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READINGS IN CULTURE

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Culture and mass-media

The mass media of communication are those institutions that produce and distribute information and visual and audio images on a large scale. Historically, the mass media may be dated from the invention of the printing press, and thus, in the West, from Johann Gutenberg's commercial exploitation of printing around 1450. The early products of printing presses were religious or literary works, along with medical and legal texts. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, periodicals and newspapers began to appear regularly. Industrialisation led to a further expansion in the book and newspaper industries in the nineteenth century. The twentieth century has seen the introduction and rapid expansion of electronic media (cinema, radio and television), to the point at which they have become a dominant element in the experience and organisation of everyday life.

The first significant attempts to theorise the mass media in the twentieth century began within the framework of mass society theory. Developed most significantly in the second quarter of the century, not least as a response to the rise of Nazism and Fascism, mass society theory typically presented industrial society as degenerating into an undifferentiated, irrational and emotive mass of people, cut off from tradition and from any fine sensitivity to aesthetic or moral values. The mass entertainment media are thereby presented as key instruments in the creation of this mass, precisely in so far as they are seen to appeal to the more base elements of popular taste (thus reducing all content to some lowest common denominator) in the search for large audiences. The media thereby serve to undermine traditional and local cultural difference, and, in the emotional nature of their content, to inhibit rational responses to the messages they present. Entertainment is complemented by the use of radio, especially, as an instrument of political propaganda, or more precisely in Marxism, as one of the core contemporary instruments of ideology. Mass society theory may therefore be seen to attribute enormous power to the media, and, as a complementary presupposition, to present the audience as the more or less passive victim of the messages foisted upon it. The empirical research that such theory fostered, 'effects' research, tends to look for the harmful effects that the media had, both politically (in inhibiting democracy) and morally (for example in encouraging violence). This assumption of media power was, paradoxically, in the media's own interests, in that it implied that they were a powerful and effective tool of advertising.

A more subtle approach to media research emerged in the post-war period, within the framework of sociological functionalism. 'Uses and gratifications' research attributes greater activity and diversity to members of the audience, in so far as they are assumed to have subjectively felt needs, created by the social and physical environments, that the media can fulfil. The central functions performed by the media include escapism (in so far as media consumption allows a legitimate withdrawal from the pressures of normal life), the establishing of personal relationships (including the use of media programmes as the focus of discussion and other social interaction) and the formation of personal identity (whereby the values expressed by programmes are seen to reinforce one's personal values).

In the 1950s, a Canadian school of media theory emerged, principally in the work of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. The central argument here was that there was a causal link between the dominant form of communication and the organisation of a society. Thus, Innis (1950, 1951) distinguished 'time biased media' from 'space biased media'. The former, such as clay and stone, could not easily be transported, but were durable, thus leading to stable social phenomena, grounded in the reproduction of tradition over long periods of time. The latter (such as paper) are less durable, but are easily transported. They could therefore support the expansion of administrative and political authority over large territories. McLuhan (1994) argued that the development of new media technologies has a fundamental impact on human cognition. The introduction of printing leads to greater compartmentalisation and specialisation of the human senses, as communication comes to be dominated by the printed page (as opposed to oral communication previously). Vision thus becomes

dominant, but deals with information that is presented in a linear, uniform and infinitely repeatable manner. Thought thus becomes standardised and analytical. Print also leads to individualism, as reading becomes silent and private. Print culture, which for McLuhan as for Innis is space biased, is challenged by electronic media. Electronic media, in their proliferation and continual presence, annihilate space and time. Confronting us continually, modern media do not have to be sought out. Similarly, the act of reading or consuming various media is no longer confined to particular periods of the day. Information from diverse locations and even periods in history are juxtaposed in a single newspaper or evening's television. The modern experience is thus one of an unceasing relocation of information in space and time, leading to what McLuhan termed 'the global village'. While McLuhan's theories fell from fashion in the 1970s, they bear a resemblance to much recent postmodernist thinking.

New strands of media theory emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, in no small part through increasing interest specifically in television. Two extremes may be identified. At one, concern is with the material base that determines cultural production. The political economy of the mass media thus focused on institutional structures that underpinned media production (and thus its contents and value orientations). Murdock and Golding (1977), for example, looked at the structures of share ownership and control that linked media organisations into multinational capitalism. At the other, emphasis is placed upon media content as texts, in need of interpretation or decoding. The increasing influence of semiotics led to a fundamental re-evaluation of the role of the media audience. They cease to be mere victims of the media, and come to be seen as actively engaging with media products, interpreting them in a plurality of ways that may be at odds with the possibly ideological intentions of the producers. The work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and Stuart Hall is crucial here. From this, cultural studies may be seen to lead, less to theorisation of the mass media per se, than to the development of distinctive theories and accounts of specific media (such as television, popular music and even the Sony Walkman).

Jurgen Habermas (1989a) and Jean Baudrillard offer two distinct, yet general accounts of the place of the mass media in the experience and development of contemporary society. Habermas's theory centres on the concept of the public sphere. The bourgeois public sphere emerged in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as critical self-reflection and reflection upon the state, conducted first in coffee houses and salons, and then through pamphlets, journals and newspapers. While in practice this public sphere was exclusive, allowing participation by the propertied, rational and male bourgeoisie, Habermas finds in it a principle of the open, and thus democratic, use of public reason. Contemporary electronic media are seen to have a complex, dialectical impact on this sphere. Positively, modern production techniques can make complex, critical and culturally demanding material widely available. In practice, cultural consumption has become increasingly privatised, breaking up the public sphere, and dominated by low-quality material, designed to have a mass appeal. In politics, this leads to the degradation of political debate and policy formation into an increasingly stage-managed political theatre.

Baudrillard (1990b, 1990c, 1993) understands contemporary capitalism in terms of symbolic (as opposed to strictly economic) exchange. The contemporary world is therefore dominated by signs, images and representations, to such a degree that the distinction between the sign and its referent, the real world, collapses (so that one can no longer speak to the real needs or interests of the people, for example). The mass media (and particularly television) are central to this production and exchange of signs, and it is to the nature of the consumption of these signs that Baudrillard looks in order to outline a pessimistic theory of the impact of the mass media on democratic society. Baudrillard's consumer is typically a channel hopper and couch potato. On the one hand, television transforms the world into easily consumable fragments, and yet does so within the gamut of media that produce more information than any one person could absorb and understand, so that it attracts only a superficial 'ludic curiosity'. On the other hand, the media swallow up private space, for although typically consumed privately, they intrude upon our most intimate moments by making them public. Nothing is taboo any longer, and the immediacy of media coverage inhibits the possibility of critical reflection. An opinion poll, for example, cannot appeal to a genuine public. It does not manipulate the public, for the public (and the distinction between public and private) has ceased to exist. The expression of political opinion is reduced to a yes/no decision, akin to the choice or rejection of a supermarket brand, or a film. Resistance, for Baudrillard, can then rest only in a refusal to participate in this system.