

# The sociological function of the mass media



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For instance, do the plethora of ways of finding and reporting news, through online forums, blogs, YouTube, etc., available to the average citizen undermine the hegemonic role of traditional news media in this regard? Discuss from a functionalist, Marxist or other sociological perspective.

### **Introduction**

The mass media plays a major role in today's society. Functionalism emphasises its strength, but warns of the danger of having its power controlled by a few individuals or organisations. That hegemony was threatened with the creation of the World Wide Web. Twenty-first century internet technology now offers any citizen the potential to reach an audience of millions.

The key sociological concepts for analysing the impact of the media are long-established, and later commentators often reinterpret existing theories rather than offering new perspectives. Two macro-theories, both viewing society as a system shaping human behaviour, dominate discussions: the functionalist stance and the Marxist-oriented conflict perspectives. This essay will draw on Parsons, Merton, and Wright to present the classic functionalist viewpoint. Conflict theory offers several interpretations of Marxism, which serves as a critique.

This essay will detail the popularity of the most frequently-accessed mainstream websites and consider social media's role in news-gathering and dissemination. Examples of traditional and modern media coverage will illustrate changing attitudes and societal mores and the capacity of social media to precipitate change, before using a functional analysis to assess if

the sociological function of the mass media has been affected by modern technological developments.

### **Social theory and the media**

Functionalism, a 'structural' perspective and a leading sociological stance of the 1940s and 1950s, regards society as an interdependent system that can only be understood by examining how separate structural parts relate to each other and to society as a whole. The traditional mass media, principally newspapers and cinema, reached their zenith during this era so it is unsurprising that sociologists used functionalism to analyse the media and society. Functionalism makes certain assumptions, including the need for stability, and examines 'the origin and maintenance of order and stability in society' (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004: xv). Functionalism suggests that the mass media's common perspective and shared common experience bind society together.

Parsons (1964) argued that societal behaviour is governed by shared values that become societal norms, a value-consensus which enables society to function effectively. Functionalism being value-neutral, disruptive activities are dysfunctional rather than intrinsically bad; defunct values become extinct. Merton (1968), remaining within the functionalist tradition, felt that functional unity was unlikely in complex societies and that all functions, whether of religion, social stratification or even the family itself, could be met elsewhere within society. He distinguished between manifest (intended) and latent (hidden/unintended) functions of the media. A manifest function could be the need to sell goods for profit. The latent functions included supporting the status quo by reinforcing values. (Merton, 1968).

Charles Wright developed what became known as the classic four functions of the media. He stated that media theorists 'noted three activities of communication specialists: (1) surveillance of the environment, (2) correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment, and (3) transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next (Wright, 1959: 16). He also identified a fourth element -entertainment - and distinguished between the intended purpose of the mass media and its consequences.

Whereas functionalists believe that societal norms govern human behaviour, Marxists argue that the controlling factor is the economic system. They offer a conflict perspective where the mass media legitimises the status quo, enabling hegemonic control over the dissemination of information. Marx argued that members of the elite produced the dominant societal ideas to conceal exploitation of the working class while the mass media manipulated information to normalise inequality (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004).

Functionalism has also been critiqued on the grounds that the value-sets presumed to characterise Western society have never been conclusively demonstrated, and the 'content of values rather than value-consensus as such can be seen as the crucial factor with respect to social order' (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004: 943).

### **Old and New Mass media**

The time lag between reporting and printing left newspapers a day behind in publishing events; the visual impact of television was immediate. The Vietnam War was the first 'televised' conflict. The iconic image of nine-year-old Kim Phuc running naked down a road outside Saigon following a napalm

attack helped to turn public opinion against continued American involvement (Newton and Patterson, 2015).

In the world of the traditional media, the internet's potential impact was underestimated by commentators such as Clifford Stoll. Writing in *Newsweek* he said: 'The truth is no online database will replace your daily newspaper [and] no computer network will change the way government works' (Stoll, 1995). He was quite clearly wrong on both counts, but at that time few people had access to the new form of media that had been developed by enthusiastic amateurs, academics and students. (Rheingold, 1994).

According to Pew Research (2015), Yahoo – the world's biggest on-line news service – attracted 127, 995, 000 unique visitors in January 2015. A Google search of the traditional media reveals that the BBC warrants an impressive 793, 000, 000 Google listings while *The Times* newspaper has 398, 000, 000. However, these numbers are dwarfed by social media listings. YouTube has 7, 540, 000, 000 entries, Twitter has 11, 350, 000, 000 and Facebook tops the poll with 15, 050, 000, 000 (Information retrieved 27. 8. 2015).

Furthermore, on Monday 24th August 2015, it was reported that one billion people – one seventh of the world's population – logged into their Facebook accounts (Zuckerberg, 2015).

Digital communication normalises rapid dissemination of information.

Anyone with a smart phone can potentially break a major news story; the first images of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001 came from mobile phone footage. 'Micro-blogging' is event-driven; Twitter provides users with a regular feed of news and trivia. Stories which are re-tweeted or commented on frequently are said to be 'trending'. However,

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with a limit of 140 characters per 'tweet', brevity still rules occasionally, just as it did when news of the Crimean War was transmitted to Britain via telegraph.

### **Discussion**

Historically, a comparatively small group of people working for an even smaller and more exclusive group of newspaper, film and broadcasting organisations gathered information. They determined what should be made public and how it should be presented. Deciding what to omit was probably as important as deciding what should be included; stories presenting the establishment in a negative light were often suppressed.

Certain reports, decades apart but linked by a common thread, bridge the gap between traditional media and the digital age and illustrate changing attitudes in Britain. During the 1936 Abdication Crisis, despite it being widely disseminated elsewhere, British media initially ignored the affair between Edward VIII and Mrs. Simpson out of deference to King George V (Rubenstein, 2003: 199). However, less deference was shown to Princess Margaret; MP Willie Hamilton, who regularly raised the issue of the royal finances in the House of Commons, described her as 'a floosie..... a monstrous charge on the public purse.' (Davies, 2002, np). The rise of celebrity culture also gave rise to the 'paparazzi', an independent cohort of photojournalists, who followed and photographed members of the royal family at every opportunity. Earl Spencer's passionate oration at the funeral of his sister, Princess Diana, blamed the paparazzi for her death, describing Diana as 'the most hunted person of the modern age' (Princess Diana 97, 1997). More recently, compromising pictures of Prince Harry on a trip to Las Vegas were

circulated on-line by US celebrity website TMZ. com (TMZ, 2012). What used to be news is now entertainment.

There are a number of potential dangers in the functions of the media. Analysis accompanying factual reporting influences public opinion, but unchallenged norms and values can perpetuate injustice; one only has to recall the portrayal of racial minorities in 1950s media. Entertainment may double as propaganda, as in the jingoistic films released during WWII. Nevertheless, deciding what information goes into the public arena may still have hegemonic undertones, as demonstrated by a BBC Newsnight investigation into Jimmy Savile. This was ‘pulled’ shortly before a tribute programme to the late celebrity, believed to have abused hundreds of children, was due for broadcast. Members of the investigation team were sidelined amid allegations of a management cover-up (Jackson, 2015).

Wright’s observation distinguishing between intended and unintended consequences of the media is particularly relevant to the new social media. In late 2010, mass demonstrations against political repression, poverty and corruption swept the Middle East during the short-lived ‘Arab Spring’ uprising. The authorities were unable to suppress the outflow of information via social media. The Tunisian government was the first to fall. The hegemony of their state-approved news agencies had been completely undermined. However, organisations such as ISIS also use social media to spread their message, recruit followers and boast of their horrific accomplishments (Ajbaili, 2014). From the value-neutral functionalist stance (Wright, 1974) this is not ‘evil’ but merely dysfunctional when viewed from the paradigm of Western culture; ISIS is communicating, commenting and

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sharing its value system to gain wider acceptance of its fundamentalist values.

Contrary to Stoll's predictions (Stoll, 1995) internet usage proliferated. Some functions of the new media, such as gathering and disseminating information, clearly descend from their traditional forbearers, but news is a globalised and a 24/7 product which has given rise to a cult of celebrity (Hollander, 2010). Gatekeepers cannot determine what constitutes news when a story may 'go viral' without warning, although unedited on-line content can be disturbing. Recently, the world was appalled by the murders on live television of a reporter and cameraman, in an attack filmed by the gunman and later circulated by him on social media. Such incidents bring into question the wisdom of facilitating unmediated access to what was once 'the airwaves'. However, that particular discussion is beyond the scope of this essay.

Social media has been proven to instigate social change. The viral impact of the YouTube video 'Kodaikanal Won't' forced Unilever to clear mercury waste from its disused factory in Tamil Nadu (Kasmin, 2015). Social movements such as anti-globalisation campaigners use social media very effectively to spread their message. Charities and NGOs regularly harness its power and it is said that U. S. President Barack Obama owed his election success to his team's mastery of social media. Only this week, the image of a lifeless Aylan Kurdi, the three-year old Syrian refugee washed up on a Turkish beach, galvanised public opinion worldwide, although one fears that effective political action to resolve the refugee crisis may take rather longer.



Mainstream broadcasters have embraced social media, routinely incorporating audience participation by inviting comment via Twitter, text or e-mail. They have websites, Twitter feeds, and Facebook pages, as do organisations or individuals wishing to raise their public profile. Printed media struggles with falling sales, but on-line services stream news, opinion and entertainment directly into the family home, traditionally seen as the location for the transmission of cultural values. Mesch cautions that: ' The introduction of new technologies such as the internet into the household can potentially change the quality of family relationships' (Mesch, 2006: 119, cited in McGrath, 2012: 9). This impact is particularly strong on children growing up with digital media, quite literally, at their fingertips, and a trend towards individualisation within households is " undermining natural family interaction" (Buckingham 2000: 43). Discussion of the functions fulfilled by family life is beyond the scope of this essay, but the issue highlights concerns over whether communications via the new social media have become a substitute for face-to-face interaction and whether social media can in fact, sustain the social fabric of traditional family life – and, by implication, society as we know it – across the generations. Although one would sincerely hope otherwise, Merton's (1968) analysis suggesting the possible extinction of functional family life could be prophetic.

### **Conclusion**

Functionalists have been criticised for seeing social order in terms of value-consensus on the grounds that consensus is presumed, not proven, to exist. Critics also note that research has not demonstrated widespread commitment to the value-sets assumed to underpin Western society, and

suggest that value-content is the crucial factor (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). Marxism argues that functionalism does not explain social conflict, and sees the mass media as another tool used by the elite to maintain their power and privilege.

Social media news content is clearly not controlled in the conventional sense and posts can disturb the status quo, influencing political and social change. This strength has diminished hegemony, although organisations such as the BBC still exert editorial control over the 'old' media. Ideologically-driven campaigns of the 'left' such as the anti-globalisation movement have been able to use social media to publicise their activities as never before. The differences between opposing sets of cultural values are brought into sharp focus as social media follows events in the Middle East and elsewhere, bringing our unstable, i. e. dysfunctional world into our homes. McGrath (2012) cautions that social media could have far-reaching impacts on family life; Merton (1968) posited that any function, including that of the family unit itself, was dispensable and that society would always find an alternative. These issues cannot be discussed here but they clearly warrant investigation.

On reflection, news may be trivial or disturbing, the message may travel faster and further and the values transmitted may be radically different from those of previous generations, but despite social media's impact, its functions – gathering and disseminating news, transmitting culture and entertaining – have remained consistent. It is the changing value-content which is disconcerting, but functional analysis necessitates a distinction between functions and effects so it cannot offer a value judgement.

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