals. The modern televangelist has evolved from the adoption of television-style promotion by religious figures, while the utilization of television in political campaigns has led candidates to consider their physical image as an important part of a campaign (Altheide & Snow, 1991).

Cultivation Analysis

The cultivation analysis theory states that heavy exposure to media causes individuals to develop an illusory perception of reality based on the most repetitive and consistent messages of a particular medium. This theory most commonly applies to analyses of television because of that medium's uniquely pervasive, repetitive nature. Under this theory, someone who watches a great deal of television may form a picture of reality that does not correspond to actual life. Televised violent acts, whether those reported on news programs or portrayed on television dramas, for example, greatly outnumber violent acts that most people encounter in their daily lives. Thus, an

individual who watches a great deal of television may come to view the world as more violent and dangerous than it actually is.

Cultivation analysis projects involve a number of different areas for research, such as the differences in perception between heavy and light users of media. To apply this theory, the media content that an individual normally watches must be analyzed for various types of messages. Then, researchers must consider the given media consumer's cultural background of individuals to correctly determine other factors that are involved in his or her perception of reality. For example, the socially stabilizing influences of family and peer groups influence children's television viewing and the way they process media messages. If an individual's family or social life plays a major part in her life, the social messages that she receives from these groups may compete with the messages she receives from television.

Key Takeaways

The now largely discredited direct effects model of media studies assumes that media audiences passively accept media messages and exhibit predictable reactions in response to those messages. Credible media theories generally do not give as much power to the media, such as the agenda-setting theory, or give a more active role to the media consumer, such as the uses and gratifications theory.

Other theories focus on specific aspects of media influence, such as the spiral of silence theory's focus on the power of the majority opinion or the symbolic interactionism theory's exploration of shared cultural symbolism.

Media logic and cultivation analysis theories deal with how media consumers' perceptions of reality can be influenced by media messages.

Exercises

Media theories have a variety of uses and applications. Research one of the following topics and its effect on culture. Examine the topic using at least two of the approaches discussed in this section. Then, write a one-page essay about the topic you've selected.

- Media bias
- Internet habits
- Television's effect on attention span
- Advertising and self-image
- Racial stereotyping in film

Many of the theories discussed in this section were developed decades ago. Identify how each of these theories can be used today. Do you think these theories are still relevant for modern mass media? Why?