

# MEDIA INFLUENCE: A COMPARISON OF COMMUNICATION THEORIES

SIGNIFICANT POWER



	<b>HYPODERMIC NEEDLE THEORY</b>	<b>AGENDA SETTING FUNCTION THEORY</b>	<b>CULTIVATION THEORY</b>	<b>SPIRAL OF SILENCE</b>	<b>PROPAGANDA MODEL</b>
<b>YEAR</b>	1920s-1940s	1972	1970s-1980s	1974	1989
<b>THEORISTS</b>	Various	Maxwell McCombs Donald Shaw	George Gerbner	Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann	Noam Chomsky Edward S Herman
<b>OVERVIEW</b>	A linear communication theory which suggests that the media has a direct and powerful influence on audiences, like being injected with a hypodermic needle.	This theory suggests that the media can't tell you what to think but it can tell you what to think about. Through a process of selection, omission and framing, the media focuses public discussion on particular issues.	The media, particularly television, contributes to the audience's perception of social reality. Because it is so pervasive, it dominates our view of reality, cultivating attitudes which were once acquired elsewhere.	The mass media play a significant role in defining dominant opinions, people with opposing views are afraid to express these ideas because they fear social isolation.	The mass media is owned and controlled by powerful organisations which serve their own commercial interests. News is shaped by five 'filters': ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, anti-Communism and fear.
<b>AUDIENCE</b>	Audiences are passive and homogenous, this theory does not account for individual differences.	Audiences are active but, when it comes to making important decisions like who to vote for, they draw on information that is particularly salient at the time.	Cultivation Theorists don't deny that audiences can be active but are susceptible to the gravitational pull of mainstream television.	Audiences are active but they will not express views other than those that are dominant or rising for fear of isolation.	Media institutions encourage a preferred reading of media texts which is shaped by commercial, right wing interests. Audiences are not passive, capable of dissent.
<b>EVIDENCE</b>	This theory is often supported by early moral panics, including the Orson Welles War of the Worlds broadcast in 1938. Presented in the form of a news bulletin, this broadcast led some to believe that the world was being invaded by martians. The belief that the media has a direct and powerful effect on audiences was also supported by the Payne Fund studies.	Typically, evidence supporting this theory shows a correlation between the number of news stories on an issue and how important people think the issue is. McCombs cites a study that revealed in the early 1980s there was a correlation between the rise in 'ailing economy' headlines and poor consumer sentiment.	Gerbner and other researches have conducted numerous studies to determine whether people who watch more television perceive reality differently to those who don't and whether this reflects a "television" view of the world. Gerbner's research found that crime on television is ten times more than in real life, resulting in a more dangerous view of reality.	Looking at attitudes to controversial topics, Noelle-Neumann's research showed the closer someone's opinion is to dominant beliefs, the more likely they are to express these views. Likewise, the further these beliefs are from public opinion, the more likely they are to remain silent.	According to Dr Jeffery Klaehn, there are numerous studies which support the logic of the Propaganda Model. His own research found that Canadian government and corporate interests in Papua New Guinea influenced the reporting of the near-genocide in the country after Indonesia's invasion, resulting in fewer articles about the atrocities.
<b>STRENGTHS &amp; WEAKNESSES</b>	Although many people still talk about the media in this way, this theory is disregarded as an outdated way of thinking about media influence. Audiences are more active than this theory suggests.	The way people receive media is changing, instead of mainstream media like newspapers and television, people now get information from the internet. Does this affect the media's ability to set agendas?	Cultivation analysis considers the total exposure to television over time. It considers the contribution that television makes to our culture and social reality. Critics say that people are also likely to be influenced by other factors.	The Spiral of Silence has a narrow focus, looking specifically at public opinion and how the mass media influences our willingness to become involved in public debate.	Some have suggested that the rise of the internet means that large commercial organisations no longer have absolute control of the media. Herman argues that this is "exacerbating the problem".

# MEDIA INFLUENCE: A COMPARISON OF COMMUNICATION THEORIES

LITTLE POWER 

	REINFORCEMENT THEORY	TWO-STEP FLOW THEORY	USES AND GRATIFICATION THEORY	SEMIOTICS	ENCODING/DECODING
<b>YEAR</b>	1960	1948	1974	1970s	1980
<b>THEORISTS</b>	Joseph Klapper	Paul F Lazarsfeld	Jay Blumler Elihu Katz	Ferdinand de Saussure	Stuart Hall
<b>OVERVIEW</b>	Klapper argued that the media has little power to influence people and it just reinforces our preexisting attitudes and beliefs which have been developed by more powerful social institutions like families, schools and religion organisations.	A diffusion model of influence, suggesting that people are more likely to be influenced by 'opinion leaders' - people who are more connected to the media than their peers and pass on media messages.	The Uses and Gratification Theory looks at how people use the media to gratify a range of needs – including the need for information, personal identity, integration, social interaction and entertainment.	A theory of communication which suggests that media texts are constructed using a shared code which is encoded by the sender and read by the receiver.	Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory suggests that audience derive their own meaning from media texts. These meanings can be dominant, negotiated or oppositional.
<b>AUDIENCE</b>	Audiences are active and exist in a society where they are influenced by important social institutions. This theory considers the total situation.	Audiences are active, particularly opinion leaders, who exist throughout society in all different classes and socioeconomic groups.	Audiences are active and can have power over the media. If people don't watch a television program, it won't rate and it will be taken off the air.	Audiences are active because they construct meaning from texts by 'reading' signs. Meaning varies as signs can have both shared and individual connotations.	Audiences are active in decoding media messages. They can accept or reject parts of the text based on their personal beliefs or attitudes.
<b>EVIDENCE</b>	In 'The Effects of Mass Communication', Klapper cites hundreds of studies that support his theory, including a 1948 study which revealed that voters were predisposed to opinions and beliefs held by their families, including one young man who said he was going to vote Democratic because his grandfather would skin him if he didn't.	Lazarsfeld's book 'The People's Choice', which examined the 1940 presidential election found that people are more likely to be influenced by 'opinion leaders' than campaign advertising. In the paper 'Who says what to whom on Twitter', researchers found that the flow of information on Twitter, supports the two-step flow of information.	Uses and Gratification theorists examine what people do with the media and maintain that the best way to find out is by asking audiences. A recent study of how young people use social networking - 'Hanging out, messing around and geeking out' - took this approach, asking young people how and why they use social networking sites.	The theory of semiotics is not supported by empirical evidence. There is also no agreed way of conducting research. Semioticians do not seek to prove this way of thinking about communication, rather, they use it as a way of thinking about the communication process, putting the emphasis on the meaning that the audience creates from media texts.	The idea of encoding/decoding is not supported by evidence. It is a way of thinking about the communication process which prioritises audience and culture. This theory shifts our attention to the reception of media texts and how meaning is created.
<b>STRENGTHS &amp; WEAKNESSES</b>	The strength of this theory is that it moves the discussion about media influence away from the assumption that the media has a direct and powerful influence on audiences, considering the total situation.	This theory acknowledges that audiences are part of a society which affects the flow of information. One weakness is that there may, in fact, be more than two steps in the flow of communication.	Uses and Gratification is an approach to studying the media, rather than a theory of influence. It has been criticised for its vague definition of important concepts.	A strength of semiotics is that it focuses on the role of the reader and links our reading of texts with culture and values. Criticised for being a loosely defined critical approach.	Only three decoding positions. These three categories are not supported by empirical evidence. The theory does consider the importance of culture in determining dominant messages.

# MEDIA INFLUENCE: ACADEMIC APPROACHES

The way we think about communication and media influence is underpinned by different academic approaches.

## THE EFFECTS TRADITION

### OVERVIEW

The effects tradition is an approach to the study of media influence which focuses on the effect that media texts have on audiences. This way of thinking about the media developed in the early days of the mass media and has become a dominant way of thinking about communication.

### FOCUS

Media effects

### RESEARCH

Experimental studies  
Quantitative evidence

### STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES

The real weakness of the effects tradition is its narrow focus on media effects. As noted by David Gauntlett in '10 Things Wrong with the Effects Model', it tackles the problem backwards, starting with the assumption that the media has an effect on audiences, then attempting to prove it. The effects tradition is also criticised for treating audiences, particularly children, as inadequate and susceptible to influence. Experimental studies conducted to prove media effects usually occur in an artificial, laboratory setting which takes media consumption out of the real world. Some research into media effects has also been criticised for being driven by highly conservative lobby groups.

## CULTURAL STUDIES

Rather than focusing simply on the effect of the media, the cultural studies approach sees the act of communication and the issue of media influence within the context of society and culture. It acknowledges that the media are part of society, aiming to look at the 'whole picture' by examining media consumption in our everyday lives

Individual media consumption and the construction of meaning

Surveys and interviews  
Qualitative evidence

The cultural effects tradition approaches the idea of media influence by conducting qualitative research. Researchers ask people how they use the media. This is considered superior to the effects tradition because it doesn't make the assumption that the media influences audience. Instead, cultural studies researchers ask people to talk about their experience with the media in an attempt to gain greater insight into the process of communication. This allows researchers to deal with ideas too complex for traditional, quantitative surveys. Cultural studies has been criticised by those who adopt the political economy approach as ignoring the importance of capitalism and economic power structures in the mass media.

## POLITICAL ECONOMY

The political economy approach to communication has its origins in Marxism and concerns itself with who owns the media. It suggests that the mass media is part of a capitalist system which incorporates advertisers, corporations and government.

Political and economic systems, e.g. organisations, ownership, advertisers, government and regulation.

Using models, such as Chomsky's Propaganda model, to explain the operation of the mass media.

The political economy approach to media and communication looks at how the mass media operates. It focuses on concepts like media ownership, the importance of the advertising dollar, media regulation and the power relationships between these. It asks questions like: Who owns the media? Who does the media benefit? Who has power and why? The political economy approach has been criticised for not focusing on the culture in which media production and consumption occurs.