

# The hypodermic syringe model essay sample

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The hypodermic syringe model is a theory of media effect on audience. The term is used to describe interaction between the media and public belief, offering the concept of people becoming affected by the information 'injected' into them through their information medium. (For example, television viewers would have their minds injected with sex and violence after watching too many graphically violent programmes, and this would affect their views and behaviour). The model tends to see contemporary society, as Greg Philo, a challenger of this theory says: 'composed of fragmented individuals who were subject to powerful and effective propaganda messages which they received and then reproduced...'

An example of the hypodermic syringe model in action could be applied to the murder of Jamie Bulger, before which the two appallingly young murderers of the toddler had been discussing violent films that they had seen. It is generally believed that the films that the two had watched affected their behaviour, causing them to want to 'try out' some of the things they had seen on screen. However, problems with this model is that it tends to view the individual as a passive member of a large audience with no will or opinions of their own; it disregards other factors and differences in individual reception of media messages. The general view is that the hypodermic syringe model is an outdated early attempt by sociologists and psychologists to explain the relationship between the public and the media. Is it really possible for people to receive the media message unadulterated and in it's entirety? Even if they do, how will it affect their behaviour, if indeed it does?

Audiences are not blank sheets of paper on which media messages can be written; members of an audience will have prior attitudes and beliefs, which will determine how effective media messages are. (Abercrombie 1996, 140)

This may be the case, but whenever a situation such as the murder of Jamie Bulger occurs, the media often adopt the hypodermic syringe theory to reiterate the moral panic that they begin over the issue.

A differing theory is the 'two step flow' model, which, in contrast to the hypodermic syringe model, argues that the audience is more likely to be 'opinion leaders' who expose themselves to more documentaries and newspapers in order to form better rounded opinions, then pass the information on to others. Katz and Lazarsfeld simplified this to 'attitudes and ideas flow FROM radio and print TO opinion leaders and FROM THEM to the less active sections of the population.' However, although the model focuses less on everyone being mindlessly affected by the media message and more on the absorption of concepts and the sharing of information, the model fails to address the idea that the media is accessible to everyone- whether opinion leaders or not, people still can and will listen to the radio, watch the television or read the newspapers. This model is only a little less worse than the hypodermic syringe model, as the latter assumes that we act and think according to what the media tells us whereas the former assumes that we act and think according to what our 'opinion leaders' tell us.

Surely if the hypodermic syringe model is not a true expression of the media experience then the two-step flow model is merely an extension of the same? Why shouldn't the media hire the 'opinion leaders' as agents??

However, the theory disagrees with the hypodermic syringe model in the enormity of effect produced by the media: in this model the recipients of the information are unlikely to act upon it in the way that the 'injected' hypodermic syringe model audience would.

Other sociologists have researched theories that look at different circumstances that exist in viewing audiences; these theories are otherwise known as active audience models. This means that as individuals or as groups (e. g. cultural groups), the audience manipulates information to create their own interpretations of events and reality-a collective effect such as is proposed in the hypodermic syringe model is therefore unlikely.

One such exploration of the dynamics of audience/media relationship is the Uses and Gratifications model, which suggests that the audience has specific needs that are satisfied by the media. Blumler and Katz (1974) identified these as being:

- Diversion (a form of escapism from personal life.)
- Personal Relationships (where the individual gains companionship, either with media characters or through discussion of them).
- Personal identity (where the individual is able to define themselves in terms of the knowledge they receive from the media)
- Surveillance (where the media provides a source of information about the rest of the world).

How can this be? The model actually suggests that instead of the media being in control and choosing what to feed us, we choose what to take in. Despite the fact that messages are still viewed as packages pre-selected by the media for us to pick and choose from, the view is valid; we don't have to view or hear any media that we don't like or that we don't feel is necessary; even if we do, since we have no interest in or use for the message, it cannot affect us. However, can our relationship with the media be viewed simply as what we wish to get out of it?

Another criticism is that of the tendency to concentrate solely on why audiences consume the media rather than extending the investigation to discover what meanings and interpretations are produced and in what circumstances, i. e. how the media are received. (O'Sullivan, Dutton & Rayner 1994, 131)

The cultural effects theory, despite viewing the media audience as passive, also investigates personal interpretation of media messages as a build up of ideas and attitudes occurring over time, which eventually condition its audience; therefore the audience is more passive than active. An example of this would be the way in which immigrants into Britain are portrayed by the media. Over time, the images of people 'sneaking' in and 'swamping' the country become part of the public consciousness and resentment grows based on these images. Therefore the indoctrination is far subtler than the full on mind tampering that occurs in the hypodermic syringe model, yet it also agrees with the two step flow theory's focus on the importance of

social relationships: messages are interpreted according to social grouping, for example gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

Because of the variety of scope for individual analysis, measuring the effects on people using the Cultural Effects theory is difficult, especially since a range of other, more personal factors such as past experience can also affect media interaction with the individual. Greg Philo studied audience response to television news coverage of a 1984-5 Miner's Strike and found that there were differences in group interpretations of the event, with all groups processing the news according to their beliefs and biases; for example, groups supporting the miners felt that the behaviour of the police was inaccurately reported whereas groups supporting the police felt that the behaviour of the miners was inaccurately reported. Both groups, however, were able to objectively see the intention of the article, which was to portray the miners as violent.

This model probably has more relevance to post-modern society than the hypodermic syringe model because it accepts that people question what they see and hear from the media, and they use their personal experiences to colour their interpretations of the meaning of the media.

In conclusion, the hypodermic syringe model cannot be considered to be an accurate reflection of the postmodern societal relationship with the media: it has fatal flaws in its assumptions of the audience as mass and it's disregard for other factors such as social relationships and personal opinion. The other theories researched, although criticisms can be found for them, offer a view of the media audience that is far more realistic.