

Student Name: Joe Average.



Outcome Three – Media Influence

On completion of this unit the student should be able to discuss theories of media influence and analyse debates about the nature and extent of media influence.

Instructions for task

Students have two periods to complete this task. The practice SAC is open book, the SAC itself is not.

Where appropriate you will be assessed according to your ability to respond to the following criteria -

- compare and contrast communication theories and/or models;
- identify and describe key viewpoints about the nature and extent of media influence;
- analyse arguments and evaluate evidence about the nature and extent of media influence;
- discuss the relationship between audiences and a range of media forms and texts;
- analyse the rationale for, and effectiveness of, measures designed to control media content;
- discuss issues in assessing media influence.

This task contributes 6% of the total marks allocated for assessment towards your study score. It is worth 40/80 marks for Unit 4.

SECTION A – Media Influence**Question 1**

Describe what is meant by a passive audience.

A passive audience is one that accepts media messages in the same way as each other. The concept of a passive audience does not take into account the idea of individual interpretation. Everyone receives a media message in the same way.

2 marks

Question 2

Describe what is meant by an active audience.

An active audience is one where people actively make meaning from a media text. They read the codes and conventions of a media text, interpreting these signs in an individual way. Active audiences are seen as less susceptible to media influence because they actively think about the messages they are receiving.

2 marks

Question 3

Do you believe audiences are passive or active consumers of media texts?

Understanding a media text involves a complex interaction between audience and text. Even when people seem to be absorbing a media text passively - such as when someone sits in front of a television and appears to 'zone out' - they are still involved in the complex process of decoding a media message, reading the codes and conventions used in a media text. Although there are dominant ways in which a text can be read, it is clear that people interpret media messages individually. Therefore, the concept of a passive audience that receives media messages in the same way is inherently flawed. There are also a number of communication theorists who support this notion. Our understanding of audience has progressed significantly since theorists first suggested the Hypodermic Needle Theory, which suggests that audiences are passive and texts are closed. More recent theories - such as the uses and Gratification Theory and Postmodernism - rightly suggest that texts are open for audiences to construct their own meanings.

4 marks

Question 4

Describe a communication theory or model which suggests that the media exerts great influence over audiences.

The Hypodermic Needle Theory suggests that the media has a direct and powerful influence on audiences. It was developed in the 1920s and 1930s after researchers observed the effect of propaganda during World War I and incidents such as Orson Welles' War of the Worlds broadcast. It became the dominant way of thinking about media influence during the subsequent decades. The Hypodermic Needle theory is a linear communication theory which suggests that a media message is injected directly into the brain of a passive, homogenous audience. This theory suggests that media texts are closed and audiences are influenced in the same way. The Hypodermic Needle Theory is no longer accepted by media theorists as a valid explanation of communication and media influence. Although the Hypodermic Needle Theory has been abandoned by most media theorists, it continues to influence mainstream discourse about the influence of the mass media. People believe that the mass media can have a powerful effect on people and parents continue to worry about the effect of television and violent video games.

Harold Lasswell's book Propaganda Technique in the World War was one of the principal source for what would later become known as the Hypodermic Needle Theory. Writing about the effect of Allied propaganda, Lasswell wrote: "From a propaganda point of view it was a matchless performance, for Wilson brewed the subtle poison, which industrious men injected into the veins of a staggering people, until the smashing powers of the Allied armies knocked them into submission."

The Payne Fund Studies were a series of studies into the effect of movies on children. Although the studies have been criticised for a lack of scientific rigor but were the first, most comprehensive study of media influence. These studies confirmed the belief that the media has a powerful and direct influence on audiences. When writing about the influence of motion pictures, WW Charters - the chairman of the project - wrote: "We see that as an instrument of education it has unusual power to impart information, to influence specific attitudes towards objects of social value, to affect emotions in either gross or microscopic proportions, to affect health in a minor degree through sleep disturbance, and to affect profoundly the patterns of conduct of children."

Although some of the data gathered from the Payne Fund Studies seemed to prove the hypodermic needle theory, it is important to recognise that these studies also proved significant flaws in this communication theory. As noted in 'Children and the movies: media influence and the Payne Fund controversy': "It is also important to realize that the best researchers of the late 1920s were not all naive adherents of what has been caricatured as the "hypodermic" or "magic bullet" theory of mass communication in which media messages were assumed to have a direct and immediate effect on the viewer's consciousness as if they were injected like a drug into the bloodstream. There are traces of that idea in the PFS, but to some degree it was tested and gone beyond."

Question 5

Describe a communication theory or model which suggests that the media **does not** exert great influence over audiences.

In 1960, theorist Joseph Klapper published 'The Effects of Mass Communication' in which he proposed the Reinforcement Theory. As Klapper noted: "Whatever it is to be called, it is in essence a shift away from the tendency to regard mass communication as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, towards a view of the media as influences, working amid other influences, in a total situation." Klapper argued that the mass media does not have the ability to influence audiences. "Regardless of whether the effect in question be social or individual," he wrote, "the media are more likely to reinforce than to change." Klapper argued that people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviour was more likely to be influenced by their family, schools, communities and religious institutions. He argued that the only time the media could influence people was when the media introduced a new idea or concept. Klapper also pointed out that there are particular attitudes and beliefs that the mass media is particularly unlikely to change, such as racial and religious tolerance because attitudes on such topics are "crucial to their self-images and central to clusters of related attitudes, they have occasionally been called "ego-involved," attitudes and it has become something of a dictum that ego-involved attitudes are peculiarly resistant to conversion by mass communication - or, for that matter, by other agencies." When writing about whether media violence encourages people to be more aggressive, Klapper wrote that the media are not 'prime movers' towards violent conduct. Klapper cites a number of studies that support his theory, including a 1948 study by Larzarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet which revealed that voters were predisposed to opinions and beliefs held by their families. As Klapper notes: "For persons such as the young man who reported his intention to "vote Democratic because my Grandfather will skin me if I don't" - or for his opposite number who explained that "I will vote Republican because my family are all Republicans so therefore I would have to vote that way" - exposure to months of campaign propaganda was found particularly likely to be reinforcing, and particularly unlikely to effect conversion." In 'The Effects of Mass Communication', Klapper cites a number of studies that support his theory, including a 1948 study by Larzarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet which revealed that voters were predisposed to opinions and beliefs held by their families. As Klapper notes: "For persons such as the young man who reported his intention to "vote Democratic because my Grandfather will skin me if I don't" - or for his opposite number who explained that "I will vote Republican because my family are all Republicans so therefore I would have to vote that way" - exposure to months of campaign propaganda was found particularly likely to be reinforcing, and particularly unlikely to effect conversion.

8 marks

Question 6

There have been many studies into the nature and extent of media influence. Discuss, analyse and evaluate any case studies, longitudinal studies, laboratory studies or correlation studies you have examined in class. What do these studies suggest about the nature and extent of media influence?

Over the last sixty years, there has been a great deal of research on the nature and extent of media influence. Various theorists and lobby groups have also put forth compelling arguments about media influence, some suggesting that - in the case of media violence, for instance - that the media has a very powerful and direct influence over audiences, encouraging people to become more violent whereas other argue that it does not. Although there is still no definitive proof either way, these studies can give us a hint of the nature of media influence. One of the most commonly cited instances of media influence is the Columbine school shooting. After Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed twelve students and a teacher, people were quick to claim that they were influenced by violent media texts - including the film Natural Born Killers, the video game Duke Nukem, and rockstar Marilyn Manson. Despite this argument, this case study is a 'moral panic' that does not provide compelling evidence about the nature and extent of media influence. First, it deals with two unique individuals who do not represent the rest of society. Similarly, it is very difficult to determine how much they were influenced by these violent media texts and how much they were influenced by other factors, such as bullying. Although this case study doesn't provide much in the way of definitive evidence about the nature and extent of media influence, there have been various laboratory studies which have attempted to demonstrate this link. In a recent metastudy titled 'The Public Health Risks of Media Violence: A Meta-Analytic Review' Christopher J Ferguson found that there was little support for the hypothesis that media violence causes aggression. One of the big problems Ferguson found when evaluating the evidence was publication bias. Once they corrected these studies for publication bias, they found that there is little evidence to support the notion that violence in the media leads to violent and aggressive behaviour. It's clear, after decades of contradictory media effects research, that the mass media has a negligible effect on people's behaviour. When thinking about media violence, it's important to consider that the media is one potential influence among many. It's much more appropriate to consider how people use the media to gratify their violent tendencies. As Henry Jenkins explained in the aftermath of the Columbine High School shootings, the killers selected the most violent and most disturbing aspects of culture that they had available to them, giving particular parts of these texts idiosyncratic meanings. People have very different readings of mass media texts. Some argue that years of violent movies and video games will desensitise people to real world violence. However, Eric Zimmerman believes that when we use media texts, we're entering a "magic circle" and have a clear sense of the difference between entertainment and the real world. In his article, 'Then Things Wrong with the Effects Model', David Gauntlett puts forward a number of reasons why research into whether violent texts cause aggression is flawed. He argues that media effects research tackles the problem backwards. It starts with the assumption that the media has a negative influence on people and attempts to prove that link rather than, for example, identifying violent people and attempting to explain the cause of that violence by examining a range of social and cultural factors. He also notes that this reasoning is also flawed when it comes to the influence that the media might have on children, treating them

as inadequate when they are often savvy users of the media who are creating their own media texts with increasing frequency. Although there have been a great many contradictory studies into the nature and extent of media influence, it is difficult to stand by the age old argument that media violence results in aggressive behaviour. It might be better to conceptualize the media as agenda setters. The Kylie Effect, road traffic advertisements and advertising in general all provide compelling evidence of the mass media's ability to set agendas. In this sense, the media does not tell people how to behave or what to think but, rather tells them what to think about and challenges age old media effects arguments.

Question 7

Identify two reasons for regulating the media.

There are various reasons for regulating the media. The Classification Board identifies a number of these reasons in their classification guidelines. First, they acknowledge that a classification system exists so that children can be protected from material that is likely to harm or disturb them and, similarly, all members of the public should be protected from material that they are likely to be offended by. Another reason for regulating the media in this way is to address community concerns about the depiction of violence, particularly sexual violence, and the representation of people in a demeaning manner. These are two very valid reasons for regulating the media but the OFLC still operates under the belief that adults in Australia should be able to read, hear and see what they want.

2 marks

Question 8

In Australia, there are many organisations that regulate the media. Identify one of these organisations and how it regulates media texts.

Australia has a number of organizations that regulate the media, such as the Australian Association of National Advertisers. The AANA is an industry body which represents advertisers in Australia. They have developed a series of guidelines for advertisements in Australia to ensure that advertisements are "legal, decent, honest and truthful and that they have been prepared with a sense of obligation to the consumer and society and [a] fair sense of responsibility to competitors." The AANA Code of Ethics features guidelines regarding the representation of gender, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age sexual preference and political belief. They also have guidelines related to marketing and advertising to children, and the promotion of food and beverages. If someone is offended by an advertisement or feels that it breaches the AANA Code of Ethics, they can make a complaint to the organisation which - taking into account the complaints and the opinion of the advertisers - will make a ruling on whether the advertisement should be banned.

4 marks