

# Media in society and culture assignment



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

What is the role and influence of the media in modern society? How does it contribute to, create, direct or represent that society's 'culture'?

Consideration of the role, influence and development of the Media in Society and Culture involves addressing fundamental questions about Culture and Society themselves. The insight of various thinkers into the social and cultural role of the media has been underwritten by presuppositions which are, in turn, informed by points of view on what constitutes society and culture. How do we conceive of a society?

Is it an organic whole, more than the sum of its individual members? Do we see society in terms of a number of social groups, organized in terms of "class", economic activity, access to and control of forms of power, knowledge and beliefs? How also do we conceive of the concept of "Culture"? As a set of rituals, practices, beliefs and values which are shared by a whole society? As the expression of the interests and values of particular social groups? Or as a combination of all the individual practices, beliefs and forms of behaviour?

Amongst twentieth century sociologists, anthropologists and cultural critics the discussion of the Media has been underwritten by the attempt to answer these questions, principally because of the nature and scope of the "mass media" itself, its influence as a powerful force for maintaining social cohesion, for constructing or reproducing social consciousness, as a mediator of values and beliefs, and as the major sources of information and means of information control within modern societies. Approaches to the role of the media within twentieth century society have been dominated by one principal approach, the "Mass Society" approach.

Drawing from the 19th century tradition of social and cultural criticism, which includes such figures as J. S. Mill, de Tocqueville, Matthew Arnold and Nietzsche, this tradition views modern society in terms of an abstract, often unspecified definition of “ society” as a whole, within which modern society is viewed as a “ mass society”, divided between elites (economic, cultural, political, intellectual), and the remainder of the “ mass society”. In part this approach can be seen as a response to the perceived decline in social standards, moral values and cultural integrity that come about with a “ mass society”.

In terms of the Media this tradition of cultural and social analysis has been predominantly pessimistic in tone, viewing the media as a major agent of standardization, alienation and cause of widespread cultural uniformity. Key twentieth century figures within this tradition have included F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot, who perceive the Media as a major threat to an established and elite cultural heritage, Civilisation, and purveyors of forms of “ massification” and inferior cultural standardization.

In America also the tradition has been extremely influential, with “ Mass Communications” research being deployed in order to show how the media was responsible for creating a new society of conformity, alienation, standardization, and declining intellectual and cultural standards, a civilization of game-shows and soap operas. The emphasis within this approach to the media is predominantly moral and psychological, critical and humanist, dependent on a humanist and Universalist perspective. For this tradition the key questions, as regards the

media, are: does the Media lead to the degeneration or the development of culture?

Does it promote standards of cultural and intellectual conformity? In what ways can the individual resist the forces which promote psychic alienation, moral mediocrity, and suburban uniformity? Studies such as *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Hidden Persuaders* advanced this predominantly critical view of the media within society. The issue of the role of the social role of the media is inextricably connected with issues of Culture, because the media is a major contributor to the cultural forms within society. However, this immediately poses the question, what do we mean by culture?

Arguments about what Culture is, if it can be defined as any one thing, have been central to the discussion of the role and influence of the media in society. The media are certainly the most influential mediators, representers and purveyors of values, beliefs and social practices within society. They produce “our” collective identity; they reflect or reproduce “our” sense of collective national identity, speaking for society as a whole. An alternative viewpoint is to see the media as speaking for only dominant social groups and cultural values.

A composite view is the cultural pluralist view, that the media has the task of reflecting or representing the contrasting cultural perspectives and cultures within a society, such as those of ethnic minorities and religious faiths.

Arguments about the role of Channel Four are very relevant here. The argument about the cultural role of the media has been dominated by the

argument that it is the media which produces “popular culture”, for a “mass audience”, as distinct from “serious culture” for a discriminating audience”.

The whole area of “Popular” or “Mass” Culture is extremely contentious, for the terms are often taken to signify “low-brow” cultural products, designed for an undemanding and indiscriminating “mass” audience, who uncritically watch or read for the purposes of escapism, titillation, and confirmation of personal prejudices and wishfulfilment. Certain critics take the argument further, identifying “mass culture” with working class culture, possible with the accompanying lament that a more authentic, valuable and various working class ‘folk’ culture has been lost, to be replaced by a culture of quiz shows and ‘soaps’.

The advent of new forms of broadcasting, especially cable and satellite television, as with videos, has raised similar issues of cultural mediocrity and “pandering to the masses”. However, does “Popular” or “Mass” culture necessarily implies a decline in cultural standards? Note the media’s role in popularizing or introducing “High culture” to a “Mass Audience”. Following on from this is the vexed issue of whether or not the media audience is imply passive, uncritically consuming the versions, values and beliefs which the media present as the audience’s own?

Or is the audience to be regarded, rather, as discriminating, critical, and actively involved in negotiating, retrieving or rejecting the meanings and values produced by the media? Is the media direct, reflect or create “popular” taste and values? Does the media give us the “culture” we want or the culture we deserve? In constructing answers to these questions we are

also constructing answers to wider questions about ideology, social consciousness, and “our own” beliefs and values.