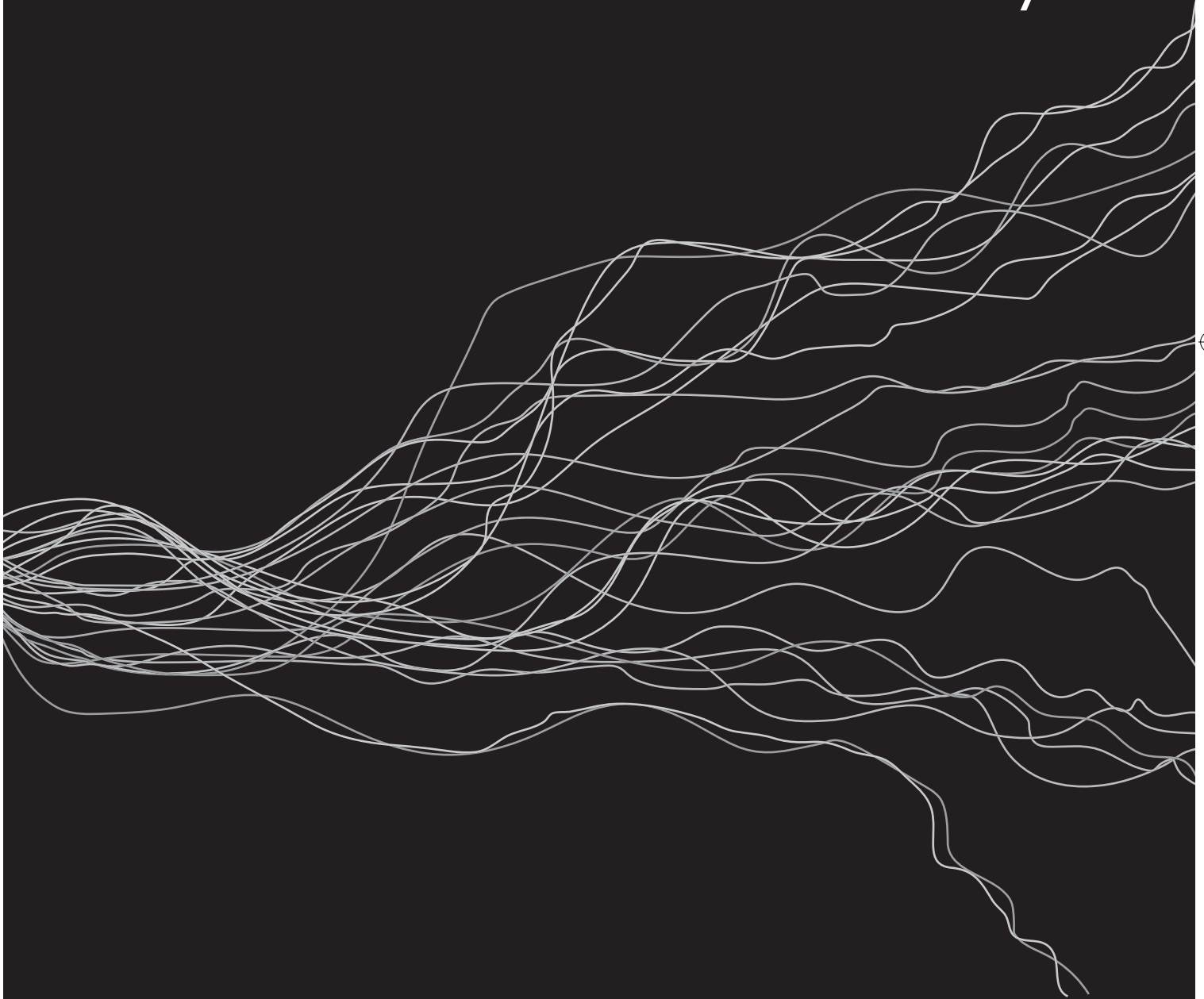


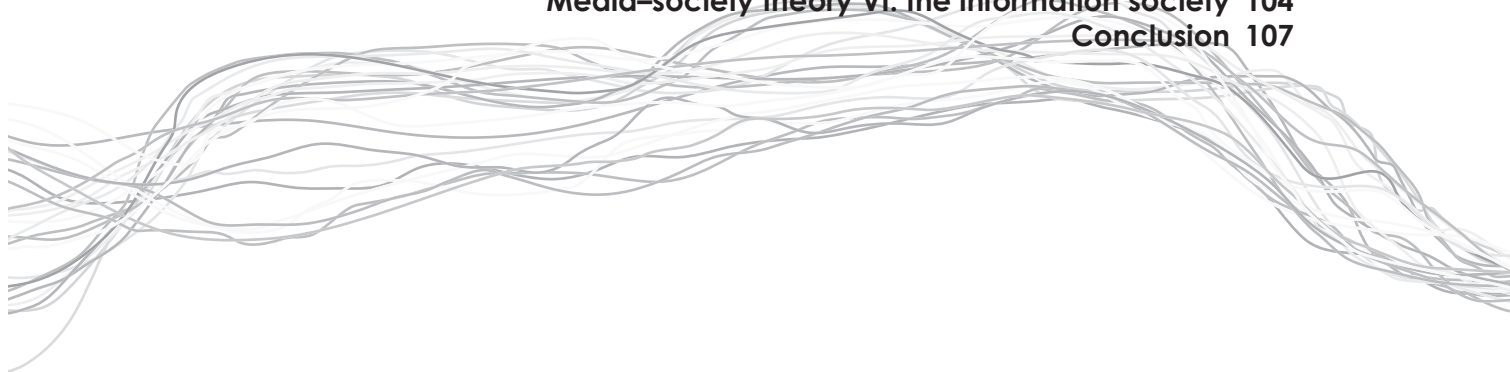
McQuail's Mass Communication Theory



4

Theory of Media and Society

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In this chapter, we look more closely at ideas about the relation between mass media and society, reserving the cultural implications for Chapter 5, even though society and culture are inseparable and the one cannot exist without the other. Treating society first also implies a primacy for society that is questionable, since the media and what they produce can also be considered as part of 'culture'. In fact most media theory relates to both 'society' and 'culture' together and has to be explained in relation to both. For present purposes, the domain of 'society' refers to the material base (economic and political resources and power), to social relationships (in national societies, communities, families, etc.) and to social roles and occupations that are socially regulated (formally or informally). The domain of 'culture' refers primarily to other essential aspects of social life, especially to *symbolic expression, meanings* and *practices* (social customs, institutional ways of doing things and also personal habits).

Most of the chapter is concerned with explaining the main theories or theoretical perspectives that have been developed for understanding the way media work and accounting for the typical cultural production that they engage in. Most of these theories do make the assumption that material and social circumstances are a primary determinant, but there is also scope for recognizing the independent influence that ideas and culture can have in their turn on material conditions. Before the theories of media and society are considered, the main issues or broad themes that have framed inquiry into mass communication are described. A general frame of reference for looking at the connections between media and society is also proposed. First of all, we return in more detail to the conundrum of the relation between culture and society.

Media, Society and Culture: Connections and Conflicts

Mass communication can be considered as both a 'societal' and a 'cultural' phenomenon. The mass media institution is part of the structure of society, and its technological infrastructure is part of the economic and power base, while the ideas, images and information disseminated by the media are evidently an important aspect of our culture (in the sense defined above).

In discussing this problem, Rosengren (1981b) offered a simple typology which cross-tabulates two opposed propositions: 'social structure influences culture'; and its reverse, 'culture influences social structure'. This yields four main options that are available for describing the relation between mass media and society, as shown in Figure 4.1.

If we consider mass media as an aspect of society (base or structure), then the option of *materialism* is presented. There is a considerable body of theory that views culture as dependent on the economic and power structure of a society. It is assumed that whoever owns or controls the media can choose, or set limits to, what they do. This is the essence of the Marxist position.

If we consider the media primarily in the light of their contents (thus more as culture), then the option of *idealism* is indicated. The media are assumed to have a

		Social structure influences culture	
		Yes	No
Culture influences social structure	Yes	<i>Interdependence</i> (two-way influence)	<i>Idealism</i> (strong media influence)
	No	<i>Materialism</i> (media are dependent)	<i>Autonomy</i> (no casual connection)

Figure 4.1 Four types of relation between culture (media content) and society

potential for significant influence, but it is the particular ideas and values conveyed by the media (in their content) which are seen as the primary causes of social change, irrespective of who owns and controls. The influence is thought to work through individual motivations and actions. This view leads to a strong belief in various potential media effects for good or ill. Examples include the promotion by the media of peace and international understanding (or having the opposite effect), of pro- or antisocial values and behaviour, and of enlightenment or the secularization and modernization of traditional societies. A form of idealism or 'mentalism' concerning media also lies behind the view that changes in media forms and technology can change our way of gaining experience in essential ways and even our relations with others (as in the theories of McLuhan 1962, 1964).

The two options remaining – of interdependence and of autonomy – have found less distinctive theoretical development, although there is a good deal of support in common sense and in evidence for both. *Interdependence* implies that mass media and society are continually interacting and influencing each other (as are society and culture). The media (as cultural industries) respond to the demand from society for information and entertainment and, at the same time, stimulate innovation and contribute to a changing social-cultural climate, which sets off new demands for communication. The French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, writing about 1900, envisaged a constant interweaving of influences: 'technological developments made newspapers possible, newspapers promote the formation of broader publics, and they, by broadening the loyalties of their members, create an extensive network of overlapping and shifting groupings' (Clark, 1969). Today, the various influences are so bound together that neither mass communication nor modern society is conceivable without the other, and each is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for the other. From this point of view we have to conclude that the media may equally be considered to mould or to mirror society and social changes.

The option of *autonomy* in the relations between culture and society is not necessarily inconsistent with this view, unless interpreted very literally. It is at least very likely that society and mass media can be independent of each other up to a point. Societies that are culturally very similar can sometimes have very different media systems. The autonomy position also supports those who are sceptical about the power of the media to influence ideas, values and behaviour – for instance, in allegedly promoting conformity, stimulating ‘modernity’ or damaging the cultural identity of poorer or less powerful countries. There are different views about how much autonomy in relation to society the media can have. The debate is especially relevant to the central thesis of ‘internationalization’ or ‘**globalization**’, which implies a convergence and homogenization of a worldwide culture, as a result of the media. The autonomy position would suggest that imported media culture is superficial and need not significantly touch the local culture.

- * It follows that **cultural imperialism** is not likely to happen simply by chance or against the will of the culturally ‘colonized’ (see Chapter 10).

An inconclusive outcome

As with many of the issues to be discussed, there are more theories than there is solid evidence, and the questions raised by this discussion are much too broad to be settled by empirical research. According to Rosengren (1981b: 254), surveying what scattered evidence he could find, research gives only ‘inconclusive, partly even contradictory, evidence about the relationship between social structure, societal values as mediated by the media, and opinions among the public’. This assessment is just as valid thirty years later, suggesting that no single theory holds under all circumstances.

It seems that the media can serve to repress as well as to liberate, to unite as well as to fragment society, to promote as well as to hold back change. What is also striking in the theories to be discussed is the ambiguity of the role assigned to the media. They are as often presented in a ‘progressive’ as in a ‘reactionary’ light, according to whether the dominant (pluralist) or alternative (critical, radical) perspective is adopted. Despite the uncertainty, there can be little doubt that the media, whether moulders or mirrors of society, are the main messengers *about* society, and it is around this observation that the alternative theoretical perspectives can best be organized.

Mass Communication as a Society-wide Process: the Mediation of Social Relations and Experience

A central presupposition, relating to questions both of society and of culture, is that the media institution is essentially concerned with the production and distribution of *knowledge* in the widest sense of the word. Such knowledge enables us to make some sense of our experience of the social world, even if the ‘taking of meaning’ occurs in relatively autonomous and varied ways. The information, images and ideas made available by the media may, for most people, be the main source of an awareness of a shared past time (history) and of

a present social location. They are also a store of memories and a map of where we are and who we are (identity) and may also provide the materials for orientation to the future. As noted at the outset, the media to a large extent serve to constitute our perceptions and definitions of social reality and normality for the purposes of a public, shared social life, and are a key source of standards, models and norms.

The main thing to emphasize is the degree to which the different media have come to be interposed between ourselves and any experience of the world beyond our immediate personal environment and our direct sensory observation. They also provide most of us with the main point of contact with the institutions of the society in which we live. In a secular society, in matters of values and ideas, the mass media tend to 'take over' from the early influences of school, parents, religion, siblings and companions. We are consequently very dependent on the media for a large part of our wider 'symbolic environment' (the 'pictures in our heads'), however much we may be able to shape our own personal version. It is the media which are likely to forge the elements which are held in common with others, since we now tend to share much the same media sources and 'media culture'. Without some degree of shared perception of reality, whatever its origin, there cannot really be an organized social life. Hjarvard (2008) sketches a theory of social and cultural change in which the media gradually develop historically until they emerge in the nineteenth century as an independent social institution. More recently this has developed further to become a means of integrating other social institutions.

The mediation concept

These comments can be summed up in terms of the concept of mediation of contact with social reality. Mediation involves several different processes. As noted already, it refers to the relaying of second-hand (or third-party) versions of events and conditions which we cannot directly observe for ourselves. Secondly, it refers to the efforts of other actors and institutions in society to contact us for their own purposes (or our own supposed good). This applies to politicians and governments, advertisers, educators, experts and authorities of all kinds. It refers to the indirect way in which we form our perceptions of groups and cultures to which we do not belong. An essential element in mediation as defined here is the involvement of some technological device between our senses and things external to us.

Mediation also implies some form of *relationship*. Relationships that are mediated through mass media are likely to be more distant, more impersonal and weaker than direct personal ties. The mass media do not monopolize the flow of information we receive, nor do they intervene in all our wider social relations, but their presence is inevitably very pervasive. Early versions of the idea of 'mediation of reality' were inclined to assume a division between a public terrain in which a widely shared view of reality was constructed by way of mass media messages, and a personal sphere where individuals could communicate freely and directly. More recent developments of technology have undermined this simple division, since a much larger share of communication and thus of our contact with others and our environmental reality is mediated via technology (telephone, computer, fax, e-mail, etc.), although on an individual and a private basis. The implications of this change are still unclear and subject to diverse interpretations.

Thompson (1993, 1995) has suggested a typology of interaction to clarify the consequences of the new communication technologies that have detached social interaction and symbolic exchange from the sharing of a common locale. He notes (1993: 35) that 'it has become possible for more and more individuals to acquire information and symbolic content through mediated forms of interaction'. He distinguished two types of interaction alongside face-to-face interaction. One of these, which he calls 'mediated interaction', involves some technical medium such as paper, electrical wires, and so on, which enables information or symbolic content to be transmitted between individuals who are distant in space or time or both. The partners to mediated interaction need to find contextual information as well having fewer ones than in face-to-face contact.

The other type is called 'mediated quasi-interaction' and refers to relations established by the media of mass communication. There are two main distinguishing features. First, in this case, participants are not oriented towards other specific individuals (whether as sender or receiver), and symbolic forms (media content) are produced for an indefinite range of potential recipients. Secondly, mediated quasi-interaction is monological (rather than dialogical), in the sense that the flow of communication is one-way rather than two-way. There is also no direct or immediate response expected from the receiver. Thompson argues that the 'media have created a new kind of **public sphere** which is despatialized and non-dialogical in character' (1993: 42) and is potentially global in scope.

*

Mediation metaphors

In general, the notion of mediation in the sense of media intervening between ourselves and 'reality' is no more than a metaphor, although it does point to several of the roles played by the media in connecting us to other experience. The terms that are often used to describe this role reflect different attributions of purposefulness, **interactivity** and effectiveness. Mediation can mean different things, ranging from neutrally informing, through negotiation, to attempts at manipulation and control. The variations can be captured by a number of communication images, which express different ideas about how the media may connect us with reality. These are presented in Box 4.1.

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4.1 Metaphors for media roles

- As a *window* on events and experience, which extends our vision, enabling us to see for ourselves what is going on, without interference from others.
- As a *mirror* of events in society and the world, implying a faithful reflection (albeit with inversion and possible distortion of the image), although the angle and direction of the mirror are decided by others, and we are less free to see what we want.

- As a *filter, gatekeeper or portal*, acting to select parts of experience for special attention and closing off other views and voices, whether deliberately or not.
- As a *signpost, guide or interpreter*, pointing the way and making sense of what is otherwise puzzling or fragmentary.
- As a *forum or platform* for the presentation of information and ideas to an audience, often with possibilities for response and feedback.
- As a *disseminator* who passes on and makes information not available to all.
- As an *interlocutor* or informed partner in conversation who responds to questions in a quasi-interactive way.

Some of these images are to be found in the media's own self-definition – especially in the more positive implications of extending our view of the world, providing integration and continuity and connecting people with each other. Even the notion of filtering is often accepted in its positive sense of selecting and interpreting what would otherwise be an unmanageable and chaotic supply of information and impressions. These versions of the mediating process reflect differences of interpretation of the role of the media in social processes. In particular, the media can extend our view of the world in an open-ended way or they can limit or control our impressions. Secondly, they may choose between a neutral, passive role and one that is active and participant. They can vary on two main dimensions: one of openness versus control, another of neutrality versus being actively participant. The various images discussed do not refer to the truly interactive possibilities of newer media, in which the 'receiver' can become a 'sender' and make use of the media in interaction with the environment. However, it is now clear that new online media can fulfil most of the roles indicated as well as additional ones, as outlined in Chapter 6 (p. 139), with reference to Internet **portals**.

*

A Frame of Reference for Connecting Media with Society

The general notion that mass communication interposes in some way between 'reality' and our perceptions and knowledge of it refers to a number of specific processes at different levels of analysis. The Westley and MacLean (1957) model (see p. 86) indicates some of the additional elements needed for a more detailed frame of reference. Most significant is the idea that the media are sought out by institutional advocates as channels for reaching the general public (or chosen groups) and for conveying their chosen perspective on events and conditions. This is broadly true of competing politicians and governments, advertisers, religious leaders, some thinkers, writers and artists, and so on. We are reminded that experience has always been mediated by the institutions of society (including the family), and what has happened is that a new mediator (mass communication) has been added which can extend, compete with, replace or even run counter to the efforts of other social institutions.

The simple picture of a ‘two-step’ (or multiple) process of mediated contact with reality is complicated by the fact that mass media are not completely free agents in relation to the rest of society. They are subject to formal and informal control by the very institutions (including their own) that have an interest in shaping public perceptions of reality. Their objectives do not necessarily coincide with the aim of relaying some objective ‘truth’ about reality. An abstract view of the ‘mediation of reality’, based on Westley and MacLean but also reflecting these points, is sketched in Figure 4.2. The media provide their audience with a supply of information, images, stories and impressions, sometimes according to anticipated needs, sometimes guided by their own purposes (e.g. gaining revenue or influence), and sometimes following the motives of other social institutions (e.g. advertising, making propaganda, projecting favourable images, sending information). Given this diversity of underlying motivation in the *selection* and *flow* of the ‘images of reality’, we can see that mediation is unlikely to be a purely neutral process. The ‘reality’ will always be to some extent selected and constructed and there will be certain consistent biases. These will reflect especially the differential opportunities available for gaining media access and also the influence of ‘media logic’ in constituting reality (see pp. 330–31).

Figure 4.2 also represents the fact that experience is neither completely nor always mediated by the mass media. There are still certain direct channels of contact with social institutions (e.g. political parties, work organizations, churches). There is also some possibility of direct personal experience of some of the more distant events reported in media (e.g. crime, poverty, illness, war and conflict). The potentially diverse sources of information (including personal contact with others, and via the Internet) may not be completely independent from each other, but they provide some checks on the adequacy and reliability of ‘quasi-mediated interaction’.

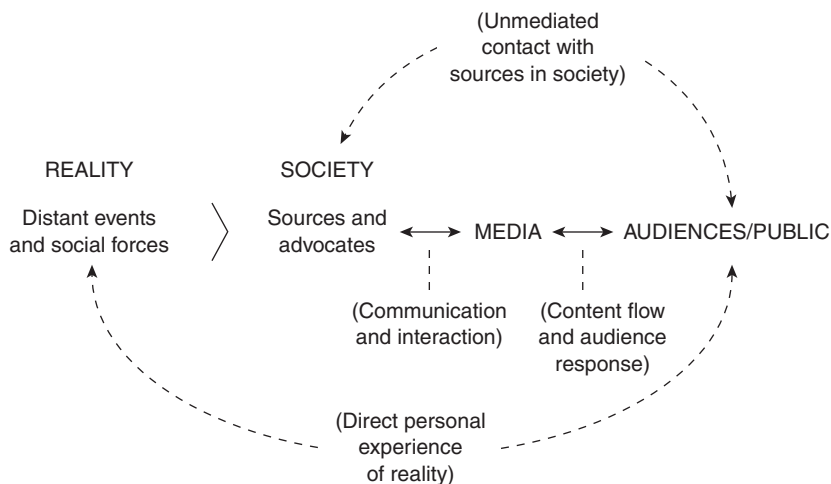


Figure 4.2 A frame of reference for theory formation about media and society: media interpose between personal experience and more distant events and social forces (based on Westley and MacLean, 1957)

Main themes of media-society theory

The main themes and issues to be dealt with in this book have already been introduced in Chapter 1 and also in Chapter 3 under the heading 'Early perspectives on media and society'. Here we return in more depth to these matters. The theories available to us are fragmentary and selective, sometimes overlapping or inconsistent, often guided by conflicting ideologies and assumptions about society. Theory formation does not follow a systematic and logical pattern but responds to real-life problems and historical circumstances. Before describing some of the theories that have been formulated, it is useful to look at the main themes that have shaped debate during the 'first age of mass communication', especially relating to power, integration, social change and space/time.

Theme I: Power and Inequality

The media are invariably related in some way to the prevailing structure of political and economic power. It is evident, first of all, that media have an economic cost and value, are an object of competition for control and access. Secondly, they are subject to political, economic and legal regulation. Thirdly, mass media are very commonly regarded as effective instruments of power, with the potential capacity to exert influence in various ways. Fourthly, the power of mass media is not equally available to all groups or interests. Box 4.2 introduces the theme of media power by naming the main kinds of effects, whether intended or not, that have been attributed to the mass media.

Hypothetical aims or effects of mass media power 4.2

- Attracting and directing public attention
- Persuasion in matters of opinion and belief
- Influencing behaviour
- Providing definitions of reality
- Conferring status and legitimacy
- Informing quickly and extensively

In discussions of media power, two models are usually opposed to each other: one a model of dominant media, the other of pluralist media (see Figure 4.3). The first of these sees media as exercising power on behalf of other powerful institutions. Media organizations, in this view, are likely to be owned or controlled by a small number of powerful interests and to be similar in type and purpose. They disseminate a limited and undifferentiated view of the world shaped by the perspectives of ruling interests.

	Dominance	Pluralism
Societal source	Ruling class or dominant elite	Competing political, social, cultural interests and groups
Media	Under concentrated ownership and of uniform type	Many and independent of each other
Production	Standardized, routinized	Creative, free, original Controlled
Content and world view	Selective and decided from 'above'	Diverse and competing views, responsive to audience demand
Audience	Dependent, passive, organized on large scale	Fragmented, selective, reactive and active
Effects	Strong and confirmative of established social order	Numerous, without consistency or predictability of direction, but often no effect

Figure 4.3 Two opposing models of media power (mixed versions are more likely to be encountered)

Audiences are constrained or conditioned to accept the view of the world offered, with little critical response. The result is to reinforce and legitimate the prevailing structure of power and to head off change by filtering out alternative voices.

The pluralist model is, in nearly every respect, the opposite, allowing for much diversity and unpredictability. There is no unified and dominant elite, and change and democratic control are both possible. Differentiated audiences initiate demand and are able to resist persuasion and react to what the media offer. In general, the 'dominance' model corresponds to the outlook both of conservatives pessimistic about the 'rise of the masses' and also of critics of the capitalist system disappointed by the failure of the revolution to happen. It is consistent with a view of the media as an instrument of 'cultural imperialism' or a tool of political propaganda. The pluralist view is an idealized version of what liberalism and the free market will lead to. While the models are described as total opposites, it is possible to envisage mixed versions, in which tendencies towards mass domination or economic monopoly are subject to limits and counter-forces and are 'resisted' by their audiences. In any free society, minorities and opposition groups should be able to develop and maintain their own alternative media.

The question is whether media exercises power in their own right and interest. However, this possibility exists and is to be found in fictional as well as factual portrayals of media moguls and empires. There are cases of media owners using their position to advance some political or financial goal or to enhance their own status. There is prima facie evidence of effects on public opinion and actions. More often, the independent power the media is said to cause unintended harmful effects. These relate, for example, to the undermining of democratic politics, cultural and moral debasement, and the causing of personal harm and distress, mainly in the pursuit of profit. Essentially they are said to exert power without responsibility and use the shield of **freedom of the press** to avoid accountability. This discussion of media effects gives rise to a number of questions which are posed in Box 4.3.

*

The power of mass media: questions arising 4.3



- Are the media under control?
- If so, who controls the media and in whose interest?
- Whose version of the world (social reality) is presented?
- How effective are the media in achieving chosen ends?
- Do mass media promote more or less equality in society?
- How is access to media allocated or obtained?
- How do the media use their power to influence?
- Do the media have power of their own?

Theme II: Social Integration and Identity

A dual perspective on media

Theorists of mass communication have often shared with sociologists an interest in how social order is maintained and in the attachment of people to various kinds of social unit. The media were early associated with the problems of rapid urbanization, social mobility and the decline of traditional communities. They have continued to be linked with social dislocation and a supposed increase in individual immorality, crime and disorder. A good deal of early media theory and research focused on questions of integration. For instance, Hanno Hardt (2003) has described the concerns of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century German theorists with the integrative role of the press in society. The principal functions of the press he discerned are set out in Box 4.4.

The perceived social functions of the early press 4.4



- Binding society together
- Giving leadership to the public
- Helping to establish the 'public sphere'
- Providing for the exchange of ideas between leaders and masses
- Satisfying needs for information
- Providing society with a mirror of itself
- Acting as the conscience of society

Mass communication as a process has often been typified as predominantly individualistic, impersonal and isolating, and thus leading to lower levels of social

solidarity and sense of community. Addiction to television has been linked to non-participation and declining 'social capital' in the sense of participating in social activities and having a sense of belonging (Putnam, 2000). The media have brought messages of what is new and fashionable in terms of goods, ideas, techniques and values from city to country and from the social top to the base. They have also portrayed alternative value systems, potentially weakening the hold of traditional values.

An alternative view of the relation between mass media and social integration has also been in circulation, based on other features of mass communication. It has a capacity to unite scattered individuals within the same large audience, or to integrate newcomers into urban communities and immigrants into a new country by providing a common set of values, ideas and information and helping to form identities (Janowitz, 1952; Clark, 1969; Stamm, 1985; Rogers, 1993). This process can help to bind together a large-scale, differentiated modern society more effectively than would have been possible through older mechanisms of religious, family or group control. In other words, mass media seem in principle capable both of supporting and of subverting social cohesion. The positions seem far apart, one stressing centrifugal and the other centripetal tendencies, although in fact in complex and changing societies both forces are normally at work at the same time, one compensating to some extent for the other.

Ambivalence about social integration

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The main questions that arise for theory and research can thus (much as in the case of power) be mapped out on two criss-crossing dimensions. One refers to the direction of effect: either *centrifugal* or *centripetal*. The first refers to the stimulus towards social change, freedom, individualism and **fragmentation**. The second refers to effects in the form of more social unity, order, cohesion and integration. Both social integration and dispersal can be valued differently, depending on preference and perspective. One person's desirable social control is another person's limitation of freedom; one person's individualism is another person's non-conformity or isolation. So the second dimension can be described as normative, especially in the assessment of these two opposite tendencies of the working of mass media. The question it represents is whether the effect at issue should be viewed with *optimism* or *pessimism* (McCormack, 1961; Carey, 1969). While early critics of mass communication (e.g. C.W. Mills) emphasized the dangers of over-integration and social conformity, the individualizing effects of newer media have come to be viewed by social critics as socially corrosive (e.g. Sunstein, 2006).

In order to make sense of this complicated situation, it helps to think of the two versions of media theory – centrifugal and centripetal – each with its own position on a dimension of evaluation, so that there are, in effect, four different theoretical positions relating to social integration (see Figure 4.4). These can be named as follows:

- 1 *Freedom, diversity*. This is the optimistic version of the tendency for media to have a fragmenting effect on society that can also be liberating. The media spread new ideas and information and encourage mobility, change and modernization.
- 2 *Integration, solidarity*. This optimistic version of the reverse effect of mass communication as a unifier of society stresses the needs for a sense of identity, belonging and citizenship, especially under conditions of social change.

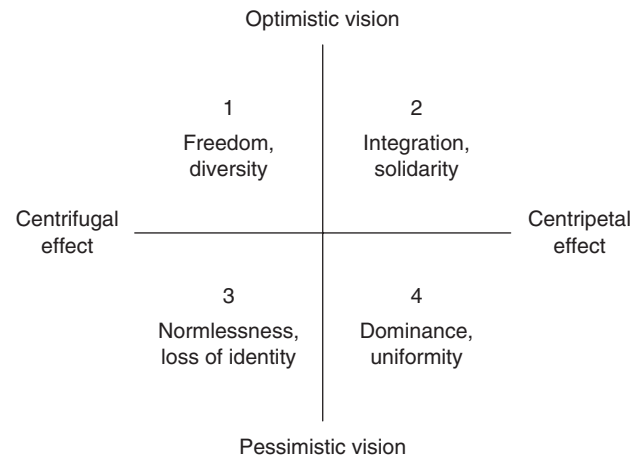


Figure 4.4 Four versions of the consequences of mass communication for social integration

- 3 *Normlessness, loss of identity.* The pessimistic alternative view of greater freedom points to detachment, loss of belief, rootlessness and a society lacking in social cohesion and social capital.
- 4 *Dominance, uniformity.* Society can be over-integrated and over-regulated, leading to central control and conformity, with the mass media as instruments of control.

This version of the integrating effects of mass communication leaves us with a number of questions (Box 4.5) that have to be answered for different societies at different points in time and no general answer is possible.

Questions about media and integration 4.5

- Do mass media increase or decrease the level of social control and conformity?
- Do media strengthen or weaken intervening social institutions, such as family, political party, local community, church, trade union?
- Do media help or hinder the formation of diverse groups and identities based on subculture, opinion, social experience, social action, and so on?
- Do mass media promote individual freedom and choice of identity?
- Do online media have a bias against integration?



Theme III: Social Change and Development

A key question that follows on from the preceding discussion is whether or not mass communication should be viewed primarily as a cause or as an effect of social change.

Wherever the media exert influence they also cause change; the options of social centralization or dispersal are two main kinds of change that have been discussed. As we have seen, no simple answer can be expected, and different theories offer alternative versions of the relationship. At issue are the alternative ways of relating three basic elements: (1) the technology of communication and the form and content of media; (2) changes in society (social structure and institutional arrangements); and (3) the distribution among a population of opinion, beliefs, values and practices. All consequences of mass media are potentially questions about social change, but most relevant for theory have been the issues of 'technological determinism' and the potential to apply mass media to the process of development. The first refers to the effect on society of changing communications media. The second refers to the more practical question of whether or not (and how) mass media might be applied to economic and social development (as an 'engine of change' or 'multiplier of modernity'). Questions about change and development are set out in Box 4.6.



4.6 Questions about change and development

- What part do or can media play in major social change?
- Are the media typically progressive or conservative in their working?
- Can media be applied as an 'engine of change' in the context of development?
- How much of media-induced change is due to technology rather than to typical content?
- Do the media diffuse innovations effectively?

The story of the rise of the media, as told in Chapter 2, certainly tends to depict media as a generally progressive force, especially because of the link between democracy and freedom of expression and between media and the opening of markets and liberalization of trade. However, there are other narratives to consider. For instance, critical theory has typically viewed the media in modern times as conformist and even reactionary. In the early twentieth century, as in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, the media were employed as a tool of change, even if with mixed success.

The case of 'modernization' and development in Third World countries received much attention in the early post-Second World War years, when mass communication was seen, especially in the USA, as a powerful means of spreading American ideals throughout the world and at the same time helping to resist communism. But it was also promoted as an effective instrument of social and economic development, consistent with the spirit of free enterprise. Several effects were predicted to follow on from the voluntary import of US mass media content. These included: consumer aspirations, values and practices of democracy, ideas of liberty, literacy (see Lerner, 1958). Subsequently, there was a large investment in communication projects designed to diffuse many technical and social innovations (Rogers and Shoemaker, 1973). The results were hard to evaluate and the efforts described gradually became redundant or impossible to pursue in a changed world.

In more recent years, the biggest change associated with mass media has probably been the transition from communism in Europe after 1985. The role of the media in these events is still a matter of debate, although the process of *glasnost* did give the media a part to play in internal change within the Soviet Union, and once started they seemed to amplify it.

Theme IV: Space and Time

Communication has often been said to have space and time dimensions and also to 'build bridges' over discontinuities in our experience created by distance and time. There are numerous aspects to each proposition. Communication makes possible an extension of human activity and perception across distance in several ways. Most obviously, in the form of transportation we are taken from place to place and our contacts, experiences and horizons are extended. Symbolic communication can achieve something of the same effect without our having to move physically. We are also provided with maps and guides to places and routes to points in real space. The location of our activity is defined by webs of communication, by shared forms of discourse and by much that is expressed in language and other forms of expression. Virtually all forms of symbolic communication (books, art, music, newspapers, cinema, etc.) are identified with a particular location and have a varying 'transmission' range that can be specified geographically. Processes of mass communication are typically described and registered in spatial terms, with reference to particular media markets, circulation or reception areas, audience 'reach', and so on. At the same time, the end of cost and capacity constraints on electronic transmission means that communication is no longer tied to any one territory and is, in principle, delocalized.

Political and social units are territorial and use communications of many kinds to signal this fact. Communication is always initiated at one point and received at one or many other points. Bridges are built and physical distance seems to be reduced by ease of communication and reception. The Internet has created various kinds of 'virtual space' and new maps to go with it, especially those that show the web of interconnections. New technologies have made it possible for messages sent to materialize at distant points. The account could be continued, but the richness of the theme of space can be appreciated.

Much the same could be said in relation to time. The multiplication and acceleration of channels for transmission and exchange of communication have made instantaneous contact with other sources and destinations an everyday possibility. We no longer have to wait for news or wait to send it, from whatever place. There is effectively no time restriction on the amount of information that can be sent. There is increasingly no time restriction on when we can receive what we want to receive. Technologies of storage and access allow us to disregard the constraint of time on much communication behaviour. All that is lacking is more time to do all this. Paradoxically, although new technologies make it possible and easy to store our memories and all the information we want, information and culture seem to be subject to faster obsolescence and decay. The limits are increasingly set by human capacity to process any more any

faster. The long-heralded problem of information overload has arrived in daily experience. Whatever the costs and benefits, it is hard to deny the revolutionary character of recent changes. For key propositions, see Box 4.7.

4.7 Media effects relating to space and time: key propositions

- Media have abolished distance
- Virtual space becomes an extension of real space
- Media serve as collective memory
- The gap between technical transmission and human reception capacity widens exponentially
- Media lead to delocalization and detemporalization

Media–Society Theory I: the Mass Society

In this and the following sections, several distinctive theoretical approaches to these themes are discussed. They are presented more or less in chronological order of their formulation and they span the range from optimistic to pessimistic, from critical to neutral. The first to be dealt with, mass society theory, is built around the concept of ‘mass’ which has already been discussed in Chapter 3. The theory emphasizes the interdependence of institutions that exercise power and thus the integration of the media into the sources of social power and authority. Content is likely to serve the interests of political and economic power holders. The media cannot be expected to offer a critical or an alternative definition of the world, and their tendency will be to assist in the accommodation of the dependent public to their fate.

The ‘dominant media’ model sketched above reflects the mass society view. Mass society theory gives a primacy to the media as a causal factor. It rests very much on the idea that the media offer a view of the world, a substitute or pseudo-environment, which is a potent means of manipulation of people but also an aid to their psychic survival under difficult conditions. According to C. Wright Mills (1951: 333), ‘Between consciousness and existence stand communications, which influence such consciousness as men have of their existence.’

Mass society is, paradoxically, both ‘atomized’ and centrally controlled. The media are seen as significantly contributing to this control in societies characterized by largeness of scale, remoteness of institutions, isolation of individuals and lack of strong local or group integration. Mills (1951, 1956) also pointed to the decline of the genuine public of classic democratic theory and its replacement by shifting aggregates of people who cannot formulate or realize their own aims in political action. This regret has been echoed more recently by arguments about the decline of a ‘public sphere’ of democratic debate and politics, in which large-scale, commercialized mass media have been implicated (Dahlgren, 1995, 2005).

Although the expression ‘mass society’ is no longer much in vogue, the idea that we live in a mass society persists in a variety of loosely related components. These include a nostalgia (or hope) for a more ‘communitarian’ alternative to the present individualistic age as well as a critical attitude towards the supposed emptiness, loneliness, stress and consumerism of life in a contemporary free-market society. The seemingly widespread public indifference towards democratic politics and lack of participation in it are also often attributed to the cynical and manipulative use of mass media by politicians and parties.

The actual abundance and diversity of many old and new forms of media seem, however, to undermine the validity of mass society theory in its portrayal of the media as one of the foundation stones of the mass society. In particular, the new electronic media have given rise to an optimistic vision of what society can become that runs counter to the central mass society thesis. The relative monopoly control typical of the rise of the original mass media is now challenged by the rise of online media that are much more accessible to many groups, movements and also individuals. This challenges not just the economic power of old media but also their guaranteed access to large national audiences at the time of their own choosing. There is a darker side to this vision, however, since the Internet also opens up new means of control and **surveillance** of the online population and is not immune to control by media conglomerates. The central ideas are stated in Box 4.8.

Mass society theory of media: 4.8 main propositions

- Society is organized centrally and on a large scale
- The public becomes atomized
- Media are centralized, with one-way transmission
- People come to depend on media for their identity
- Media are used for manipulation and control

Media–Society Theory II: Marxism and Political Economy

While Karl Marx only knew the press before it was a true mass medium, the tradition of Marxist analysis of the media in capitalist society is still of some relevance. There have been several variants of Marxist-inspired analysis of modern media, merging into the present-day ‘critical **political economy**’ (Murdock and Golding, 2005).

The question of power is central to Marxist interpretations of mass media. While varied, these have always emphasized the fact that ultimately they are instruments of control by and for a ruling class. The founding text is Marx’s *German Ideology*, where he states:

The class that has the means of material production 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. (cited in Murdock and Golding, 1977: 15)

Marxist theory posits a direct link between economic ownership and the dissemination of messages that affirm the legitimacy and the value of a class society. These views are supported in modern times by evidence of tendencies to great concentration of media ownership by capitalist entrepreneurs (e.g. Bagdikian, 1988; McChesney, 2000) and by much correlative evidence of conservative tendencies in content of media so organized (e.g. Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

Revisionist versions of Marxist media theory in the twentieth century concentrated more on ideas than on material structures. They emphasized the ideological **effects of media** in the interests of a ruling class, in 'reproducing' the essentially exploitative relationships and manipulation, and in legitimating the dominance of capitalism and the subordination of the working class. Louis Althusser (1971) conceived this process to work by way of what he called 'ideological state apparatuses' (all means of **socialization**, in effect), which, by comparison with 'repressive state apparatuses' (such as the army and police), enable the capitalist state to survive without recourse to direct violence. Gramsci's (1971) concept of *hegemony* relates to this tendency. Marcuse (1964) interpreted the media, along with other elements of mass production systems, as engaged in 'selling' or imposing a whole social system which is at the same time both desirable and repressive.

All in all, the message of Marxist theory is plain, but questions remain unanswered. How might the power of the media be countered or resisted? What is the position of forms of media that are not clearly in capitalist ownership or in the power of the state (such as independent newspapers or public broadcasting)? Critics of mass media in the Marxist tradition either rely on the weapon of exposure of propaganda and manipulation (e.g. Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Herman, 2000) or pin their hopes on some form of collective ownership or alternative media as a counter to the media power of the capitalist class. The main contemporary heir to Marxist theory is to be found in political economy theory.

Political-economic theory is a socially critical approach that focuses primarily on the relation between the economic structure and dynamics of media industries and the ideological content of media. From this point of view, the media institution has to be considered as part of the economic system, with close links to the political system. The consequences are to be observed in the reduction of independent media sources, concentration on the largest markets, avoidance of risks, and reduced investment in less profitable media tasks (such as investigative reporting and documentary film-making). We also find neglect of smaller and poorer sectors of the potential audience and often a politically unbalanced range of news media.

The main strength of the approach lies in its capacity for making empirically testable propositions about market determinations, although the latter are so numerous and complex that empirical demonstration is not easy. While the approach centres on media activity as an economic process leading to the commodity (the media product or content), there is a variant of the political-economic approach that

suggests that the primary product of the media is really *audience*. This refers to the fact that they deliver audience attention to advertisers and shape the behaviour of media publics in certain distinctive ways (Smythe, 1977). What commercial media sell to their clients is a certain more or less guaranteed number of potential customers according to a market-relevant profile. This perspective is more difficult to apply to online advertising and in particular to the **search engine** as a major vehicle of advertising (Bermejo, 2009; and see below, p. 402). *

The political economy approach is now being applied to the case of the Internet. Fuchs (2009) builds on Smythe's ideas in suggesting that the key to the Internet economy lies especially in the **commodification** of the users of free access platforms which deliver targets for advertisers and publicists as well as often providing the content at no cost to networks providers and site-owners. In the case of very popular websites such as *Myspace* and *YouTube*, the distinction from mass communication is not very clear. *

The relevance of political-economic theory has been greatly increased by several trends in media business and technology (perhaps also enhanced by the fall from grace of a strictly Marxist analysis). First, there has been a growth in **media concentration** worldwide, with more and more power of ownership being concentrated in fewer hands and with tendencies for mergers between electronic hardware and software industries (Murdock, 1990; McChesney, 2000; Wasko, 2004). Secondly, there has been a growing global 'information economy' (Melody, 1990; Sussman, 1997), involving an increasing convergence between telecommunication and broadcasting. Thirdly, there has been a decline in the public sector of mass media and in direct public control of telecommunication (especially in Western Europe), under the banner of 'deregulation', 'privatization' or 'liberalization' (McQuail and Siune, 1998; van Cuilenburg and McQuail, 2003). Fourthly, there is a growing rather than diminishing problem of information inequality. The expression '**digital divide**' refers to the inequality in access to and use of advanced communication facilities (Norris, 2002), but there are also differences in the quality of potential use. The essential propositions of political-economic theory (see Box 4.9) have not changed since earlier times, but the scope for application is much wider (Mansell, 2004). *

Critical political-economic theory: main propositions 4.9

- Economic control and logic are determinant
- Media structure always tends towards monopoly
- Global integration of media ownership develops
- Contents and audiences are commodified
- Real diversity decreases
- Opposition and alternative voices are marginalized
- Public interest in communication is subordinated to private interests
- Access to the benefits of communication are unequally distributed

Media–Society Theory III: Functionalism

Functionalist theory explains social practices and institutions in terms of the ‘needs’ of the society and of individuals (Merton, 1957). Society is viewed as an ongoing system of linked working parts or subsystems, each making an essential contribution to continuity and order. The media can be seen as one of these systems. Organized social life is said to require the continued maintenance of a more or less accurate, consistent, supportive and complete picture of the working of society and of the social environment. It is by responding to the demands of individuals and institutions in consistent ways that the media achieve unintended benefits for the society as a whole.

The theory depicts media as essentially self-directing and self-correcting. While apolitical in formulation, it suits pluralist and voluntarist conceptions of the fundamental mechanisms of social life and has a conservative bias to the extent that the media are more likely to be seen as a means of maintaining society as it is rather than as a source of major change.

Although functionalism in its early versions has been largely discarded in sociology, it survives as an approach to the media in new forms (e.g. Luhmann, 2000) and it still plays a part in framing and answering research questions about the media. It remains useful for some purposes of description and it offers a language for discussing the relations between mass media and society and a set of concepts that have proved hard to replace. This terminology has the advantage of being to a large extent shared by mass communicators themselves and by their audiences and of being widely understood.

Specifying the social functions of media

The main functions of communication in society, according to Lasswell (1948), were surveillance of the environment, correlation of the parts of the society in responding to its environment, and the transmission of the cultural heritage. Wright (1960) developed this basic scheme to describe many of the effects of the media and added entertainment as a fourth key media function. This may be part of the transmitted culture but it has another aspect – that of providing individual reward, relaxation and reduction of tension, which makes it easier for people to cope with real-life problems and for societies to avoid breakdown (Mendelsohn, 1966). With the addition of a fifth item, mobilization – designed to reflect the widespread application of mass communication to political and commercial propaganda – we can name the following set of basic ideas about media tasks (functions) in society:

Information

- Providing information about events and conditions in society and the world.
- Indicating relations of power.
- Facilitating innovation, adaptation and progress.

Correlation

- Explaining, interpreting and commenting on the meaning of events and information.
- Providing support for established authority and norms.
- Socializing.
- Co-ordinating separate activities.
- Consensus building.
- Setting orders of priority and signalling relative status.

Continuity

- Expressing the dominant culture and recognizing subcultures and new cultural developments.
- Forging and maintaining commonality of values.

Entertainment

- Providing amusement, diversion and the means of relaxation.
- Reducing social tension.

Mobilization

- Campaigning for societal objectives in the sphere of politics, war, economic development, work and sometimes religion.

We cannot give any general rank order to these items, or say anything about their relative frequency of occurrence. The correspondence between function (or purpose) and precise content of media is not exact, since one function overlaps with another, and the same content can serve different functions. The set of statements refers to functions for society and needs to be reformulated in order to take account of the perspectives either of the media themselves (their own view of their tasks) or of the individual user of mass media, as in '**uses and gratifications**' theory and research (see Chapter 16). Media function can thus refer both to more or less objective tasks of the media (such as news or editorializing) and to motives or benefits as perceived by a media user (such as being informed or entertained).

Among the general 'functions for society', most agreement seems to have been achieved on the idea of the media as a force for social integration (as noted already). Studies of media content have also often found that mainstream mass media tend to be conformist and supportive rather than critical of dominant values. This support takes several forms, including the avoidance of fundamental criticism of key institutions, such as business, the justice system and democratic politics; giving differential access to the 'social top'; and symbolically rewarding those who succeed according to the approved paths of virtue and hard work, while symbolically punishing those who fail or deviate (see Chapter 18). Dayan and Katz (1992) argue that major social occasions portrayed on television (public or state ceremonies, major sporting events) and often drawing huge audiences worldwide help to provide otherwise missing social cement. One of the effects of what they call '**media events**'

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is to confer status on leading figures and issues in society. Another is on social relations: 'With almost every event, we have seen *communitas and camaraderie* emerge from normally atomized – and sometimes deeply divided – societies' (1992: 214).

In the light of these observations, it is not so surprising that research on effects has failed to lend much support to the proposition that mass media, for all their attention to crime, sensation, violence and deviant happenings, are a significant cause of social, or even individual, crime and disorganization. The more one holds to a functionalist theory of media, the less logical it is to expect socially disintegrative effects. Even so, this theoretical approach can be applied in cases of apparent harm. All social systems are at risk of failure or error and the term 'dysfunction' was coined to label effects that seem to have a negative character. The media, lacking clear purpose and direction in society, are more prone to dysfunctions than other institutions and are less easy to correct. However, what is functional or not is nearly always disputable on subjective grounds. For instance, media critical of authorities are performing a useful watchdog role, but from another point of view they are undermining authority and national unity. This is the fundamental and irremediable weakness of functionalism. Key propositions of the theory are found in Box 4.10.

4.10 Functionalist theory of media: main propositions

- Media are an institution of society
- They perform the necessary tasks of order, control and cohesion
- They are also necessary for adaptation and change
- Functions are recognizable in the effects of the media
- Management of tension
- There are also unintended harmful effects which can be classified as dysfunctions

Media–Society Theory IV: Social Constructionism

- * Social **constructionism** is an abstract term for a very broad and influential tendency in the social sciences, sparked off especially by the publication of Berger and Luckman's book *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967). In fact the intellectual roots are a good deal deeper, for instance in the symbolic interactionism of Blumer (1969) and the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz (1972). In this work, the notion of society as an objective reality pressing on individuals is countered with the alternative (and more liberating) view that the structures, forces and ideas of society are created by human beings, continually recreated or reproduced and also open to challenge and change. There is a general emphasis on the possibilities for action and also for choices in the understanding of 'reality'. Social reality has to be made and given

meaning (interpreted) by human actors. These general ideas have been formulated in many different ways, according to other theoretical ideas, and represent a major paradigm change in the human sciences in the later twentieth century.

They have also had a particular appeal to students of mass communication and are at the centre of thinking about processes of media influence as well as being a matter of debate. The general idea that mass media influence what most people believe to be reality is of course an old one and is embedded in theories of propaganda and ideology (for instance, the role of the media as producing a 'false consciousness'). The unthinking, but unceasing, promotion by media of nationalism, patriotism, social conformity and belief systems could all be interpreted as examples of social construction. Later critical theory argued for the possibility of such ideological impositions being contested and resisted, emphasizing the possibilities for reinterpreting the hegemonic message. Even so, the emphasis in critical theory is on the media as a very effective *reproducer* of a selective and biased view of reality.

Aside from the question of ideology, there has been much attention to social construction at work in relation to mass media news, entertainment and popular culture and in the formation of public opinion. In respect of news, there is now more or less a consensus among media scholars that the picture of 'reality' that news claims to provide cannot help but be a selective construct made up of fragments of factual information and observation that are bound together and given meaning by a particular frame, angle of vision or perspective. The genre requirements of news and the routines of news processing are also at work. Social construction refers to the processes by which events, persons, values and ideas are first defined or interpreted in a certain way and given value and priority, largely by mass media, leading to the (personal) construction of larger pictures of reality. Here, the ideas of 'framing' and '**schemata**' play their part (see Chapter 14). Central propositions are in Box 4.11. *

Social constructionism: main propositions 4.11

- Society is a construct rather than a fixed reality
- Media provide the materials for reality construction
- Meanings are offered by media, but can be negotiated or rejected
- Media selectively reproduce certain meanings
- Media cannot give an objective account of social reality (all facts are interpretations)

Media–Society Theory V: Communication Technology Determinism

There is a long and still active tradition of searching for links between the dominant communication technology of an age and key features of society, bearing on all the

themes outlined above. To label this body of thinking ‘determinist’ does not do justice to the many differences and nuances, but there is a common element of ‘media-centredness’ (see p. 12). There is also a tendency to concentrate on the potential for (or bias towards) social change of a particular communication technology and to subordinate other variables. Otherwise, there may be little in common between the theories.

Any history of communication (as of other) technologies testifies to the accelerating pace of invention and of material and other consequences, and some theorists are inclined to identify distinct phases. Rogers (1986), for instance, locates turning points at the invention of writing, the beginning of printing in the fifteenth century, the mid-nineteenth-century start to the telecommunication era, and the age of interactive communication beginning in 1946 with the invention of the mainframe computer. Schement and Curtis (1995) provide us with a detailed ‘timeline’, extending from pre-history to modern times, of communication technology inventions, which they classify according to their being either ‘conceptual/institutional’ (such as writing) or ‘devices for acquisition and storage’ (such as paper and printing), or being related to processing and distribution (such as computers and satellites). History shows several apparent trends but especially a shift over time in the direction of more speed, greater dispersion, wider reach and greater flexibility. They underline the capacity for communication more readily to cross barriers of time and space. These matters are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 (pp. 125–7) with reference to the cultural and social factors shaping the evolution of media technologies.

The Toronto School

* The first significant theorist in this tradition seems to have been the Canadian economic historian H.M. Innis, who founded the ‘**Toronto School**’ of thinking about the media in the period after the Second World War. Innis (1950, 1951) attributed the characteristic features of successive ancient civilizations to the prevailing and dominant modes of communication, each of which will have its own ‘bias’ in terms of societal form. For example, he regarded the change from stone to papyrus as causing a shift from royal to priestly power. In ancient Greece, an oral tradition and a flexible alphabet favoured inventiveness and diversity and prevented the emergence of a priesthood with a monopoly over education. The foundation and endurance of the Roman Empire was assisted by a culture of writing and documents on which legal-bureaucratic institutions, capable of administering distant provinces, could be based. Printing, in its turn, challenged the bureaucratic monopoly of power and encouraged both individualism and nationalism.

There are two main organizing principles in Innis’s work. First, as in the economic sphere, communication leads over time to monopolization by a group or a class of the means of production and distribution of knowledge. In turn, this produces a disequilibrium that either impedes changes or leads to the competitive emergence of other forms of communication, which tend to restore equilibrium. This can also be taken to mean that new communication technologies undermine old bases of social power. Secondly, the most important dimensions of empire are *space* and *time*, and some means of communication

are more suitable for one than for the other (this is the main so-called bias of communication). Thus, empires can persist either through time (such as ancient Egypt) or extensively in space (such as Rome), depending on the dominant form of communication.

McLuhan's (1962) developments of the theory offered new insights into the consequences of the rise of print media (see also Eisenstein, 1978), although his main purpose of explaining the significance of electronic media for human experience has not really been fulfilled (McLuhan, 1964) (see also Chapter 5). Of printing, McLuhan wrote: 'the typographic extension of man brought in nationalism, industrialism and mass markets, and universal literacy and education'.

Gouldner (1976) interpreted key changes in modern political history in terms of communication technology. He connects the rise of 'ideology', defined as a special form of rational discourse, to printing and the newspaper, on the grounds that (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) these stimulated a supply of interpretation and ideas (ideology). He then portrays the later media of radio, film and television as having led to a decline of ideology because of the shift from 'conceptual to iconic symbolism', revealing a split between the 'cultural apparatus' (the intelligentsia), which produces ideology, and the 'consciousness industry', which controls the new mass public. This anticipates a continuing 'decline in ideology' as a result of the new computer-based networks of information. The main propositions of media technological determinism are presented in Box 4.12.

Media technological determinism: main propositions 4.12

- Communication technology is fundamental to society
- Each technology has a bias to particular communication forms, contents and uses
- The sequence of invention and application of communication technology influences the direction and pace of social change
- Communication revolutions lead to social revolutions

Moving away from media determinism

Most informed observers are now wary of single-factor explanations of social change and do not really believe in direct mechanistic effects from new technology. Effects occur only when inventions are taken up, developed and applied, usually to existing uses at first, then with a great extension and change of use according to the capacity of the technology and the needs of a society. Development is always shaped by the social and cultural context (Lehmann-Wilzig and Cohen-Avigdor, 2004; Stober, 2004). It no longer makes sense to think in terms of a single dominant medium with some unique properties. This may have been justifiable in the case of the book or, in some

respects, at a later stage the telegraph and telephone. At present, very many different new media forms coexist with many of the 'old' media, none of which has disappeared. At the same time, the argument that media are converging and linking to comprise an all-encompassing network has considerable force and implications (Neuman, 1991). It may also be true that new media forms can have a particular social or cultural 'bias' (see Chapter 6) which makes certain effects more likely. These possibilities are discussed in the following section.

Media–Society Theory VI: the Information Society

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The assumption of a revolutionary social transition as a result of new communication technology has been with us for quite some time, although it is not without its critics (e.g. Leiss, 1989; Ferguson, 1992; Webster, 1995, 2002). Ferguson (1986) treated this 'neo-technological determinism' as a *belief system* which was tending to operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The term 'communications revolution', along with the term '**information society**', has now almost come to be accepted as an objective description of our time and of the type of society that is emerging.

The term 'information society' seems to have originated in Japan in the 1960s (Ito, 1981), although its genealogy is usually traced to the concept of 'post-industrial' society first proposed by the sociologist Daniel Bell (1973). Another source was the idea of an 'information economy' developed by the economists Machlup (1962) and Porat (1977) (see Schement and Curtis, 1995). Bell's work belonged to the tradition that relates types of society to succeeding stages of economic and social development. The main characteristics of the post-industrial society were found in the rise in the service sector of the economy relative to manufacture or agriculture and thus the predominance of 'information-based' work. Theoretical knowledge (scientific, expert, data-based) was becoming the key factor in the economy, outstripping physical plant and land as bases of wealth. Correlatively, a 'new class' was emerging based on the possession of knowledge and personal relations skills. Most of the observed post-industrial trends were seen to accelerate in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The production and distribution of information of all kinds, especially using computer-based technology, have themselves become a major sector of the economy.

Aside from the accumulating evidence of the significance of information in contemporary economy and society, there has not been much agreement or clarity about the *concept* of 'information society'. Melody (1990: 26–7) describes information societies simply as those that have become 'dependent upon complex electronic information networks and which allocate a major portion of their resources to information and communication activities'. Van Cuilenburg (1987) put the chief characteristic as the exponential increase in production and flow of information of all kinds, largely as a consequence of reduced costs following miniaturization

and computerization. However, he also called attention to our relative incapacity to process, use or even receive much more of the increasing supply of information. Since then, this imbalance has become much greater. Reductions in costs of transmission have continued to fuel the process of exponential growth. There is a continually decreasing sensitivity to distance as well as to cost and a continually increasing speed, volume and interactivity of possibilities for communication.

Despite the importance of the trends under way, it has not really been established that any revolutionary transformation in society has yet occurred, as opposed to a further step in the development of capitalism (Schement and Curtis, 1995: 26). What is still missing is evidence of a transformation in social relationships (Webster, 1995). Several commentators have emphasized the increased 'interconnectedness' of society as a result of 'information society' trends extending to a global level. According to Neuman (1991: 12), this is the underlying 'logic behind the cascade of new technologies'.

Some writers (e.g. van Dijk, 1993; Castells, 1996) choose to use the term 'network society' instead of 'information society'. Van Dijk (1999) suggests that modern society is in a process of becoming a network society: 'a form of society increasingly organizing its relationships in media networks which are gradually replacing or complementing the social networks of face to face communication'. A network structure of society is contrasted with a centre-periphery and hierarchical mass society, or one that largely conforms to the traditional bureaucratic model of organization that was typical of industrial society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It exhibits numerous overlapping circles of communication that can have both a vertical and a horizontal range. Such networks can serve to exclude as well as connect. Traditional mass media exhibited a similar structure and were inclusive of all.

The idea of interconnectedness relates to another aspect of contemporary society that has attracted comment, and that is the high degree of *dependence* on others. This is hardly a new idea since it was the basis of Durkheim's century-old social theory concerning the division of labour. But there is arguably a qualitative change in our era, resulting from the continued excursions of information technology into every aspect of life, especially where intelligent machines replace human agency. One aspect that has been emphasized by Giddens (1991) is the degree to which we have to put our trust in expert systems of all kinds for maintaining normal conditions of life. We also live with increased awareness of risks of many kinds (health, environmental, economic, military) that are both derived from the public circulation of information and also managed by reference to information. Elsewhere Giddens refers to the globalized world as one 'out of control – a runaway world' (1999: 2). In addition, it would seem that the 'culture' of contemporary society, in the traditional sense of mental and symbolic pursuits and customary ways of passing time free from essential obligations, is largely dominated by a vast array of informational services in addition to the mass media.

A notable, although intangible, dimension of the concept of 'information society' is the fact that it has come to form part of contemporary self-consciousness, and in some versions it is almost a new world view. For instance, de Mue (1999) compares

the transition taking place to the development of mechanics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He writes:

While the mechanistic world view is characterized by the postulates of analysability, lawfulness and controllability, the informationistic world view is characterized by the postulates of synthesizability, programmability and manipulability ... it fundamentally alters human experience and the evaluation of and association with reality.

For others, informatization connotes a new vision of progress for all and a future with unlimited horizons, more or less in continuation of the model we already have. Established mass media have played a key part in publicizing a 'euphoric' and utopian view of new media potential (see Rössler, 2001). This perspective carries some ideological baggage, tending to legitimate some trends of the time (e.g. faith in science and high technology as solutions to problems) and to delegitimize others (especially ideological politics about class and inequality). By emphasizing the means and processes of communication and the quantitative dimensions of change, it de-emphasizes the precise content and purpose of it all. In this respect, a connection with **postmodernism** can also be made. It is at least apparent that very divergent interpretations are possible.

Despite scattered insights of this kind, the information society concept has been dominated by economic, sociological, geographical and technological considerations. The *cultural* dimension has been relatively neglected, aside from recognition of the great volume of information and symbolic production, and unless we view postmodernist thinking as filling this gap. The rise of an 'information culture' that extends into all aspects of everyday life may be easier to demonstrate than the reality of an information society.

It is clear that the 'information economy' is much larger than the mass media on their own, and the primary information technologies involved are not those of mass production and distribution of print material for the general public or mass dissemination by broadcasting or electronic recordings. It could be argued that the birth of the 'information age', although presaged by mass communication, marks a new and separate historical path. Certainly, the mass media were well established before the supposed information 'revolution' and may be better considered as part of the industrial age rather than of its successor. There were early voices that foretold the death of mass media precisely because of the rise of new information technologies that are said to render them obsolete (e.g. Maisel, 1973).

The information society concept has not been universally accepted as helpful for analysis, for reasons that have in part been explained. A central problem is the lack of an overt political dimension, since it seems to have no core of political purpose, simply an (attributed) inevitable technocratic logic of its own (van Dijk, 1999). In this it may at least match the predominant spirit of the times in both popular and intellectual 'western' circles. It is quite clear that in several contexts, the information society idea has been harnessed for public policies with technocratic goals for nation states or regions (Mattelart, 2003). The general consensus about the significance of changes occurring in communication technology is not accompanied by unanimity about the social consequences. Hassan (2008) believes that the information society

idea is essentially ideological and supportive of the neo-liberal economic project that benefits most from global interconnectivity. Some of these issues are returned to in Chapter 6, which deals with new media developments. However, certain main theoretical points are summarized in Box 4.13.

Information society theory: main propositions 4.13

- Information work replaces industrial work
- Production and flow of information accelerates
- Society is characterized by increasing interconnectivity
- Disparate activities converge and integrate
- There is increasing dependency on complex systems
- Trends to globalization accelerate
- Constraints on time and space are much reduced
- Consequences are open to alternative interpretations, both positive and negative
- There are increased risks of loss of control
- Information society theory is an ideology more than a theory

Conclusion

These theoretical perspectives on the relation between media and society are diverse in several respects, emphasizing different causes and types of change and pointing to different paths into the future. They cannot all be reconciled, since they represent alternative philosophical positions and opposed methodological preferences. Nevertheless, we can make some sense of them in terms of the main dimensions of approach, each of which offers a choice of perspective and/or method. First, there is a contrast between a critical and a more or less positive view of the developments at issue. Although scientific inquiry seeks a degree of **objectivity** and neutrality, this does not prevent one either approving or disapproving of a tendency indicated by a theory. In respect of Marxism, political economy theory and mass society theory, there is an inbuilt critical component. In contrast, functionalism leans in a positive direction as far as the working of media is concerned. Information society theory is open to critical and positive views, while social constructionism and technology determinism are open ended.

Secondly, there is a difference between a more socio-centric and a more media-centric view. We can view media either as dependent on society and mirroring its contours or as primary movers and moulders. The main media-centric theories are those relating to communication technology and the information society. There are of course other variables to consider, especially those relating to approach and method

of inquiry. Humanistic, qualitative and speculative methods can be chosen instead of traditional objective methods of 'scientific' research (see Rosengren, 1983).

This account is really incomplete without some of the theory relating to culture that will be discussed in Chapter 5, but it gives some idea of the general structure of thinking about mass media and society.

Further Reading

Curran, J. and Gurevitch, M. (2005) *Mass Media and Society*, 4th edn. London: Hodder Arnold.

An authoritative and periodically updated volume of twenty chapters on varied aspects of the media–society relationship. Theoretically strong and broadly critical in approach. Key chapters are by Livingstone, Murdock and Golding, Curran, Hesmondhalgh and Garnham.

Hassan, R. (2008) *The Information Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

This thoughtful study rescues a somewhat tired and battered concept and restores it to some value as a means of understanding the ongoing effects of digitization.

Online Readings



Corner, J. (2007) 'Media, power and culture', in E. Devereux (ed.), *Media Studies*, pp. 211–30. London: Sage.

Hermes, J. (2007) 'Media representation of social structure: gender', in E. Devereux (ed.), *Media Studies*, pp. 191–210. London: Sage.

Klaehn, J. (2002) 'A critical review and assessment of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model', *European Journal of Communication*, 17 (2): 147–83.

Webster, F. (2002) 'The information society revisited', in L. Lievrouw and S. Livingstone (eds), *The Handbook of New Media*, pp. 443–57. London: Sage.



