

# Principles of Sociology

**DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS**

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**10th Session**

**Media and Consumption**

# **Theoretical approaches of mass media**

## ● **Functionalist perspective**

- The functionalist perspective on mass media designates and analyses the role of them concerning the societies' integration and day-to-day functionality.
- According to functionalism, mass media perform five crucial functions that contribute to the cultural reproduction of modern societies:
  - 1) *Information*
  - 2) *Correlation*
  - 3) *Continuity*
  - 4) *Entertainment*
  - 5) *Mobilization*
- ***Criticism of functionalist approach to the media***
  - a) The functionalist analyses are confined to the description of media's social and cultural roles, in such way that neglect the questions about their social necessity.
  - b) Functionalist approaches seem to hold the image of people as passive individuals, in the sense that they accept media messages as these are diffused. This is the result of functionalism's 'ignorance' of the ways that audience deal with media products.
  - c) Functionalist approaches hold an almost totally positive stance towards media's roles.

## ● **Conflict perspective**

- Conflict perspective is characterized by two basic theoretical/analytical dimensions, the political economy and the cultural approach.
- **A) The political economy approach**
- The political economy approach focuses on the ownership and control of media institutions/corporates.
- Media are approached as a special type of industry, and its ‘means of production’ refer to the means of communication.
- This approach is interested in the regime of ownership and the forms of social and political control that are associated with this regime.
- The ownership of the media has often been concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy media magnates.
- Until Second World War, the basic mean of communication was mass newspaper. In many countries, ‘press barons’ owned a lot of newspapers and this state of ownership offered them the power to set the political agenda and to promote schemes of interpretation of news.

- In contemporary globalized world, media's proprietors have in their hands transnational media corporations that enable them to exert political, economic, social and cultural power.
- According to Noam Chomsky, the mass media serve their owners' economic and political interests by controlling the flow of information and promoting propaganda.
- The social groups devoid of economic and political power do not have access to the public sphere as it's organized by mass media.
- The critical voices are also excluded by mainstream mass media.

- **B) The ‘culture industry’ approach**

- The Frankfurt School was established in the 1920s and '30s, and was composed of neo-marxist theorists, who attempt to widen and enrich Marxism by emphasizing the role of culture in contemporary capitalist world.
- To critical theorists, the ‘culture industry’ comprises the entertainment industries of film, TV, radio, popular music, newspapers and magazines.
- The culture industry’s output are standardized, mass produced commodities that purport to fill people’s leisure time and, in this way, to bring about profit for the industry’s owners and ideological control for the sake of ruling elites.
- Critical theorists designate the terms of mass society and mass culture.
- The concept of a mass culture suggests that cultural differences have become leveled down in the densely populated developed societies, where cultural products are targeted at the largest possible audience.
- The leisure time is not any more a substantially free time but a cultural field that is defined by values and cultural patterns promoted by the culture of industry.

- According to theorists of the Frankfurt School, the standardized and easily consumed products of culture industry largely contributes to the shrinking and loss of individuals' capacity for critical and independent thought.
- Critical theorists argued that culture became simple entertainment and art was commoditized, so the art's potentiality for awakening, resistance and critical thought was dangerously diminished.
- **Criticism of conflict theories of the media**
- Conflict theorists tend to focus on the process of cultural production and on the form and content of cultural commodities.
- They are not involved in analyzing the process of reception of media products and so they seem to have a representation of consumers as passive and weak persons in front of dominant economic powers and cultural hegemony.



## ● Symbolic interactionism

- Interactionist media studies view people as active agents and focus on dialectic relationship between mass media and audiences.
- Herbert Blumer's 1930s study of the impact of cinema on the audience was an early attempt to allow people themselves to inform sociological understandings of media influence.
- One of the most important interactionist approach to the media is moral panic theory.
- S.Cohen studied the clashes between Mods and Rockers in the UK, and he pointed out how exaggerated and sensational media representations contribute to recurring moral panics in society.
- Moral panics serve to scapegoat social groups (i.e. youth cultures and ethnic minorities) by taking attention away from structural problems like unemployment and economic recession.
- J. Thompson maintains a critical stance towards those theoretical positions that view people as passive recipients of media messages.
- According to Thompson, the mass media do not contribute to a decline of critical thinking but they broaden and enrich our mental horizons as they provide us with various types of information.

- Thompson's theory of the media: *3 types of interaction*
- 1) *Face-to -face* interaction
- 2) *Mediated interaction*
- 3) *Mediated quasi-interaction*
- *The basic distinction between the two first types and the third type refers to the fact that the two previous types are ‘dialogical’ but the mediated quasi-interaction is ‘monological’.*
- According to Thompson, all three types of interaction intermingle in our lives today.
- The mass media bring about important changes concerning the balance between the public and the private spheres.
- This shift brings *more into the public domain than* before, not less, and often leads to more debate and controversy than previously.

## ● **Postmodern theory**

- The postmodern world is one marked by a lack of certainty, a mixing and matching of styles and genres and a playfulness in relation to cultural products.
- In pop music, there is the advent of sampling, the mixing of original tracks with new rhythms and rap.
- In art, postmodern trends reject the idea of a progressive ‘avant-garde’, and foster the playful mixing of high and popular forms in ‘post-progressive’ ways.
- According to Lyotard, we confront the end of a progressive Western culture, so all that is left to do is to ‘play with the pieces’.

- According to French postmodernist thinker Jean Baudrillard, the advent of electronic mass media, such as television, has transformed the very nature of our lives.
- TV is not confined to ‘represent’ the world to us, but it increasingly defines what the world in which we live actually is.
- In our contemporary social world, Baudrillard argued that the border between reality and representation has collapsed, so we can no longer separate out representations from reality.
- The media representations are *part of the hyperreal world and cannot be* seen as separate from it.
- To Baudrillard, we are trapped in a hyperreal world, as our knowledge about social reality and its events is largely, if not totally, defined by mass media images.
- Hyperreality is a *world in which the ultimate guarantor of authenticity and reality is to be seen on TV and in the media - to be ‘more real than the real’*.
- The hyperreal world is composed of simulacra, namely images which only get their meaning from other images and hence have no grounding in an ‘external reality’.

- **Critique to Baudrillard's view:**

- Baudrillard emphasizes unilaterally the power of media images to define and construct people's views about reality and their experience.
- He maintains a structuralist view that neglects the individuals' capacity to resist to this simulated reality.

# **Audiences and media representations**

## ● **Approaches of Audience studies**

### ● **A) Hypodermic model**

- This model compares the media message to a drug injected by syringe.
- Theorists of hypodermic model assume that the audience accept media messages without dealing with these in a critical way.
- Consumers of media images and information are seen as passive and unable to think critically, to interpret messages in their own terms and to resist to dominant ideology.
- The hypodermic model also assumes that the message is received and interpreted in more or less the same way by all members of society.
- This theoretical/analytical view supports the idea about narcotization and homogenization of society.

### ● **Criticism of the hypodermic model**

- Theories that follow the hypodermic model neglect the variety of responses to the media messages and the plurality of audiences.

- **B) The two-step flow model**

- Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) argued that audience response is formed through a two-step flow:
- *a)* the first step is when the media reaches the audience
- *b)* the second step comes when the audience interprets the media through their social interaction with influential people ('opinion leaders').

- **C) Gratification model**

- According to this model, we have to be involved in the ways in which various audiences utilize the media products (information, images, messages e.tc) in order to meet their own needs.
- The gratification model recognizes that some people may use the media to strengthen their social relationships.

- **Criticism of the gratification model**

- This model seems to assume that the needs of the audience already exist, so in this way it does not recognize the influential role of media concerning the creation and definition of needs and desires.



- **D) Reception model**

- S. Hall developed the reception theory in order to distinguish different forms of reception of media products.
- This model designates the crucial role of social class and cultural background concerning the interpretation of media 'texts'.
- The term 'media texts' is used to encompass various forms of media from books and newspapers to films and CDs.
- S. Hall argued that we can point out three different modes of decoding/reading media 'texts':
  - 1) *Symmetrical reading*
  - 2) *Negotiated reading*
  - 3) *Oppositional reading*

- **E) Interpretative model**

- This model fully recognizes the active role of audience, in the sense that consumers of media messages are viewed as active agents who can shape the media.
- The audience may proceed to comparisons between different media 'texts' and so they can read messages in a critical way.
- The interpretative model takes into account the capacity of consumers to be involved in the shaping of media output.

# Media representations and Stereotypes

- **The media representations of social class**
- Most of the media representations of working class reflect a middle-class version of what working-class life is like.
- The basic reason for this kind of representation has to do with the fact that middle-class professionals occupy important positions in the industry of TV and film production.
- The members of working class are often represented as people who work with their hands in manual jobs or are unemployed.
- Their living conditions are presented as harsh, foggy and polluted, but their social relationships seem to be characterized by intense feelings of solidarity and compassion.

- **The gendered media representations**

- The representations of girls and women in the mass media rely on traditional stereotypes of gender roles.
- Women are usually presented as:
  - *a)* housewives and homemakers
  - *b)* performers of specific, similar to domestic, roles, such as nurses, carers.
  - *c)* objects of male sexual desire.
- G. Tuchman referred to 'the symbolic annihilation of women' on television, in the sense that stereotypical women's representations are reproduced across various types of television broadcasting and so they contribute to the concealment of different forms of women's social, political, and economic action.
- In recent years, some research have pointed out that media have promoted new female images, such as those of emancipated and economic independent woman.
- Critics argue that even if an independent female figure is presented by media, this image follows strict norms about feminine beauty.
- Media still project ideal prototypes of female body and behaviour.

- **The media representations of minority groups**
- Social and cultural analysts have pointed out that Black and Asian people were noticeably absent from mainstream television until quite recently.
- The media references to these minority groups were negatively signified, namely they were presented as dangerous, problematic and aggressive social groups.
- Shaheen has found that in most of the Hollywood films, Arabs are presented as the ‘bad guys’, ‘brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics’.
- In Britain, ethnic minorities have also been commonly presented as different from an indigenous white British culture and often as presenting problems and threats for it.

- **The media representations of disabled people**
- The disabled people are usually presented in the media as physically or bodily different.
- The media representations of disabled people are scanty, but, when disabled people are present, they are often represented as:
  - **a) mentally unstable, insane people**
  - **b) weak and dependent persons**
  - **c) criminals**
- Film analysts have found that disabled characters are never incidental to a storyline, but are included precisely because of their disability.

# The control of media



- **Towards the global media order**

- Until the 1970s most media companies operated within specific domestic markets in accordance with regulations from national governments.
- Media industry was divided into different sectors, such as radio, television, cinema, print media.
- Since the 1970s and 1980s, media industry has undergone radical transformations concerning the field and the means of its activities.

- **Basic traits of the new global media order**

- 1) Concentration of ownership
- 2) Rise of private ownership
- 3) Transnational corporate structures
- 4) Diversification of media products
- 5) Corporate media mergers

- **The thesis of Media Imperialism**

- In our globalized world, we encounter a new division of information between the developed societies and less developed countries.
- Western media corporations possess a crucial part of global production and diffusion of media 'texts', and this has led some analysts to speak of media imperialism.
- The headquarters of the world's 20 largest media conglomerates are all located in industrialized nations; the majority of them are in the United States.
- The thesis of media imperialism supports that the less developed countries find themselves extremely vulnerable and weak to defend their political outlook and cultural independence.
- Through the electronic media, Western cultural products (films, music, TV shows etc) have become widely diffused round the globe.
- Western media corporations filter and control the flow of information, and in this way contribute to the predominance of a 'First World outlook'.

- **Criticism of media imperialism**

- 1) The flow of information is not one-way, but we can also find reverse-flows.
- Media products in former colonial countries become popular and can be sold to former colonizers (i.e.: the success of Indian film industry Bollywood).
- 2) The thesis of media imperialism substantially adopts the ‘hypodermic needle’ model, in the sense that Western cultural products promote Western values that are ‘injected’ into passive consumers around the globe.
- Consumers are active agents who can reject, modify or reinterpret the messages in media products.
- 3) There are ‘local forms’ of resistance to the power of the global media. Religion, local tradition and popular mentalities function as important sources for the development of resistance to the impact of global media products.

- **The thesis of glocalization**
- Roland Robertson (1995) has proposed the term glocalizaion in order to fully understand the contemporary global processes.
- The term *glocalization* depicts the mixture of globalizing and localizing forces.
- The western media (and other) corporations have to acknowledge and take into account the local traditions and ethics, if they want to promote their products in other countries.
- This view entails the transformation of the products in order for them to adapt to various cultural patterns.

# Consumption

- In the second half of the 19th century economics held an individualistic and instrumental position about consumer practices.
- According to economic theory, the act of purchase relies on calculation about what is most suitable for the satisfaction of personal needs.
- The first sociological reflections on consumption tried to show that the consumer practices are based on another kind of rationality, that of social rationality.
- This rationality refers to the positional logic.
- From this point of view, consumers are interested in getting and using objects which can serve as symbols of status, demonstrating and possibly bettering their standing in the social structure, marking social hierarchies and boundaries.
- Fashion, a phenomenon that became ever more important in the great metropolises at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, seemed to be an exemplar of modern consumption practices.

- In the post-war period, a strong, critical trend of sociological thought emerged.
- Critical theory concentrated on the power exercised by the cultural industry and advertising, and on their capacity to manipulate tastes.
- According to this critical perspective, people are not always able to act on the basis of their own sense of distinction.
- Consumers are viewed as victims of the variety of images and the speed of innovation, so much so that it appears everything changes even though in fact it remains the same.
- Since the 1980s, cultural anthropology has delved deeper into the relationships amongst consumers.
- Anthropological and sociological researches have pointed out consumers' capacity to use goods not only according to a positional logic, but also in communicative ways.
- The consumer practices can contribute to the creation, maintenance and modification of social ties.

- R. Sassatelli designates different logics that support the acts of consumption:
- a) *relational*
- b) *normative*
- c) *ceremonial*
- d) *hedonistic*
- The acts of consumption are informed by a variety of different logics, that each of these acts may contain more than one motivating factor, and that each can be lived and presented, read and justified differently according to context.
- Sociology of consumption has the task to study the times, places and institutions of consumption, the rhetorical tropes which actors may use to justify tastes, the social dynamics that these tastes embody, the lifestyle models which underlie particular preferences, and the identity which is bestowed on the figure of the consumer.



## ● Bibliography

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