Full Length Research Paper

Mass communication: Trends, traits and theories

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Mass communication is a term used in a variety of ways, which despite the potential for confusion, is usually clear from the context. "Mass Communication" is often used incorrectly to refer to the dissemination of entertainment, arts, information and messages by television, radio, newspapers, magazines, movies, recorded music and associated media. This general use of the term is only appropriate as designating the most commonly shared features of such otherwise disparate phenomena as broadcast television, cable, video playback, theatre projection, recorded song, radio talk, advertising, the front page, editorial page, sports column, comics and pages of newspaper. In this usage, "mass communication" refers to the activities of the media as a whole and fails to distinguish among specific media, modes of communication, genres of text or artifact, production or reception situations, or any question of actual communication.

Key words: Communication, mass communication, news, information, entertainment, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, advertising, production.

INTRODUCTION

The term "mass communication" is used in a variety of ways, which despite the potential for confusion, is usually clear from the context. These include: (a) Reference to the various activities of the mass media as a group, (b) The use of criteria of a concept, "massiveness", to differentiate among media and their activities and (c) The construction of questions about communication as applied to the activities of the mass media. Significantly, only the third definition does not take the actual process of communication for granted.

Mass Communication is often used incorrectly to refer to the dissemination of entertainment, arts, information and messages by television, radio, newspapers, magazines, movies, recorded music and associated media. This general use of the term is only appropriate as designating the most commonly shared features of such otherwise disparate phenomena as broadcast television, cable, video playback, theatre projection, recorded song, radio talk, advertising, the front page, editorial page, sports column, comics and pages of the newspaper (Beniger, 1987). In this usage, "mass communication" refers to the activities of the media as a whole and fails to distinguish among specific media, modes of communi-cation, genres of text or artifact, production or reception situations, or any questions of actual communication. The only analytic purpose the term serves is to dis-

tinguish mass communication from interpersonal, small group and other face-to-face communication situations. Another use of the term involves the various criteria of massiveness, which can be brought to bear in analyses of media and mass communication situations (Blum, 1980).

These criteria may include size and differentiation of audience, anonymity, simultaneity and the nature of influences among audience members and between the audience and the media. Live television audience of recent decades may be the epitome of mass communication. These may include special events as the funerals of India's Late Prime Ministers Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. and entertainment spectaculars as the Olympic Games, World Cup Soccer and the Academy or Grammy Awards. These transmissions are distributed simultaneously, regardless of individual or group differences, to audience members numbering in several tens or even a few hundreds of millions (Blum, 1980; Turow, 1992). Outside of their own local groups, these audience members know nothing of each other. They have no real opportunities to influence television representation of the events or the interpretation of those representations by other audience members.

By contrast audience of most cable television channels

are smaller and more differentiated from other audience groups. The target audience for newspapers, magazines and movies are less simultaneous, they are smaller and more differentiated and there is the potential for a flow of local influences as people talk about articles, features and recommend movies. Compared to a letter, phone call, conversation, group discussions, or public lecture, all of these media produce communication immensely more massive on every criterion (Curan and Michael, 1991; Jensen, 1990).

All of the criteria used in defining mass communication are potentially confusing when one is engaged in a specific research project or critical examination. The most confounding problem is encountered when determining the level of analysis. Should the concern be with a single communication event or with multiple events but a single communication channel? Should the focus be on multiple channels or a single medium? Does the central question concern a moment in time or an era, a community, a nation, or the world?

Here, the radio provides an excellent example of the importance of these choices. Before television, network radio was the epitome of mass communication; it was national, live, available and listened to everywhere, especially in Nigeria. Today, it is difficult to think of radio this way because the industry no longer works in the same manner. Commercial radio stations depend on local and regional sources of advertising income. Essentially, all radio stations are programmed to attract a special segment of a local or regional audience, even when programming national entertainment materials such as popular songs, stations emphasize local events, personalities, weather, news and traffic in their broadcast talk. Radio transmission is an industry characterized by specialized channels each attracting relatively small and heterogeneous audience. The average home in a developed nation like the United States and its developing counterpart, India have at least one and even more than that compared to television sets (Katz, 1990; Schramm, 1960; Manohar and Wadhwani, 1992). Cumulatively, the United States and Indian radio audience is just as big, undifferentiated and anonymous as that of television. Is radio today, then a purveyor of mass communication? This depends on whether the concern is with the industry as a whole or with the programming and audience of a particular station. Most uses of the term "mass communication" fall into one of these first two categories, either it refer to the activities of the mass media as a whole, or to the massiveness of certain kinds of communication. Both uses have taken for granted, issues of communication and instead have placed emphasis on the massiveness of the distribution system and the audience. Attention is given to what is called the mass media because it is the institutional and technological system capable of producing mass audiences for mass distributed "communications." Communication, then, ends up been implicitly defined as a kind of object (message, text and artifact) that is reproduced and transmitted by these media. For some purposes, this may be exactly the right definition. This diminishes our ability to treat communication as a social accomplishment, as something people do, rather than as an object that gets moved from one location to another. If communication is something people do, then it may or may not be successful and may or may not be healthy and happy. If communication means, "to share" for example rather than "to transmit" then what, if something of importance is shared when people watch a television programme.

Scholars of mass communication are often more interested in communication as a social accomplishment than they are in the media as mass distribution systems. This interest is based on an intellectual independence from both existing habits of terminology and most importantly, from media institutions as they exist Jensen, 1990; Katz, 1990; McQuail, 1987).

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION THEORY?

Communication is a tricky concept, and while we may casually use the word with some frequency, it is difficult to arrive at a precise definition that is agreeable to most communication scholars. Communication is immensely rooted in human behaviors and the structures of society. It is difficult to think of social or behavioral events where communication does not feature.

Communication consists of transmitting information from one person to another. In fact, many scholars of communication take this as a working definition, and use Lasswell's maxim ("who says what to whom to what effect") as a means of circumscribing the field of communication (Katz, 1990). Others suggest that there is a ritual process of communication that cannot be artificially abstracted from a particular historical and social context. As a relatively young field of inquiry, it is probably premature to expect a conceptualization of communication that is shared among all or most of those who work in that area. Furthermore, communication theory itself is, in many ways, an attempt to describe and explain precisely what communication is.

A theory is some form of explanation of a class of observed phenomena. Karl Popper described theory as, "the net, which we throw out in order to catch the world, to rationalize, explain and dominate it". The idea of a theory lies at the heart of any scholarly process, and while those in the social sciences tend to adopt the tests of a good theory from natural sciences, many who study communication adhere to an idea of theory that is akin to that found in other academic fields. Never the less, when evaluating the strength of a theory, the criteria commonly found in the sciences are derived from the scientific method, and are often broadly applicable (Blum, 1980; Jensen, 1990).

EVALUATING THEORY

What makes a theory "good"? Six criteria can be said to be properties of a scientific and authentic theory. The terminology presented here is drawn from Littlejohn's theories of human communication, but a similar set of criteria are widely accepted both within and outside the field of communication.

1. Theoretical scope: How general is the theory? That is, how widely applicable is it? In most cases, a theory that may only be applied within a fairly narrow set of circumstances is not considered as useful as a theory that encompasses a very wide range of communicative interactions. The ideal, of course, is a theory that succinctly explains the nature of human communication as a whole.
2. Appropriateness: Theories are often evaluated based on how well their epistemological, ontological and axiological assumptions relate to the issue or question is being explained. If a theory recapitulates its assumptions (if it is tautological), it is not an effective theory.
3. Heuristic value: Some theories suggest the ways in which further research may be conducted. By presenting an explanatory model, the theory generates questions or hypotheses that can be operationalized relatively easily.
4. Validity: It may seem obvious that for a theory to be good, it must also be valid. Validity refers to the degree to which the theory accurately represents the true state of the world.
5. Parsimony: The law of parsimony (Occam's razor) dictates that a theory should provide the simplest possible (viable) explanation for a phenomenon. Others suggest that a good theory should exhibit an aesthetic quality and that it should be beautiful or natural.
6. Openness: Theories, perhaps paradoxically, should not exist to the absolute exclusion of other theories. A theory should not be a dogma; it should encourage and make provision for skepticism and should to whatever degree possible, be compatible with other accepted theory McQuail, 1987; Schramm, 1960; Manohar and Wadhwani 1992).

Moreover in the context of social sciences, we may find different theories which may each explain a phenomenon in useful ways. There is value in being able to use theories as "lenses" through which one can understand the world together with other scholars. So let us discuss in a nutshell the most rational and relevant communication theories.

1. Agenda setting theory: The Agenda-setting theory says that the media (especially the news media) are not always successful at telling us what to think, but they are quite successful at telling us what to think about (McCombs, 1972; Shaw, 1973).
2. Cultivation theory: Gerbner's cultivation theory says that television has become the main source of storytelling in today's society. Those who watch it for four or more hours a day are labeled heavy television viewers while those who view less than four hours per day, according to Gerbner are light viewers. Heavy viewers are exposed to more violence and therefore are affected by the mean world syndrome, an idea that the world is worse than it actually is. According to Gerbner, the overuse of television is creating a homogeneous and fearful populace (Gerbner, 1976).
3. Cultural imperialism theory: Cultural Imperialism theory states that Western nations dominate the media around the world, which in return has a powerful effect on Third World cultures by imposing on them Western views and therefore destroying their native cultures (Schiller, 1973).
4. Diffusion of innovation theory: In the Diffusion Innovation theory, communicators in society with a message influence/encourage people that have strong opinions through the media to influence the masses (Lazarsfeld, 1944).
5. Media dependency theory: This theory states that the more dependent an individual is on the media in fulfilling his or her needs, the more important the media will be to that person (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976).
6. Media equation theory: This theory predicts why people respond unconsciously and automatically to communication media as if it were human (Reeves and Nass, 1996).
7. Spiral of silence theory: The spiral of silence theory explains why people often feel the need to conceal their opinions, preferences, views, etc. when they fall within the minority group (Noelle-Neumann, 1984).
8. Technological determinism theory: Technological determinism theory state that, "The media technology shapes how we as individuals in a society think, feel, act and how society operates as we move from one technological age to another" (Tribal- Literate- Print- Electronic etc.) (Mcluhan, 1962).
9. Functional approach to mass communication theory: There are five functional approaches the media serves users: surveillance, correlation, transmission, entertainment and mobilization (Lasswell, 1948; Wright, 1960).
10. Human action theory: Human behavior can be predicted because people make choices with a purpose for their actions. Behavior is chosen by individuals to reach certain goals (Winch, 1958; McQuail, 1987; Schramm, 1960; Turow, 1992; Manohar and Wadhwani 1992).

Apart from these, there are many more important theories such as uses and gratification theory, cognitive dissonance theory, communication accommodation theory, expectancy violation theory, face-negotiation theory etc, that need to be discussed.

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