Module 2

Theoretical Perspective on Media

The number of people around the world who have access to a variety of media continues to grow exponentially. Even Buddhist monks in Tibet have access to television and the internet is increasingly available to remote and rural communities. Moreover, the amount of time humans spend consuming different media also continues to increase. With smart phones and PDA’s many of us are continually connected and have the media at our fingertips twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. The following is an analysis of the Mass Media through the perspective of the three main Sociological theories – Functionalism, Interactionism and Conflict Theory, and their relative impact on the media as a sociological institution.

The first theory to be explored is the **Functionalist Theory**, which basically states that each aspect of society is interdependent and contributes to society's functioning as a whole. Further, it emphasizes that society is held together by social consensus and cohesion, in which members agree upon and work together to achieve what is in the best interests for the society as a whole. More implicitly, functionalism argues that if something does not serve a useful purpose in society, it will not endure from one generation to the next. Based on this perspective one would conclude that the purpose of the media has become increasingly useful to society since its prevalence has only increased. From the Functionalist perspective, the media serves five essential functions – it acts a means of socialization; enforces social norms; confers status; promotes consumption; and keeps us informed about our environment.

According to the **Interactionist perspective**, people attach meanings to symbols, and then they act according to their subjective interpretation of these symbols. Whereas functionalism looks at the “big picture” concepts in sociology, interactionism focuses on how people interact with each other day to day, and then seek to determine what meanings individuals assign to their own actions and symbols, as well as to those of others. Accordingly, interactionists seek to analyze how the mass media contributes not only to shaping social behavior between members of society, but also to creating shared understandings of this same behavior. Interactionism also seeks to study mass media as a major and growing source of daily activity in many societies. As more and more youngsters spend a significant portion of their day on Facebook and Twitter, whereas functionalists may be concerned with how these new media serve to maintain social stability, interactionists would focus on the effects these media have in the peoples’ everyday interactions with each other and with society at large.

**Conflict Theory**, tends to present society in a different light than do the functionalist and interactionist perspectives. While these latter perspectives focus on the positive aspects of society that contribute to its stability, the conflict perspective focuses more on the conflicted, and ever-changing nature of society. Unlike functionalism, that defend the status quo, seeks to avoid social change, and asserts that people cooperate to effect social order, conflict theorists challenge the status quo, encourage social change, and believe wealthy and powerful people try to force social order lower classes and minority populations to serve their own interests. Based on this point of view conflict theory argues that the mass media simply
reflects, and often even exacerbates the many conflicts and divisions within different groups in our society. Therefore, as opposed to functionalists, conflict theorists believe that the mass media serves to reinforce the distance and discord between genders, different races and ethnicities and social classes, rather than promoting social harmony.

Each perspective interprets the role of the mass media in a different manner and hence each theory is likely to affect the views of individuals who are part of the institution in distinct ways. As a functionalist, you are likely to view the programming decisions of a news organization executive who deliberately decides to omit a negative story about one of its sponsor corporations as a neutral act designed to reduce potential disharmony within the organization and possibly the public at large. As an interactionist, you would be interested in how the decision may affect the day to day interactions between the members of the organization or even between the organization and members of the public may be affected. On the other hand, a conflict theorist would likely view this as one of the negative functions of the mass media – Gatekeeping. Gatekeeping is the method by which power is maintained within the elites which control the flow of information by ensuring that material must travel through a series of checkpoints before reaching the public (Schaefer, 2009). Therefore conflict theory explains why news organizations may shy away from negative stories about corporations that finance large advertising campaigns in their newspaper or on their stations.

This was clearly evidenced when TV networks receiving millions of dollars in advertising from companies like Nike and other textile manufacturers were reluctant to run stories about possible human-rights violations by these companies in foreign countries. Conflict theorists identify the same problem at the local level where city newspapers will not give new cars poor reviews or run stories on selling a home without an agent because the majority of their funding comes from auto and real estate advertising.

Conflict theory seeks to promote social change, whereas functionalism seeks to thwart it and interactionism merely to observe and analyze it as it pertains to the everyday interaction. There is no disputing the fact that online social networks are becoming an increasingly dominant form of media in everyday life. “Today, conversations are markets and markets are conversations. And the forums for these conversations cultivate a tight, unswerving and mostly unforgiving community and culture. Participation requires observation in order to understand the sociological landscape and the dynamics that define each community. They are after all, populated by people, not audiences (Solis, 2007).” While observing that social networks are becoming an important catalyst for social change within internet media by reallocating power to individual rather than conglomerates, Interactionism perspective would be useful in interpreting the shift in dialogue and assist companies in bridging the gap with improved marketing strategies. “An interactionist may argue that by listening, reading, and participating, corporate marketing will be smarter and more approachable than ever before. This is how we humanize brands, create loyalty, and earn customer’s business. Yes, there are many networks. Yes, they’re thinning our attention. And, yes, this is the new form of media and influence, and it is transforming corporate communications, traditional media, and how people communicate with each other (2007).

In contrast to the above perspective, a conflict theorist may be more inclined to see the media’s approach to social change as that of facilitating “negative” or regressive social change rather than contributing to greater harmony. Conflict theory would be more interested in the fact that “marketers and media firms target audiences based increasingly on their ideological beliefs. Increasingly, though, these marketers are focusing on those with higher levels of expendable income in combination with information they gain on age, ethnicity,
education, gender, race, and place of residence. The effect is the social price alienation, reduced social mobility, anger and fear of others. If primary media communities continue to take hold, their large numbers will diminish the chance that individuals who identify with certain social categories will even have an opportunity to learn about others (Gibbs, 2000).

As media influences society, society also influences the media. In fact, I believe that especially now, with the advent of Twitter and other social networks, the public should be viewed as equally powerful institution that has become increasingly able to exert influence in the other sociological institutions including the mass media. Although conflict theory can often fall into the common trap of dismissing the public as irrelevant by viewing it as just passively subjected to the powers of the free market, interactionism is more likely to give us insight into how the increased dialogue exchanges between individual and society at large with media affects our individual lives on a personal level.

Functionalism, on the other hand may be more likely to offer insight into how society’s views of the media have become increasingly critical and even on occasion suspicious. A functionalist may argue that the changing opinions of society regarding the media and the influence they exert serve a functional purpose by directly affecting the organizations that depend on the media. While conducting a study on human rights organizations and the media, Rodgers noted that Amnesty's [International] need to appear relevant and to remain in the lens of the media in relation to contemporary geopolitical dilemmas was embodied in a clear organizational policy. Interviews with members of Amnesty's executive confirmed this evaluation in the logic behind their strategy as one member of Amnesty's executive member observed: “You can work all you like on Mauritania, but the press couldn't give a rat's ass about Mauritania. You don't put a press release out on that.” (Amnesty informant #2, Female, September 14, 2003) (Rodgers, 2009). Therefore, society’s pressure on the media serves to funnel appropriate interest, and therefore funding to the issues that more accurately reflect the public interest.

We have seen that although there are some similarities between the social theories of Functionalism, Interactionism and Conflict Theory, they differ quite substantially from each other and according to which theory one subscribes to, their approach to different sociological institutions, including the media, will vary greatly. Therefore I tend to view the media and their impact on society through a conflict lens because I believe the Conflict Theory holds the most appeal. However, this does not mean that Functionalism and Interactionism do not have important contributions to make to the overall picture. As a student of Communications it is important that I also understand the social and political forces which shape our cultural landscape and especially the changing nature of society and culture.

References


Feminist Perspective:

Feminism is a vast movement which is not specifically centred on studying the media. It is concerned with challenging the unfair and unequal distribution of power and wealth in a patriarchal society.

Through the years Feminism has been firstly a political project which has sought to challenge power structures and change the roles and perceptions of women.

In common with other perspectives (such as Marxism), a part of this is to understand how power works because without this understanding it is almost impossible to get things changed.

This is why feminists have mad such a contribution to Media Studies. If the Mass Media play such an important part in the reinforcement of patriarchal ideology, then it is essential to see:

- How this process works,
- To criticise it,
- And to find ways of using the media to propose alternatives to patriarchy.

Feminists are particularly interested in the contribution made by the media to society’s dominant ideas about gender roles, and in this, the mass media play a crucial role in socialisation, in teaching us how to behave and think in ways that our culture finds acceptable. A significant part of this socialisation process is to provide answers to questions like: *What does it mean to be a woman?* And *What does it mean to be a man?*

**ACTIVITY:**
Try completing this chart of binary oppositions which gives some of the main gender stereotypes. Can you extend the list?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEMININITY</th>
<th>MASCULINITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>Rational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>Public, work-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>Active</td>
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<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>Rough</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soft</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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What can you conclude about status and power from these lists?
The gender roles and representations have changed rapidly in recent years, largely because feminists have made a good deal of progress in eroding stereotypes but some would argue they have been replaced by different but equally disempowering stereotypes.

Laura Mulvey conceived the term ‘male gaze’ to emphasise the extent to which so much of our media output assumes that the spectator is male or constructs reality from a male point of view, from a set of largely masculine assumptions.

Mulvey’s interest was particularly the cinema which offered the perfect opportunity for the male viewer to drool over the erotic exhibition of women’s bodies on screen. Because female characters have been invariably insignificant to the plot, female viewers have also identified with the male character, enjoying the spectacle of women through his eyes.

However, the landscape of gender representation in the media has changed enormously over the last 30 years. Today, men and women are portrayed working side by side in such settings as hospitals, schools and police stations.

In the cinema, roles for women have developed away from the victim roles of the past and producers have realised that ‘kick-ass heroines do better business’ (Gauntlett, 2002).

Watch this link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QkS2Jeqdc