Mass media creating and sustaining moral panic media essay

Experience, Human Nature

In today's world most people watch television or films, listen to music, read books or access the internet on a daily basis; all these things constitute the larger portion of the media. The media has quite a huge impact on some susceptible members of the public that watch, read and listen to it each day. The media will be adamant that their coverage of the news is impartial, but more often than not an element of bias can be seen in a lot of the reporting. Television has the capability to produce multimedia content and, consequently, has the power to change a person's view of reality; in order to believe in something, one has to have complete faith in the source of information. The media can shape our reality by integrating opinions with facts and, in doing so, manipulate messages; the amount of time and emphasis given to particular types of stories can also influence what issues viewers perceive to be important. Over-reporting of several issues whilst neglecting certain others positions a number of issues at an unmerited advantage to others. The media plays a very involved position in society today; it shapes and frames the way of thinking of many of those who use it daily. Young people, particularly, are stimulated by it and constantly use it in their learning and day to day activities. Adults also have become reliant on media, especially so the internet, and use it for their basic everyday functionality. The media is an intricate part of worldwide communication; it assists us with keeping up with what is going on in our community, state, nation, country and world as a whole. Modern society has been conceptualised as an information society where mass media plays a critical role in social processes and mobilisation for change and development; the role of mass media in social awareness and political mobilisation can never

be overlooked. The mass media has many positive effects on society, but, conversely, there also negative effects. The media provides us with all the things that we need for acquiring information to keeping in touch with other people, but when can we say that the media has gone too far?

Urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation created the social background in which the mass media developed. The majority of the substance in the mass media is not intended to confront or alter the societal and political configuration of a country, either in a democratic civilisation or in a dictatorship state. The mass media does, however, play a critical part in forming and reflecting communal beliefs; the media communicate the world to individuals and replicate the character of a society. Analysts in the early twentieth century suggested that the media weakened an individual's ability to act autonomously, sometimes being compared to the telescreens of the dystopian novel 1984. (McLuhan 2001) During the middle of the twentieth century, however, empirical studies suggested that the media had a more limited effect on the population. Recent research presents a more complicated interaction between the media and society; the media generates information from a structure of links and influences and then the individual interprets and evaluates the information provided as well as generating information from outside of media contexts.

The mass media has a strong social and cultural impact upon society; this is based upon its capability to reach out to an extensive audience and to send them powerful and influential messages. McLuhan uses the expression " the medium is the message" to illustrate how the delivery of the message can,

more often than not, be more significant than the actual message itself; it is through the persuasiveness of media such as television, radio and newspapers that news and propaganda reaches the target audience. (McLuhan 2001) Television broadcasting has the clout to control and manipulate the content that society watches; this is a unique feature of traditional mediums and the development of the internet has challenged this established involvement in mediums such as television.

The internet has unchained some of the confines placed on society by allowing for diversification of communal and cultural opinions and wide-ranging political opinion. There had been suggestions that allowing the populous to access information through the internet would lead to a bombardment of too much information, it can though, allow society a medium for expressing opinions and a way of moving away from the limitations placed on humanity.

The influence media has had on society since its establishment is phenomenal; the belief that this impact has been remarkable has been largely uncontested in media theory since its inception. However, there has been much discussion as to what those effects are, how severe the implications are and if this is on a balance with the evolution of human communication. Those who cite this criticism feel that the media perpetuates stereotypes, especially so when it comes to minority and ethnic groups; according to some stereotypes the " bad guys" tend to be from one or two minority groups. Other stereotypes include all Italians being associated with the Mafia; all youths are vandals, gang members, or punk rock types; all

Americans are ignorant etc. All of these stereotypes do a major disservice to the whole truth, of course.

Today many people find it easier to categorise people in terms of " black and white" (based on nationality, sex, sexual preference, skin colour, etc.) rather than deal with the " shades of grey" that more realistically characterise the human disposition. Some critics say that this sets up a fake image of reality and that the important issues are simplified by the media.

Ever since the media's creation there has been constant criticism that some content is offensive, inappropriate, or indecent; TV and fashion magazines are blamed for low self-esteem amongst young girls, television programs present a narrow view of the world and make it appear more violent than it actually is. Other critics suggest that advertisers deliberately try to associate contentment with the purchasing of their products and the lack of these products somehow will leave a person feeling empty in their lives.

George Gerbner (1994) suggests that the continual depiction of crime, especially minority crime, has led to the " Mean World Syndrome."(context. org 2000) This view suggests that frequent viewers of media believe that crime rates are much higher than the actual data would imply. Also, a lot of mass media has been cited with presenting propaganda, political or otherwise, and aiming it at an audience of a below-average intellectual level.

Those who criticise television for showing gratuitous violence state that by the time they are 18, U. S. children typically see nearly 20, 000 murders on TV. (Gerbner 1994)

Most of these programmes do not show any consequences for the perpetrators of these crimes or of the effects of the murders; real life violence and murders normally have a deep and lasting effect on both the people involved and on their friends and families, this painful truth is normally glossed over in film and TV drama.

Studies have shown that frequent viewers of violence on TV tend to be more paranoid about the levels of crime and violence in their community; they also tend to be more suspicious of people and are more inclined to think that their surroundings are unsafe. Violence in films and TV, although related to ratings and profits, causes harm to individuals and society. (McLuhan 2001)

" In every really great world-shaking movement, propaganda will first have to spread the idea of this movement. Thus, it will indefatigably attempt to make the new thought processes clear to the others, and therefore to draw them over to their own ground, or to make them uncertain of their previous conviction" (Hitler, 1924)

Hitler was an expert on mass-brainwashing and propaganda and the U. S. government learnt a lot from the Nazis, they, in turn, learnt a lot from the American mass media. The U. S. media is one of the world's greatest practitioners of what Hitler preached, repeating sophisticated lies continually for months and years until the populous repeat them unthinkingly as universally accepted facts. (Gerbner 1994)

Irrational cognitive behaviour is partly created by the intervention of the mass media; they emphasise and play on the imminent threat that confronts

society (Taylor et al, 2009). This can be seen in current issues such as Muslim extremists who are reported as being an enemy to society so therefore, people then equate all Muslims as being terrorists. The concept of an enemy, however, imposes ' conflict with what general societal expectations maybe' (Kelly and Toynbee, cited in Taylor et al. 2009 p. 356). This can be supported by the view of sociologist Howard Becker (1963) who states that labelling a person as part of the ' master-status' has repercussions on people who are labelled as ' mainstream' society as it exacerbates the problem of stereotypes, consequently fear makes people highly susceptible to subliminal control paraphernalia. The pattern of the deception is clear; report what you want people to believe then murmur a meagre apology or correction that doesn't make front page news so that individuals only have themselves to blame for being a co-conspirator of the lie. An example of this was the Iraq war and weapons of mass destruction. The media, urged on by the British and US governments, reported incessantly that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and, even without any evidence, people began to believe it. This led to the fear that he may use them against the countries and, although there were mass protests against the war, badly informed people began to justify in their minds the need to invade Iraq.

Mass media dominate the cerebral life of contemporary societies, and therefore are of immense interest to sociologists. From the earliest media studies in the 1930s, the main concern was with the implicit power in technologies, especially radio and television. Hitler's successful use of radio

for propaganda was an object lesson in the potential dangers. The perception of mass society added gravitas to the suggestion that the electronic media could, if wanted to, generate an Orwellian state of mind control, with passive societies subjugated by a minuscule elite of communicators.

Early studies seemed to show that media effects were indeed powerful and direct, the hypodermic model of influence, but more thorough investigations revealed that mass communications are mediated in complex ways, and that their effects on the audience depend on factors such as emotional state, values, beliefs, class and social context.

In 1999 a mass murder committed by two teenagers in a school in Denver, Colorado shocked the world; the teenagers were called Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris and their school was Columbine High. Columbine quickly became the embodiment for the frightening trend of school shootings. " It was the bloodiest, creepiest, most vivid school attack anyone at the time could remember and remains, to this day, the episode the American popular imagination just can't seem to shake." (Gumbel 2009) Klebold and Harris didn't just shoot their victims in cold blood, they laughed whilst doing it; reports state it was as though they were really enjoying themselves.

As this event occurred close to a major city the camera crews were on the scene very quickly and filmed as the whole thing unfurled. People around the world were fixated at the images that were being shown; " from the start, the images seemed to suck viewers right into the heart of the mayhem. One

of the dead was left stranded in a parking lot, which terrified fellow students would eventually have to pass as they ran out at the end of their ordeal." (Gumbel 2009) The cameras captured it all.

After coming to terms with what was happening, the questions and accusations began. The media reported that Klebold and Harris were part of a school group called the Trench Coat Mafia; these were Goths who worshipped singer Marilyn Manson. We were also told that they were obsessed with violent computer games such as Doom and Quake, that they were being bullied at school and that they were Nazi sympathisers; the date they carried out the massacre was Hitler's birthday. This, of course, caused moral panic and outrage. Singer Marilyn Manson is portrayed by the media as signifying sexuality, violence and death even before his music is played; a campaign was already well under way against Manson's music because of its anti-religious ideas, and Columbine became the perfect way to collaborate these various objections to him. Also the computer games were targeted by the media for playing a large role in the massacre; " Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were literally obsessed with playing the video game Doom and they were very good at it. These boys practiced for hundreds and hundreds of hours, perfecting their craft. Therefore, it should not be altogether surprising that their killing spree resembled something out of a typical Doom scenario." [Grossman, 1999] In linking the killers to video and computer games, the stereotype was created that these games have the power to influence murder.

Much of what was reported though was wrong, as tens of thousands of official documents and other evidence has now shown. Klebold and Harris had plenty of friends; they did well in school, were not members of the Trench Coat Mafia, did not listen to Marilyn Manson, were not bullied, and were not necessarily Nazi sympathisers; the date the massacre was carried out just coincided with Hitler's birthday. FBI (2007) suggests that they did not set out to kill only fifteen people that day, (thirteen victims and themselves) and that the truth was much more sinister. Their objective, harboured for over a year and a half and chronicled thoroughly on Harris's website and in their private diaries recovered after their deaths, was to blow up the entire school. They did not plan to get at anyone or any group in particular; they did it because they hated the world in general and intended to have fun destroying as much of it as they could.

Another instance of the mass media promoting panic amongst people was the War of the Worlds radio broadcast. A Radio Research Project study investigated the effects of the 1938 Orson Welles radio dramatisation of H. G. Wells' The War of the Worlds, about an invasion from Mars. Some 25% of the listeners to the show, which was formatted as if it were a news broadcast, believed that an invasion was under way creating a national panic despite repeated and clear statements that the show was fictional. Wells' dramatisation was so alarming that listeners were convulsed in panic and mass hysteria. They fled their homes, blocked roads, overwhelmed telephone circuits, flocked to churches, set about preparing defenses and some even contemplated suicide in the belief that the end of the world was

at hand. Radio Project researchers found that most people didn't believe that Martians had invaded, but rather that a German invasion was under way. This, the researchers reported, was because the show had followed the news bulletin format that had earlier accompanied accounts of the war crisis around the Munich conference. Listeners reacted to the format, not the content of the broadcast. The project's researchers had proven that radio had already so conditioned the minds of its listeners, making them so fragmented and unthinking, that repetition of format was the key to popularity. (McLuhan 2001)

Society is bombarded constantly with never ending messages from different types of sources such as TV, radio, magazines, internet and many more. The influence of media has spread all over the world that it has not only altered our social identities but our cultural values as well. We have become a society that does not necessarily think for itself or use internal value systems to shape our decisions. Thus it has become the cultural norm to seek outside advice thus eliminating the need, and ultimately the ability, to think critically, based on unbiased information.

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