

Discuss the role of media studies

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The Australian media, in all its forms - predominantly through print, television, radio, internet and billboards - but also through the newly emerging and perhaps more subtle forms such as pavement stencil art and SMS text messaging, has an exceedingly powerful impact on our mentality, personality, and general awareness of the world[CJM1] around us. Hence, because of the elevated level of control it has over the individual on so many levels - specifically culturally, politically, and economically, Media Studies is intrinsically deterministic in allowing us, through disassembling the purpose and effect behind the various forms of media we absorb, understand how we are manipulated by the media - and therefore give us both knowledge and to some extent, control, over our perceived meaning of everyday life

As members of a society living in the midst of the informational age in the 21st century - the next major phase in our social evolution after the industrial age, we inhabit a time period when the media undoubtedly forms the cornerstone of the cultural and political understanding we have of our surroundings. Communication - through the myriad of its various forms now in existence - including print press, television, film, telephone, and increasingly the internet - is one of the products of this informational age, and the media has been without reluctance to adopt any and all new technologies as a part of its infrastructure. As a result of this convergence¹. 0, we live in a world where we can practically neither distinguish between the purposes of the various forms of, nor escape, the media.

It is omnipresent, whether in the comfort of our own homes (eg. Television¹. 1, radio, internet, mobile phones) or in the wider community which we venture into (eg, billboards, pavement stencil art, news/advertising SMS

messaging). A small amount of companies own a large proportion of our overall media in the capitalist Australian society which we live in, and with relatively little exception, the underlying purpose of all media is to either directly or indirectly contribute to making profit for its corresponding shareholders (the few exceptions in Australia include independent, not-for-profit organizations such as the ABC). This effectively means that media as a whole, in all its forms, is a commodity - which produces audiences, and in turn sells them to advertisers. This commodity can be, as well as sold for direct economic gain to advertisers, utilized by the government as a means of obtaining their desired political and cultural conformity of the public, and media studies is implicit to our understanding of this manipulation inflicted on us.

We are culturally shaped, as very few would argue, from our experiences growing up - that is, through our childhood and adolescence. As renowned psychologist JH Flavell¹ stated:

Because children... cannot discriminate between fantasy and reality, they are uniquely vulnerable to learning and adopting as reality the circumstances, attitudes, and behaviours portrayed by entertainment media

The media, being omnipresent throughout this development, exerts its influence on us, and hence it is vital that we comprehend when and how this influence is occurring - which media studies is to a great extent devoted to. A 1977 study² of children found that:

96% of 5- and 6-year-olds, 85% of 8- and 9-year-olds, 62% of 11- and 12-year-olds do not fully understand the purpose of TV adverts

Furthermore, a 1999 Australian Film Commission report³ found that the average Australian watches television for three hours and 13 minutes each day

and also

Two thirds of videos rented [in 1998] came from the US

This illustrates several facts. Firstly, that we, voluntarily, expose ourselves to an incredibly large amount of media - over three hours of television alone daily. Secondly, that in the phase in our life's development which has the most influence on our persona, we are generally ignorant in regards to the media's manipulation of us. And thirdly, and definitely not least importantly - that we are probably most exposed to American culture (although Australian television has only regulated amounts of non-Australian content, we tend to end up watching the non-Australian - specifically the American content).

American Empiricism^{3. 5} is a well researched field of media studies which allows us to determine in a sense how and why the apparent 'Americanisation' of our culture is occurring through the media, and to confidently attribute cultural components such as our increasingly Americanized vocabularies, speaking styles, and eating habits to the media.

Harold Lasswell (1902-78), a pioneer in media studies, contributed to creating the model of 'content analysis' - a way of analysing the media message content, and its psychological effect on us. This effectively provided a means of linking the media through its most popular form - television, to cultural influence. This was fundamental to helping us understand things like how, although Australian government media initiatives such as the 'National

Drugs Campaign⁴ and anti-smoking campaigns were leading to a declining drug/cigarette use⁴. ⁵, they were encountering internal media resistance, which could be linked to drug/tobacco use in film⁴. ⁶ and television by characters generally considered as positive role-models. Media studies teaches us to analyse media languages, and to establish that government initiatives such as those above, through both film and print media often achieve their objectives through the use of a technique labelled as 'fear/scare tactics'.

These are some powerful examples of how media studies has helped us make sense of some of the cultural meaning in our lives. Because Media Studies allows us to understand how the media is influencing us - specifically our children, this empowers us to regulate their exposure to media content, as well as encourage creativity and individuality through non-conformist to media (specifically television) role models. However, it is an obvious fact that we cannot at all times achieve this control, as the media envelops us - but we learn to encourage critical, and not complacent, attitudes towards it. With this approach, Media Studies helps us to garner the positive effects of the media while limiting the negative. This view is supported by the AAP (American Academy of Pediatrics), who state in their policy statement⁵:

A media-literate public is able to decipher the purpose and message of media rather than accepting it at face value. With an educated understanding of media images and messages, users can recognize media's potential effects and make good choices about their and their children's media exposure.

What media studies indeed confirms is that we are part of a media culture - where the media plays a huge role in influencing not only our personality and consumption habits, but also our political knowledge and views in everyday life.

The Australian political mentality is at the very least, influenced, and at the very most, shaped, by the media. Media studies has several media effects theories - ranging from " Direct Effects", where the media is assumed as all powerful and the audience as passive recipients, to " Minimal/Limited Effects" where the most common impact of the media is believed to be reinforcement of views and not change, to " Neo-Marxist", where major effects are assumed and the media is seen as a powerful agent for ideological hegemony by the ruling elite and capitalism. However, the generally accepted, and unarguably most applicable theory to the Australian media situation is that of " Political Economy", where the media is seen as part of our political and economic structure, as agents of powerful institutions and capitalism, and major effects are assumed.

1. 0 Stuart Cunningham & Graham Turner, *The Media & Communications in Australia* (2002) p4-10

1. 1A 1999 Australian Film Commission Report³ found that there are 1. 8 Televisions in Australia per person.

1Flavell JH The development of children's knowledge about the appearance-reality distinction. *Am Psychol* 1986; 41: 418-425

2 Ward, Wackman and Wartella (1977)

3The Mercury, 24 February, 1999, p. 7

3. 5 Stuart Cunningham & Graham Turner, *The Media & Communications in Australia* (2002) p28-29

4 National Drugs Campaign - <http://www.drugs.health.gov.au/media/campaign.htm>

4. 5 "The effectiveness of anti-smoking education campaigns" - <http://www.quit.org.au/quit/Fandl/fandi/c13s5.htm>

4. 6 Dr Jennifer Tickle from Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, USA interviewed 632 students aged 10 to 19 on their smoking habits and their favourite actors, and concluded a direct link between the actors' and their own smoking habits.

5 AAP Policy Statement on 'Media Education'. Appeared in *PEDIATRICS* Vol. 104 No. 2 August 1999, pp. 341-343

6 Mosco, V. (1995). *The Political Economy Tradition of Media Research*, Module 2, Unit 4 of the MA in Mass Communications, Leicester, University of Leicester.