ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION

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Abstract:

The media play a central role in informing the public about what happens in the world, particularly in those areas in which audiences do not possess direct knowledge or experience. This article examines the impact the media has in the construction of public belief and attitudes and its relationship to social change. Drawing on findings from a range of empirical studies, we look at the impact of media coverage in areas such as disability, climate change and economic development. Findings across these areas show the way in which the media shape public debate in terms of setting agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects. For example, in our work on disability we showed the relationship between negative media coverage of people on disability benefit and a hardening of attitudes towards them. Further, we found that the media also severely limit the information with which audiences understand these issues and that alternative solutions to political problems are effectively removed from public debate. We found other evidence of the way in which media coverage can operate to limit understanding of possibilities of social change. In our study of news reporting of climate change, we traced the way that the media have constructed uncertainty around the issue and how this has led to disengagement in relation to possible changes in personal behaviours. Finally, we discuss the implications for communications and policy and how both the traditional and new media might help in the development of better informed public debate.

Keywords: media, social change, policy, climate change, disability, economy
INTRODUCTION

Mass media is communication—whether written, broadcast, or spoken—that reaches a large audience. This includes television, radio, advertising, movies, the Internet, newspapers, magazines, and so forth.

Mass media is a significant force in modern culture, particularly in America. Sociologists refer to this as a mediated culture where media reflects and creates the culture. Communities and individuals are bombarded constantly with messages from a multitude of sources including TV, billboards, and magazines, to name a few. These messages promote not only products, but moods, attitudes, and a sense of what is and is not important. Mass media makes possible the concept of celebrity: without the ability of movies, magazines, and news media to reach across thousands of miles, people could not become famous. In fact, only political and business leaders, as well as the few notorious outlaws, were famous in the past. Only in recent times have actors, singers, and other social elites become celebrities or “stars.”

The current level of media saturation has not always existed. As recently as the 1960s and 1970s, television, for example, consisted of primarily three networks, public broadcasting, and a few local independent stations. These channels aimed their programming primarily at two-parent, middle-class families. Even so, some middle-class households did not even own a television. Today, one can find a television in the poorest of homes, and multiple TVs in most middle-class homes. Not only has availability increased, but programming is increasingly diverse with shows aimed to please all ages, incomes, backgrounds, and attitudes. This widespread availability and exposure makes television the primary focus of most mass-media discussions. More recently, the Internet has increased its role exponentially as more businesses and households “sign on.” Although TV and the Internet have dominated the mass media, movies and magazines—particularly those lining the aisles at grocery checkout stands—also play a powerful role in culture, as do other forms of media.
THEORIES

Three main sociological perspectives on the role of media exist: the limited-effects theory, the class-dominant theory, and the culturalist theory.

Limited-effects theory

The limited-effects theory argues that because people generally choose what to watch or read based on what they already believe, media exerts a negligible influence. This theory originated and was tested in the 1940s and 1950s. Studies that examined the ability of media to influence voting found that well-informed people relied more on personal experience, prior knowledge, and their own reasoning. However, media “experts” more likely swayed those who were less informed. Critics point to two problems with this perspective. First, they claim that limited-effects theory ignores the media's role in framing and limiting the discussion and debate of issues. How media frames the debate and what questions members of the media ask change the outcome of the discussion and the possible conclusions people may draw. Second, this theory came into existence when the availability and dominance of media was far less widespread.

Class-dominant theory

The class-dominant theory argues that the media reflects and projects the view of a minority elite, which controls it. Those people who own and control the corporations that produce media comprise this elite. Advocates of this view concern themselves particularly with massive corporate mergers of media organizations, which limit competition and put big business at the reins of media—especially news media. Their concern is that when ownership is restricted, a few people then have the ability to manipulate what people can see or hear. For example, owners can easily avoid or silence stories that expose unethical corporate behavior or hold corporations responsible for their actions.

The issue of sponsorship adds to this problem. Advertising dollars fund most media. Networks aim programming at the largest possible audience because the broader the appeal, the greater the potential purchasing audience and the easier selling air time to advertisers becomes. Thus, news
organizations may shy away from negative stories about corporations (especially parent corporations) that finance large advertising campaigns in their newspaper or on their stations. Television networks receiving millions of dollars in advertising from companies like Nike and other textile manufacturers were slow to run stories on their news shows about possible human-rights violations by these companies in foreign countries. Media watchers 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. This influence also extends to programming. In the 1990s a network cancelled a short-run drama with clear religious sentiments, Christy, because, although highly popular and beloved in rural America, the program did not rate well among young city dwellers that advertisers were targeting in ads.

Critics of this theory counter these arguments by saying that local control of news media largely lies beyond the reach of large corporate offices elsewhere, and that the quality of news depends upon good journalists. They contend that those less powerful and not in control of media have often received full media coverage and subsequent support. As examples they name numerous environmental causes, the anti-nuclear movement, the anti-Vietnam movement, and the pro-Gulf War movement.

While most people argue that a corporate elite controls media, a variation on this approach argues that a politically “liberal” elite controls media. They point to the fact that journalists, being more highly educated than the general population, hold more liberal political views, consider themselves “left of center,” and are more likely to register as Democrats. They further point to examples from the media itself and the statistical reality that the media more often labels conservative commentators or politicians as “conservative” than liberals as “liberal.”

Media language can be revealing, too. Media uses the terms “arch” or “ultra” conservative, but rarely or never the terms “arch” or “ultra” liberal. Those who argue that a political elite controls media also point out that the movements that have gained media attention—the environment, anti-nuclear, and anti-Vietnam—generally support liberal political issues. Predominantly conservative political issues have yet to gain prominent media attention, or have been opposed by the media. Advocates of this view point to the Strategic Arms Initiative of the 1980s Reagan administration. Media quickly characterized the defense program as “Star Wars,” linking it to an
expensive fantasy. The public failed to support it, and the program did not get funding or congressional support.

**Culturalist theory**

The culturalist theory, developed in the 1980s and 1990s, combines the other two theories and claims that people interact with media to create their own meanings out of the images and messages they receive. This theory sees audiences as playing an active rather than passive role in relation to mass media. One strand of research focuses on the audiences and how they interact with media; the other strand of research focuses on those who produce the media, particularly the news.

Theorists emphasize that audiences choose what to watch among a wide range of options, choose how much to watch, and may choose the mute button or the VCR remote over the programming selected by the network or cable station. Studies of mass media done by sociologists parallel text-reading and interpretation research completed by linguists (people who study language). Both groups of researchers find that when people approach material, whether written text or media images and messages, they interpret that material based on their own knowledge and experience. Thus, when researchers ask different groups to explain the meaning of a particular song or video, the groups produce widely divergent interpretations based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, and religious background. Therefore, culturalist theorists claim that, while a few elite in large corporations may exert significant control over what information media produces and distributes, personal perspective plays a more powerful role in how the audience members interpret those messages.
CONCLUSION

The information that people are given in media accounts can both legitimise the actions of the powerful, and facilitate change at the collective level, but can also limit and shape the behaviours of individuals which are central to wider social change. There is a need to examine the relationship between beliefs about the world and the political conclusions drawn by the public, the relationship between political conclusions and taking political action, and between those conclusions and individual and collective commitments to behavioural change. Our research has shown that the media play a facilitating role – in the easing through of policy action by repetition and reinforcement of media messages, and the absence of proposed alternatives – and also a possible role in shaping behaviour, especially where these are linked to other types of structural support. The key to both of these lies in the complex process of negotiation in which audiences receive messages involving a range of factors including current and past media accounts, beliefs, knowledge and prior experience, structural barriers and values. These may lead to attitudinal and ultimately behavioural commitment and change, or may inhibit these. In relation to the role of public communications about climate change, for example, there is little point in driving home the message about behavioural change unless there are simple, effective and supported solutions open to people from which they can see the real benefits. But media accounts can play a central role in not only legitimising certain courses of action, but the placing of trust and credibility in particular versions of the possible directions for social policies. They can also be used to insert doubt and confusion into a debate such as climate change, and may reduce commitments to action. The media are in essence a contested space in which the most powerful groups can establish the dominance of specific messages. But, as we have shown, the complexity of the reception process then creates the possibility of variations in attitudinal and behavioural response.
REFERENCES


