

Lecture- 06



Media Effects Theories

Early media studies focused on the use of mass media in propaganda and persuasion. However, journalists and researchers soon looked to behavioral sciences to help figure out the effect of mass media and communications on society. Scholars have developed many different approaches and theories to figure this out. You can refer to these theories as you research and consider the media's effect on culture.

Widespread fear that mass-media messages could outweigh other stabilizing cultural influences, such as family and community, led to what is known as the direct effects model of media studies. This model assumed that audiences passively accepted media messages and would exhibit predictable reactions in response to those messages. For example, following the radio broadcast of War of the Worlds in 1938 (which was a fictional news report of an alien invasion), some people panicked and believed the story to be true.

Challenges to the Direct Effects Theory

The results of the People's Choice Study challenged this model. Conducted in 1940, the study attempted to gauge the effects of political campaigns on voter choice. Researchers found that voters who consumed the most media had generally already decided for which candidate to vote, while undecided voters generally turned to family and community members to help them decide. The study thus discredited the direct effects model and influenced a host of other media theories (Hanson, 2009). These theories do not necessarily give an all-encompassing picture of media effects but rather work to illuminate a particular aspect of media influence.

Marshall McLuhan's Influence on Media Studies

During the early 1960s, English professor Marshall McLuhan wrote two books that had an enormous effect on the history of media studies. Published in 1962 and 1964, respectively, the Gutenberg Galaxy and Understanding Media both traced the history of media technology and illustrated the ways these innovations had changed both individual behavior and the wider culture. Understanding Media introduced a phrase that McLuhan has become known for: "The medium is the message." This notion represented a novel take on attitudes toward media—that the media themselves are instrumental in shaping human and cultural experience.

His bold statements about media gained McLuhan a great deal of attention as both his supporters and critics responded to his utopian views about the ways media could transform 20th-century life. McLuhan spoke of a media-inspired “global village” at a time when Cold War paranoia was at its peak and the Vietnam War was a hotly debated subject. Although 1960s-era utopians received these statements positively, social realists found them cause for scorn. Despite—or perhaps because of—these controversies, McLuhan became a pop culture icon, mentioned frequently in the television sketch-comedy program *Laugh-In* and appearing as himself in Woody Allen’s film *Annie Hall*.

The Internet and its accompanying cultural revolution have made McLuhan’s bold utopian visions seem like prophecies. Indeed, his work has received a great deal of attention in recent years. Analysis of McLuhan’s work has, interestingly, not changed very much since his works were published. His supporters point to the hopes and achievements of digital technology and the utopian state that such innovations promise. The current critique of McLuhan, however, is a bit more revealing of the state of modern media studies. Media scholars are much more numerous now than they were during the 1960s, and many of these scholars criticize McLuhan’s lack of methodology and theoretical framework.

Despite his lack of scholarly diligence, McLuhan had a great deal of influence on media studies. Professors at Fordham University have formed an association of McLuhan-influenced scholars. McLuhan’s other great achievement is the popularization of the concept of media studies. His work brought the idea of media effects into the public arena and created a new way for the public to consider the influence of media on culture (Stille, 2000).

Agenda-Setting Theory

In contrast to the extreme views of the direct effects model, the agenda-setting theory of media stated that mass media determine the issues that concern the public rather than the public’s views. Under this theory, the issues that receive the most attention from media become the issues that the public discusses, debates, and demands action on. This means that the media is

determining what issues and stories the public thinks about. Therefore, when the media fails to address a particular issue, it becomes marginalized in the minds of the public (Hanson).

When critics claim that a particular media outlet has an agenda, they are drawing on this theory. Agendas can range from a perceived liberal bias in the news media to the propagation of cutthroat capitalist ethics in films. For example, the agenda-setting theory explains such phenomena as the rise of public opinion against smoking. Before the mass media began taking an antismoking stance, smoking was considered a personal health issue. By promoting antismoking sentiments through advertisements, public relations campaigns, and a variety of media outlets, the mass media moved smoking into the public arena, making it a public health issue rather than a personal health issue (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). More recently, coverage of natural disasters has been prominent in the news. However, as news coverage wanes, so does the general public's interest.

Through a variety of antismoking campaigns, the health risks of smoking became a public agenda.

Quinn Dombrowski – Weapons of mass destruction – CC BY-SA 2.0.

Media scholars who specialize in agenda-setting research study the salience, or relative importance, of an issue and then attempt to understand what causes it to be important. The relative salience of an issue determines its place within the public agenda, which in turn influences public policy creation. Agenda-setting research traces public policy from its roots as an agenda through its promotion in the mass media and finally to its final form as a law or policy (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).