The War for the Public's Mind

Media Construction of Reality

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The Public's Mind and the Media

Joost Meerloo, a Dutch physician and psychoanalyst, argued that the mechanization of modern life had influenced people to become more passive and to conform to social situations Meerloo affirmed that people do not focus on personal values, nor do they follow their conscience and ethical evaluations; they focus more on the values presented by the mass media. The headlines in the morning paper provide a temporary political vision; the radio announces suggestions into their ears; television news keeps them in constant fear and passively fixated on negativity.[1] Along these lines, Jaques Ellul, a French philosopher, points out that the average citizen does not have time to be properly informed, and sometimes they cannot be taught how to evaluate the media. The citizen is then seen as being wrapped in a kaleidoscope where thousands of images without proper evaluation follow one another. Each image deals with a different subject but disappears as the next image appears.[2] This passivity, this inability to distinguish facts from fiction, and this dependence on the media make the individual the perfect target of propaganda warfare and bias, which often takes place in the media.

Television, as the primary media, generates a false sense of connection with the actors presented. It is an ideal tool for promoting propaganda; it becomes the parent who is always there[3] and the "one-eyed nanny" of the American people, otherwise known as the Western public mind.[4]

Des Freedman, a professor at the University of London, explains in *Paradigms of Media Power* that the power of the media is in imposing a discussion. Media power is a relationship among institutions, actors, and contexts that represent economic, political, technological, and cultural forces. Four paradigms of media power emerge from the relationships among these actors and their forces: consensus, chaos, control, and contradiction.[5] Des Freedman emphasizes that access to the media is somewhat uneven. Authors like Hallin and Mancini, Curran, and many others have focused on media models and how their content is selected, broadcasted, or published.

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky developed a model of the media system called the "propaganda model." It is based on the US media system. Like all models, it has flaws, but it serves as a paradigm to help understand the synchroni-

zation between private media and institutional powers. To explain the model, they looked at the usage of money and power and how it enabled prioritized news programming while marginalizing dissidence. This allowed government and power groups to disseminate their messages to the public. Herman and Chomsky contend that selection of programmed news is filtered through media owners, the companies that pay for media advertising, and by the original source of information.[6] There are more theoretical media models, but the one provided by Herman and Chomsky illustrates a broader view of the powers that operate in the selection of media content. The model goes beyond the political assumptions of the authors.

Psychology and the media

"Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind. To get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, control is the object now. And to generate heat not light is the intention. To keep everybody in the helpless state engendered by prolonged mental rutting is the effect of many ads and much entertainment alike."[7]

The quotation above is from the preface to media theorist Marshall McLuhan's 1951 book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*. The book is a collection of essays on the impact of the media upon symbols, corporations, and audiences.

Edward Barrett, director of the Office of War Information (OWI), wrote that "old-boy networks rooted in common wartime experiences in psychological warfare extended well beyond the social sciences." "Among OWI alumni," he wrote in 1953, "are the publishers of Time, Look, Fortune, and several dailies; editors of such magazines as Holiday, Coronet, Parade, and the Saturday Review, editors of the Denver Post. New Orleans Times-Picayune, and others; the heads of the Viking Press, Harper & Brothers, and Farrar, Straus, and Young; two Hollywood Oscar winners; a two-time Pulitzer prizewinner; the board chairman of Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and a dozen key network executives; President Eisenhower's chief speechwriter; the editor of Reader's Digest international editions; at least six partners of large advertising agencies; and a dozen noted social scientists."[8] Nelson Rockefeller was one of the foremost advocates of psychological operations during the war and was Eisenhower's advisor on this matter from 1954 to 1955.[9] The connection in the US and England between former propaganda professionals and psychological warfare with private media is very well documented. It is undoubtedly the reason US audiences are less aware of the government's influence on news content. This lack of awareness is because bias and

propaganda is camouflaged as news, and the audience believes that there is freedom of the press.[10]

The relationship between the media and psychology has reached such a point that within this academic discipline that a sub-discipline called *media psychology* has emerged. This discipline links the science of communication to psychology. Like other disciplines that emerged from psychology, media psychology arose because of the need to apply psychological knowledge outside academics.[11] One of the first applications of psychology within the media was propaganda. At the beginning of the 20th century, these were straightforward techniques. However, later propagandists learned to use psychological techniques that allowed them to achieve their purposes through more subtle means. One example is creating emotion when exposed to propaganda.[12] The media system can introduce values into society and thus modify its behaviors—it has become an educational tool.[13]

David Giles points out that there is a presumption that there are social stereotypes that influence representation in the media. Still, it is the media system that ends up characterizing social stereotypes. The media impacts psychology so tremendously that media stereotypes influence the social reality and the identity of groups and individuals.[14] For example, Giles states, men learn what it is to be a man by the media's representation of men; based on previous media representations, not on real actions of men that they interact with in life. The same happens with other social groups.

On the other hand, the fiction of television series and movies is so realistic today that it causes reality and fiction to get confused in the minds of the audience. This sense of imagination causes the audience to identify itself with outlandish fictional characters, causing irrational responses from the audience to events in their actual day-to-day life.[15] The audience mimics the social behaviors they observe in the media without realizing that these characters are exaggerated fictitious creations.

Studies on the effects of the media

The relationship between the media and the population has been the object of analysis since the beginning of media existence. Pioneering scholars like Lasswell, Parker, and McLuhan have analyzed the processes of mass communication as early as the 1930s. Also, the US government established the *Hays Motion Picture Production Code* to safeguard the public's interpretation of the media, as previous empirical knowledge demonstrated the mimicry between screen and audience.

Years before, a private entity financed a series of studies developed by scholars from seven universities that analyzed the effect of films on children and adolescents: the *Payne Fund Studies*. These studies encompassed four years of socio-

psychological research and investigated films' effects on the ideals, health, emotions, and sexual behavior of the audience. The studies confirmed the use of analysis of consequences arising from exposure to the media.[16]

Another endeavor hosted by the Rockefeller Foundation held secret seminars where discussions centered around ways to shape American public opinion through propaganda design. The goal was to prevent the audience from being exposed to foreign propaganda speeches. The foundation recruited many scholars who specialized in psychological warfare during WWII.[17] The foundation chose Harold Lasswell's thesis. It focused on manipulating audience feelings through the use of mass media to help avoid the propagandistic effects emanating from the National Socialist and Soviet regimes.[18] Another scholar related to the Rockefeller Foundation was Daniel Lerner. He was an officer in the Psychological Warfare Division and demonstrated how the media were capable of shaping society.[19] The Rockefeller Foundation concluded that the effects of media propaganda were not quite as impactful as earlier believed but that its power was indeed considerable.[20]

Because of media power perception, Paul Lazarsfeld conducted one of the first studies on the effect of radio on the population for the Rockefeller Foundation. Lazarsfeld analyzed Orson Wells' program *War of the Worlds.*, and found that variables such as social class, education, or critical thinking ability influenced the effects of the broadcast on the population.[21] The people who most believed in Orson Walls's address were the least educated.[22] Lazarsfeld was able to demonstrate that socioeconomic variables influenced the effect of media credibility—the lower the educational level, the greater the gullibility. The study also proved that the impact of the media upon radio audiences and audiences who read the news was different: the radio audience was more likely to be influenced by the information it heard whereas readers were more likely to question the printed news.[23]

Magic Bullet and Minimal-effects

The first named theory about the effects of the media on the audience was the magic bullet theory, also known as the hypodermic needle model. It is defined as a stimulus-response (S-R) theory. It assumes the individual is isolated from the rest of the members of society and allows for a direct and uncontaminated relationship between the sender and the receiver. In this direct-effects model, the media would have a direct influence on the receiver (the audience). This model arose because of the first analyses of propaganda and organizational theorists mentioned previously.

The second theory is minimal-effects or two-step flow. This second model emerged from the study of psychological experiments developed during WWII. These film experiments exposed American soldiers to propaganda films to at-

tempt to change their views on the war—using movies to inform soldiers of the reasons for the war. However, the movies did not affect their opinions about the war, as the first media effects model suggested.[24] This experiment with films, called Why We Fight, changed the notion that the media produced homogeneous effects in society, and introduced the idea that other variables, such as level of education or initial opinion, influenced the outcome of exposure to the advertising, as Lazarsfeld previously suggested.[25]

Years later, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*, by Bernard Berelson and Paul Lazarsfeld, revealed that the message broadcast in different media formats did not have a direct effect on the audience. Instead, influence was exerted when the message was conveyed by respected leaders, thus creating a two-step effect in persuasion.[26] This result became a reality in 1955 with the Personal Influence study. This was followed by Joseph Klapper, who suggested that exposure to the media reinforced previous opinions, rather than changing them. Klapper also indicated that there were variables in the audience's environment that could alter the outcome of the effect.[27] Klapper introduced the Phenomenistic theory, which states a series of generalities frame the study of the effects of the media and its inability to influence the audience by itself.[28] Klapper states that a propaganda monopoly is seen as a single uncontested vision portrayed by the press. It can only occur if the audience was predisposed to that opinion and if the respected leaders shared it. Likewise, Klapper suggests that media persuasion reinforces previously held attitudes, rather than changes them.[29] While the direct-effects model provided a basic S-R model with a passive audience, the Klapper model demonstrates a complex Orientation-Stimulus-Reasoning-Orientation-Responses (O-S-R-O-R) model with an active audience. This last model corresponds to the audience model proposed by Gabriel Tarde and Robert Parker, when they tested it on a deliberative and discursive audience.

Klapper was an advisor to the Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography and various agencies that studied the impact of television on audience behavior. The author also worked as an investigator for CBS and testified before the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy. The motive for his testimony was to advocate against regulations on the media industry in matters such as tobacco, sexuality, or violence.[30] During his appearance, Klapper assured the Commission that the violence represented in the media was not the primary inducer of crime and delinquency in audiences.[31] Klapper came under suspicion from the beginning. However, Klapper only suggested analyzing the effects of media, psychological predispositions, and the social context where the message was received. He also stressed that the belief structure among the au-

dience was of higher necessity. The author never spoke of a minimal-effects model.[32] Years later, new empirical studies on the media, focusing mainly on television would provide new models on the effects of the media. These theories opposed Klapper's theories. Regardless, Klapper's most important contribution was selective exposure—individuals tend to tune into and believe reporting that they are predisposed to believe.

This theory, and Lazarsfeld's studies demonstrated the influence of propaganda based on socioeconomic variables and allowed propagandists to get closer to their targeted social groups. Selective media exposure based on personal predispositions is valuable information when designing psychological or propaganda campaigns. Knowing what kind of person is open to media for a reason is the perfect way to achieve the desired effect on the audience through personalized advertising. Understanding audience use and selection of media can aid in personalized, targeted advertising.

Back to Notable Effects

Criticism of the minimal-effects model was not long in coming. Critics of the model argued that the experiments used were based on surveys and quantitative methods that measured short-term effects. Also, they were based on the observation of changes in specific positions or attitudes.[33]

On the other hand, Paul Lazarsfeld had already indicated that the mentality of the radio audience differed from the mindset of the written press audience. Similarly, Neil Postman, an American sociologist, points out how television changed public discourse—the method of communication affects our way of thinking, the content of thought, and culture. Postman explains that members of oral cultures think and share differently than members print cultures. In cultures that focus on print, the emphasis is on logic, linearity, and exposition. Postman further states that television works with images that evoke emotions; the image has more hierarchy than the plot—the evening news is unrelated, unconnected pieces of information. As in mass society, Cartesian linearity in the presentation of news has fallen by the wayside, impeding the audience from having cardinal points to allow for reflection.[34] For Postman, television responds to the principle of entertainment—even the news is a spectacle. Television has changed the way we see reality.[35] Television has altered reality to such an extent that the distinction between entertainment and news has become artificial; everything is part of a television spectacle, interspersed with publicity from advertisers.[36] The mindset of the television audience is more influenced by the information it receives compared to radio and print audiences. The cognitive process and belief for less discerning and educated views is more suggestible through the emotional impact of television images.

The Media's Construction of Reality

Denis McQuail, a British sociologist and scholar of communication processes, suggests that mass media influences political and commercial campaigns by creating reality and social norms, generating social reaction, and provoking institutional and cultural changes.[37] The author believes that the media can be a powerful tool for those who can control it since they can attract attention to matters that are of convenience, while others are omitted. The media confers legitimacy; they are channels of persuasion and mobilization; the media can establish audiences and maintain them, apart from offering a psychological reward through its use and gratification. The author continues by suggesting mass media as a fast, flexible tool, and relatively easy to plan and control.[38]

Since World War II, televised political campaigns indicate that the US (and by extension its sphere of influence) has accepted slogans, forceful images, and emotional appeals as useful information when passing judgment on the government or lifestyle. During World War II, posters tried, through emotional induction, to explain the complexity of war.[39] Propaganda repeated on multiple channels, came to shape reality and limit belief in alternatives.[40] Images have become a tool for reporting events around the world—they can change the meaning of ongoing issues. Images create landmarks for the audience.[41]

Seeing journalists wearing gas masks during the Persian Gulf War did not demonstrate reality—that there was no gas attack—the image indicated that there was a real attack. On screen, the cognitive hierarchy begins with the image, followed by visual headlines, then audio. The nature of television prevents depth and reasoning; the images are what penetrates to the audience.[42] The main effect of media content is to replace the real world with hyper-realistic, ratings--generating, simulations of the world.[43] A phrase attributed to an Israeli information minister reads, "You cannot win a war without television."[44] Thus, McQuail proposes the fourth stage of media effects: the construction of reality.[45] Within the construction of reality, the constructivist paradigm tells us that each person builds their existence based on the media content they consume and perceive. However, it is difficult to escape the general purpose of mass media.[46]

Considerations

Ever since Gabriel Tarde defined the public mind as an audience—as a community of psychological deliberative media—new theories have been developed about the relationships of the audience with published or broadcasted facts. Walter Lippmann realized that the experience of the audience with facts was not direct and that in the communicative process the cognitive development of the

public mind could be altered. This is known today as perception management. There have been many studies trying to prove that the media does not affect the audience, but other empirical studies confirm the opposite. The mimicry between published symbology and social behavior has been observable and verifiable since the beginning of the diffusion of the media system.

That is why power groups strive to control the information disseminated in the media. Antonio Gramsci called it cultural hegemony. Theories that showed empirical data on the mimicry between symbology in the media and society did not take long to arrive. Years later, theories such as Cultivation theory, or Agenda Setting, would demonstrate how the media system, mainly television, has overwhelming effects on the psychology of the audience.

These theories shape a third model of media effects on audiences—cumulative effects. This model suggests that the repetition and symmetry of central messages through the media system influence the audience, without it having the possibility of avoiding the messages by changing the channel. Repeated exposure to the same message leads the audience to assume it as their reality, not artificially created by the media.[47] In this model, the audience is not the focus of attention; the model assumes that the media content is so pervasive that it is impossible to avoid it. This model assumes that the effects, while not direct, are long-term and lasting.[48]

These theories on the relationship between communication technologies and the audience generated a field of study named media ecology.[49] The mind of the audience is one of the most analyzed elements on the face of the earth. To control the public mind is to dominate an entire society through suggestion, while coercion is relegated to marginal use with dissenters. ❑

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