



Why Study the Media?

INTRODUCTION: There should be reasons why one should study anything. These reasons should be ones that you understand and believe in. You should know why you are doing anything, in fact, those reasons should answer that big question - **SO WHAT? This is Media Studies - so what?**

Definition: Media Studies is indeed a subject of great scope. Indeed, it has many parts and many implications and therefore, researchers need to make better efforts to understand what each other is doing, how and why. As Roger Silverstone (1999) says: *'it is because the media are central to our everyday lives that we must study them ... as social and cultural as well as political and economic dimensions of the modern world'*.

Media studies is a discipline and field of study that deals with the content, history, and effects of various media; in particular, the mass media. Media studies may draw on traditions from both the social sciences and the humanities, but mostly from its core disciplines of mass communication, communication sciences, and communication studies.

I. MEDIA POWER AND INFLUENCE

Many of the main arguments for studying the media come down to this: everyone believes that they do have some power, though it is surprisingly difficult to establish exactly what kind of power this is. The main power of the media lies in the fact that *they can shape what we know about the world and can be a main source of ideas and opinions*. They may *influence the way we think and act*. This power is the greater if we take the media together rather than looking at one individual medium such as television. And it is most obvious when we look at examples of media use such as an advertising campaign. Such campaigns do use media together, and thus repeat and reinforce any message they are putting across. Some people argue about how much power the media really have. But the continuous and public arguments suggest that it must be worthwhile studying the media in order to see whether or not they really do have this power and influence.

II. ECONOMIC POWER

In particular, the sheer economic power of the media makes them significant and worth studying. The media industries employ thousands of people directly and make the employment of thousands of others possible (for example, in terms of the production of equipment). The income and expenditure of the media are vast. The amount spent on making programs or producing a magazine is colossal. For instance, the income of the UK ITV (Channel 3) companies from advertising was £2.725 billion in 1999, plus £590 million for Channel 4 and £187 million for Channel 5. The license fee income of the BBC was £2.3 billion in 1999, of which £114 million was spent on collecting the fees.

III. SCALE OF OPERATIONS

This is also huge. It provides an argument for looking at what is going on. One may measure this scale in all sorts of ways. One could talk about it in terms of size of audience. Peak-time audiences for television run to about 19 million people - that's over a third of the population of this country. *Coronation Street* and *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* hit this in 1999. One could look at it in terms of geographical scale of operations. So what about satellite channels like Sky, spraying down their programs over Britain and most of Europe? Or what about scale in terms of proportion of the particular media industry controlled? The news gathering companies AP, Reuters, AFP and UPI totally dominate the sourcing of world news stories for

newspapers across Europe. This shows that when we talk about 'operations' we are not just talking about production. If you want to launch a new magazine on a national scale in Britain, then you need to be sure of the retail support of WH Smith, with its dominance of prime-site outlets, let alone its control of nearly 50 per cent of the distribution business. However we measure this scale - this **massness** of the mass media - it is so great that, again, it must make the media a subject worth looking into.

IV. ACCESS TO THE AUDIENCE

This is about the ability of the media to get to their audience. It is notorious that radio and television are special in the sense that they get into the living room. They have access to every household in the land. But, then again, there is *the Sun*, which reaches nearly four million people every day; or the *News of the World*, which gets to five million people every Sunday. This ability to get to people, sometimes in huge numbers, also makes the media special as communicators. A total of 60 per cent of UK homes now have access to the Net. Digital television is proliferating channels and interactivity. Homes have more direct access to information and to the rest of the world than at any time in history.

V. INFORMATION AND ENTERTAINMENT

These two things are very important to most people. So where do we get most of this from? **Right: the media.** Thousands of hours of television are pumped out through all channels: there are zoo satellite channels; 90 per cent of people polled say that they get their news from television, and that they believe it for the most part; 13 million people read the three main tabloid and four main quality newspapers every day; there were 139.75 million cinema attendances in 1999; 180 million CDs were sold in 1998. If you think about it, **where else do you get your information and entertainment from but the media?** Remember, books are as much a media industry as any other. You may spend time socializing and playing a sport. But again, statistically, you are spending an average of 2.5 hours a week just watching television - that's 1,300 hours a year. So if the media are the main providers of information and entertainment, again it makes sense to look at what they provide and why, because it certainly is a major part of our life.

VI. REPETITION OF MESSAGES

This refers to the repeating of items of information and entertainment. The main channels of serious news in three of the media all give more or less the same items, much of it from three main news agencies. *The fact that thousands of copies of newspapers are printed means that the same messages are being reproduced thousands of times.* Films appear in the cinema, a year or so later they come out on video, about two years later they appear on broadcast television. Now they are appearing on satellite and cable systems. Whatever one gets out of a particular film, this too is being repeated across various media. And there is evidence to prove that what is repeated is believed. So this, too, is a good argument for studying the media and for studying the possible effects of this repetition.

VII. MEANING AND MESSAGES

All this media material tells us something. On one level there is often a pretty obvious intention to tell us something - perhaps tell us what a new record release is like through a review. But on another level what we are told is less obvious. It is, perhaps, not so obvious that an advertisement warning against AIDS is actually suggesting that women are significant AIDS carriers (because this campaign featured a photograph of a young woman). This example is important because it is simply untrue that females are significant in this way. Statistically it is males who are more likely to be carrying the virus. So a good argument for studying the media is to dig down for these less obvious meanings and messages, and then think why they are there anyway. *There may be other reasons why one should study the media.*

But those already given provide some major answers to the title question of this **COURSE**. They provide a good argument for looking into what is being said, into who is saying it, into how it is being said, into who is taking in what is being said, into what effect all this may have on readers and viewers. So I hope that you feel convinced, if you needed convincing, that what you are doing is worthwhile and important to you as an individual.

Reference: Craeme, B. (1990). *More than Meets the Eye: An Introduction to Media Studies*. 3rd Edition. Oxford University Press.

