
Mass Communication: Mass Society Theory

Mass society theory, which first appeared in the late nineteenth century, was the dominant theory of the 1920s. (Baran & Davis, 2002) It provided various basic assumptions about the individuals, the roles of media, and the nature of social changes. There were three major changes in the United States society during that period – urbanization, industrialization, and modernization. Industrialization brought in more leisure time for people to read and consume media. (Broussard, 2019) However, media consumption usually includes a cost, while the elites usually have more resources to the technology. Industrialization also provoked the trend of urbanization. People from rural areas surged into the urban cities, marking the first time that the population of cities is more than farms (2019). The living norms are extremely different in urban areas compared to rural where people live together. (Broussard, 2019) Immigrants from abroad also begin to join the “melting pot” society of America. The living norms were also different as well as the language they were using.

When people gradually moved into cities, they abandoned the rural life pattern where people are closer in terms of relationship and bonds. The reliance of media, therefore, was better than ever before, compensating the interaction with society that was missing from the urban cities. Media became a powerful force within society that can subvert essential norms and values and thus undermine the social order (Baran & Davis, 2002). An example would be how Hitler’s Nazi party turned radio into an effective propaganda tool that helped consolidate his power. In the United States, many schemes were proposed in the 1920s that would have turned control of broadcasting over to churches, schools, or government agencies. (Baran & Davis, 2002) Scholars believed that the media have the power to reach out and directly influence the minds of average people so that their thinking is transformed. (Baran & Davis, 2002; Davis 1976) One assumption of the mass society theory is that, once media transforms people’s thinking, all sorts of bad long-term consequences are likely to result (Marcuse, 1941). Even today, almost every social problem can be linked in some way to the media (Baran & Davis, 2002), such as the social media’s influence in smoking (Yoo, Yang, & Cho, 2016).

In the mass society theory, average people are thought to be vulnerable to media (Kreiling, 1984). People during that time were pure receiver of the mass media, lacking the ability to interact and state their own opinion. Also due to urbanization, people were cut off and isolated from traditional social institutions that previously protected them from manipulation. Another assumption of mass society theory is that the social chaos initiated by media will be resolved by establishment of a totalitarian social order (Davis, 1976). The final assumption for mass society theory is that, mass media inevitably debase higher form of culture, bringing about a general decline in civilization (Davis, 1976).

Another early concept of all-powerful media is the propaganda theory. According to Baran & Davis (2002), “Propaganda involves the no-holds-barred use of communication to propagate specific beliefs and expectations”(Baran & Davis, 2002). Most propaganda theories are influenced by Behaviorism and Freudianism. One of the propaganda theories is Harold Lasswell’s propaganda theory. The theory blended Behaviorism and Freudianism into a pessimistic vision of media. It stated that, when people are confronted by powerful threats, they turn to propaganda for reassurance (Baran & Davis, 2002). Another propaganda theory is

Walter Lippmann's theory of public opinion formation. It believes that average people cannot govern themselves, so we need a place to control information gathering and distribution, usually by elites. (Baran & Davis, 2002) Later on, John Dewey provided his critics on the two propaganda theories, refusing to accept the need for technology that would protect people from themselves. He believed that people could learn to defend themselves through education.

The "magic bullet" model originated from Harold Lasswell's book, 'propaganda technique of the world war'. The magic bullet theory was based on early examples of the effects of mass media, such as Nazi propaganda and the effects of Hollywood. People were assumed to be 'uniformly controlled by their biologically based 'instincts' and that they react more or less uniformly to whatever 'stimuli' came along'(Lowery, 1995). The war of the worlds and household radios were often cited as the example of this effect. Paul Lazarsfeld challenged the concept by introducing the two-step flow of communication, where ideas flow from mass media to opinion leaders to greater public. The limited effect theories of mass communication hence became the dominant focus after mass society theories (Broussard, 2019).

According to the textbook of Mass communication theory, theories are "any organized set of concepts, explanations, and principles of some aspect of human experience"(Baran & Davis, 2002). In my opinion, theories provide rules for us to understand the phenomenon in a certain field of study. It also "shares a commitment to an increased understanding of social and communicative life and a value for high quality scholarship" (Miller, 2005, Baran & Davis, 2002). Scholars identified four major categories of communication theories – postpositivism, cultural theory, critical theory, and normative theory.

Postpositivism came from the beginning, when scholars are keen to use the physical science methods of positivism to examine the mass communication world. Positivism refers to gaining knowledge through empirical, measurable, and observable phenomena, as used mostly in physical science fields. Postpositivism uses similar approach, with its epistemology to be held through logical search for regularities and casual relationships utilizing the scientific method. (Baran & Davis, 2002)

Cultural theory seeks to understand contemporary cultures by analyzing the structure and content of communication. Its epistemology focuses on the subjective interaction between the observer and the community. (Baran & Davis, 2002) Cultural theory does not aim for the scientific process of postpositivism, but to understand the world using a more qualitative view.

Critical theory seeks to gain knowledge from a different perspective than the previous two. It does not want to use scientific analysis to examine the social world, nor does it wish to understand the social world through analyzing the content and structure of mass communication. It gains knowledge from the social world in order to change it, believing that there exist deep flaws in it. The epistemology of critical theory is that knowledge is advanced only when it serves to free people the powerful. (Baran & Davis, 2002)

Normative theory is to guide us to an operation media system that fits the social norm. Its epistemology is based on how we can compare the current media system to the ideal media system. We can learn from normative theory of how an ideal media system should operate.

As we look into articles such as 'Theory and Research in Mass Communication' by Bryant and Miron and 'Mass Communication Research Trends' by Kamhawi and Weaver, we understand

that the goal of these theories is to provide us better understanding of the social world we live in. The theories add sense to a given equation and set good research apart from great research. It also provides explanation for connections we found between two or more concepts, while providing suggestions for connections we should be looking at.

The importance of mass media is shrinking nowadays, given rise to the dominance of social media. User-generated contents are playing a more significant role than ever. People are simply posting their own ideas and thoughts on their own blogs and social media. Facebook has finally admit the media role it is representing (Enriquez, 2019), while we may also acknowledge that other platforms, such as YouTube and twitter, are also to some extent, media companies. As media audiences devolve into smaller fragments, owning the ability to choose their own media content and source (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), it is harder than ever for authorities to gate keep. The media world is not like what it was before with only a limited media platform where the content can be easily monitored. Self-monitoring is more crucial than ever, therefore, general people should be as educated as possible when it comes to media literacy.

The normative theory I developed is called the invisible hand theory. Similar to the invisible hand in Adam Smith's 'The Wealth of Nations', the mass media world should have a similar explanation on how the media world would meet its equilibrium. In Adam Smith's theory, the invisible force would help a free market reach its equilibrium. I would argue that the same methodology would work in the mass media world as well. Receivers would buy contents that are more meaningful and entertaining, reaching equilibrium where better media contents would survive the competition. The higher the willingness of consumers to receive certain media content would encourage producers to provide better media content. Similar to libertarian theory, government can simply let go of any form of control of the media. In a media world dominated by social media, I believe there still exist three services media companies should provide.

First of all, interesting content may now always be good for the society. Violence or sexual content may attract consumers' interest, but may be harmful, especially to kids. Media companies should develop artificial intelligence to eliminate certain noxious content as immediate as they come out, which Facebook and YouTube are already doing. Even though the government should do as less as possible in controlling the media, they still should enact laws to disapprove the outlying content that includes things such as violence, drug abuse etc. But anything beyond those categories should be allowed. Secondly, the media should take good use of their resources to provide education regarding the media. In a media society free of almost any kind of external control, general public should learn basic concept of media literacy and information on how to filter fake news. Lastly, media companies should hold public debate, inviting general public to share thoughts on how the media world could be made better. For the government, referendum regarding media issues would be beneficial when necessary.

There are various flaws in this model. Just like libertarian theory, it seems to be too positive about individual ethics and rationality. However, that is what all the education is set for. People may argue that the general public may not be objective in terms of what content would be most beneficial to the society as a whole, but would the authorities know better? When we let the authorities control everything like we always do, large corporation and the government may put their interest above the society's interest. I don't think that government should subsidize media companies in this model because when there are subsidies, there would be collusion between the media and government.

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