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SPRING SESSION 2019/2020			
CYCLE: FUNDAMENTAL BA			
FILIÈRE :	ENGLISH STUDIES	MODULE :	Introduction to Media Studies
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## Effects of Mass Media on Society

### INTRODUCTION

Media are the vehicles or channels, which are used to convey information, entertainment, news, education, or promotional messages are disseminated. Media includes every broadcasting and narrowcasting medium such as television, radio, newspapers, billboards, mails, telephone, fax, internet etc. The mass media occupy a high proportion of our leisure time: people spend, on average, 25 hours per week watching television, and they also find time for radio, cinema, magazines and newspapers. For children, watching television takes up a similar amount of time to that spent at school or with family and friends. While school, home and friends are all acknowledged as major socializing influences on children, a huge debate surrounds the possible effects of the mass media and findings, both in favor and against effects, are controversial. The possibility of media effects is often seen to challenge individual respect and autonomy, as if a proeffects view presumes the public to be a gullible mass, cultural dopes, vulnerable to an ideological hypodermic needle, and as if television was proposed as the sole cause of a range of social behaviors.

### I. FUNCTIONS THE MEDIA

Mass media is a tremendous source of information for individuals as well as society. We know a bit about the role of mass media in a democracy. Let us now see how the media perform their functions to bring about changes.

### II. MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL CHANGE:

Using mass media, people's attitudes and habits can be changed. For example, all of us have mistaken or wrong notions about various diseases like leprosy or HIV/AIDS. Many of us think that by touching people suffering from these diseases we would be infected. You might have heard on radio or watch television programs or read messages which tell us that by touching an HIV/AIDS patient we do not get infected. Change would also mean things for the better. The concept of development of a country is again a matter of change, when old practices and equipment are changed and new, better and more efficient means are being used. Mass media play an important role in communicating this change. By giving the necessary information, and sometimes skills, the media can help bring about this change. You may ask how media

can impart skills. Mass media like television can demonstrate and show how things work. You would have seen on television how a certain dish is cooked using modern kitchen equipment.

1. **Mass media have made the world smaller and closer:** The speed of media has resulted in bringing people across the world closer. Let us take an example. When you watch a football match between Real Madrid and Barcelona in Spain live on television, you feel you are part of the crowd in that stadium. It means that the whole world is shrinking and becoming a village. Wherever we go to any part of the world, we see the same products such as soft drinks, television, washing machine, refrigerator etc. and the same type of advertisements. Similarly, the World Wide Web and internet have brought people and countries much closer.
2. **Mass Media Promotes Distribution of Goods:** Mass media are used by the consumer industry to inform people about their products and services through advertising. Without advertising, the public will not know about various products (ranging from soup to oil, television sets to cars) and services (banking, insurance, hospitals etc.) which are available in the market as well as their prices. Thus mass media help the industries and consumers.
3. **Entertainment and information:** Mass media is one of the best means of recreation. Television, radio, internet are the best means of entertainment and extremely informative. Social media keeps us up to date with the happenings around the world. We can sum up the functions of media as: [1] Media provide news and information required by the people. [2] Media can educate the public. [3] Media helps a democracy function effectively. They inform the public about government policies programs and how the latter can be useful to them. [4] Media can entertain people. [5] Media can act as an agent of change in development. [6] Media has brought people of the world closer to each other. [7] Media promote trade and industry through advertisements [8] Media can help the political and democratic processes of a country. [9] Media can bring in positive social changes.

### III. MEDIA EFFECTS: A MATTER OF CHANGE OR REINFORCEMENT?

If by media effects, we mean that exposure to the media changes people's behaviour or beliefs, then the first task is to see whether **significant correlations exist between levels of exposure and variations in behaviour or beliefs**. 'Change' theories generally presume that the more we watch, the greater the effect. Most research does show such a correlation (Signorelli & Morgan, 1990), albeit a small and not always consistent one. For example, having shown that those who watch more violent television tend to be more aggressive (Huesmann, 1982). Researchers must ask whether more aggressive people choose to watch violent programs (i.e. selective exposure), whether violent programs make viewers aggressive (i.e. media effects), or whether certain social circumstances both make people more aggressive and lead them to watch more violent television (i.e. a common third cause). In research on media violence, some researchers offer a bidirectional argument, concluding that there is evidence for both selective viewing and media effects (Huesmann, Lagerspetz, & Eron, 1984). Undoubtedly, many viewers choose selectively to watch violent or stereotyped programs. However, it does not necessarily follow that there are no effects of viewing such programs or that motivated viewers can successfully undermine any possible effects. Many

remain concerned especially for the effects of violent programs on children and so-called vulnerable individuals, irrespective of whether they chose to watch them.

However, if by media effects, we mean that the media do not generate specific changes but rather reinforce the status quo, then empirical demonstration of media effects becomes near impossible. It is difficult to know what beliefs people might have espoused but for the media's construction of a normative reality, and difficult to know what role the media plays in the construction of those needs and desires which in turn motivate viewers to engage with the media as they are rather than as they might be. Nonetheless, arguments that the media support the norm, suppress dissent and undermine resistance, remove issues from the public agenda, are central to theories of ideology (Thompson, 1990), propaganda (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1986) and cultivation (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Similarly, it is extremely difficult to test the argument that the media, in combination with other social forces, bring about gradual social changes over the long term, as part of the social construction of reality. Yet for many, these 'drip drip' effects of the media are likely to exist, for television is 'telling most of the stories to most of the people most of the time' (Gerbner, et al., 1986, p.18). There are, then, difficulties in conducting empirical research on both change and reinforcement conceptions of media effect. As we shall see, the findings of the field are in many ways inconclusive.

#### **IV. SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF MEDIA EFFECTS:**

The sociological approach to communication theory is based on assumption that there exists a definite relationship between mass media and social change. Some of the relevant theories which are going to be discussed here are :

**[1] The cultivation theory:** It was developed by George Gerbner in 1967. It is based on the assumption that mass media have subtle effects on audiences who unknowingly absorb the dominant symbols, images, and messages of media. He calls it "*cultivation of dominant image pattern*". According to this theory a long persistent exposure to TV is capable of cultivating common beliefs about the world.

**[2] Social Learning Theory:** It is one of the most widely used theories in mass communication. According to this theory the media are active but subtle educators in teaching readers, viewers, listeners about the world. An important component of this theory is that it explains how people can learn from observations alone.

**[3] Agenda Setting Theory:** The term was coined by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L Shaw in 1972 in the context of election campaign where the politicians seek to convince the voters about the party's most important issues. This theory tries to describe and explain as how stories are selected. (a) Packaged and presented- a process known as Gatekeeping, (b) by resulting agenda (c) how this agenda affects what people think about the relative importance of the issues presented. This theory also "predicts" that of particular news item is presented prominently and frequently by the press, the public will come to believe that it is important.

**[4] Uses and Gratification Theory:** This theory has emerged out of the studies which shifted their focus from what media do to the people to what people do with media (Katz, 1959). The uses approach assumes that audiences are active and willingly expose themselves to media and that the most potent of mass media cannot influence an individual who has "no use" for it in the environment in which he lives. The uses of the mass media are dependent on the perception, selectivity, and previously held values, beliefs and interests of the people.

## VI. MEDIA EFFECTS

One of the more controversial areas of study of the media is what effect the media have on us. This is particularly timely as eyes are on Hollywood and the violent and sexy movies it makes.

**Observational Learning Theory:** The Observational Learning theorist would take the *Aggressive Cues theory* a step further. This theory says that people can learn by observing aggression in media portrayals and, under some conditions, model its behavior. If there are 50 ways to leave your lover, then there must be at least 49 ways to be violent or aggressive. Watching violent media portrayals will teach you new ways to be violent. Ever catch yourself saying, "If I ever committed a murder I would not make THAT mistake?" What? Are you suggesting there is a circumstance where you would kill someone? Or, how about this? Imagine walking down a dark alley and someone steps out in front of you and makes a threatening gesture. What would you do? Anyone think of some kung fu/karate moves you might make to defend yourself? That is a pretty aggressive/violent thought. You learned it by watching a media portrayal. So, the *Observational Learning theorist* says that not only would the media violence increase the probability of the viewer committing an aggression or violence, it teaches the viewer how to do it. Does media mirror society or does it influence it? (The answer is both.) Further, the *Observational Theorist* hedges his bet by pointing out that you will not automatically go out and mimic the violent act, but you store the information away in your brain.

**Reinforcement Theory:** One theory says that media violence decreases the probability of violence by the viewer. Two others say that it will increase the probability of violence. Then there is the *Reinforcement Theory* that demystifies both. *The central assumption of this theory is that media portrayals reinforce established behaviors viewers bring with them to the media situation.* Violent portrayals will increase the likelihood of violent or aggressive behavior for those who accept violence and aggression as normal. It will decrease the likelihood of aggression and violence for those brought up to believe that violence is bad. Violence merely reinforces prior beliefs. Instead of looking for blame in a violent media portrayal, the Reinforcement theorist would say that if you want to predict an outcome, look at the viewer's background. Look at the person's cultural norms and views of social roles. *If person grows up in a crime-ridden neighborhood, then violent portrayals are more likely to lead to violence.* Obviously, selective perception is going on here. But the Reinforcement theorist would point out that there is going to be the exception to the rule. You are going to run across the gentle old man who everyone believed would never hurt a fly who whacks his family into a thousand pieces one day. Or you are going to find the gang member who one day recognizes the futility of violence and turns to the priesthood.

**Cultivation Theory:** A final theory on the effects of violence in the media has evolved out of studies that are more recent. It is the *Cultivation Theory*. Rather than predict that we will turn to or from violence, it looks at how we will react to the violence. *The central assumption of the theory is that in the symbolic world of media, particularly TV, shapes and maintains audience's conception of the real world In other words, the media, especially TV, creates fantasy world that is mean spirited and dangerous.* It also creates stereotypes of dominant/weak folk in society. For instance, imagine a bank robber who is big and mean. Is your imaginary bank robber of certain race? Are all people that look like this bank robber actually mean back robbers? Or how about this? You are starting to show some signs of age with gray hair and wrinkles around

your eyes. If you are guy in the media, that is good. It shows a maturing. If you are woman, that is bad, it just shows that you are getting old and less vital. A male can be dominant and be looked up to.

## **Conclusion**

Briefly, there are various positive and negative impacts that today media has on society. We find that major chunk of youth is using social media networks more than 5 hours a day resulting in decreasing their general health in general and mental health in particular. We also found that media is playing both constructive as well as destructive roles on one hand it has lots of advantages but on the other hand it has lots of disadvantages and at the end it's up to the individual and society to decide which ones to use.

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