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New Perceptions and Identities in Media Narratives

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Abstract

Communication has existed since the beginning of mankind. Over the years, its practices have evolved, becoming more and more sophisticated but its principal motive has remained the same; to effectively spread messages. As one of the arms of communication, mass media has evolved to become a dominant force for the dissemination of information. The implication of this is that not only have our modes of communication evolved, but the ways in which we view each other in the global community has also altered our phenomenological experience of everyday life. Marshall McLuhan describes this as the 'global village' where traditional barriers of time and space have been broken and bridged. The inevitable march of human civilization towards technology has brought about the information age where the reliance on mass media is more a rule than an option. We no longer live with mass media, but we live within its confines. This in turn affects the way that we process information including cultural stimuli and the entire architecture of human thought. The ubiquity of mass media has created an environment where mass media not only dictates norms but also reflects human behavior creating a new reality that is not only framed, but also made immediate by it. This means that as we become more and more entrenched in the realities created by mass media, we begin to become blasé of the ways it shapes and dictates our lives.

Media and Society

Media is seen to have a hand in spreading social values and norms because its influence touches a larger number of people in a shorter amount of time (Bordieu, 2006). Studying media allows for an understanding into the ways that it is used to maintain or affect change in daily lives (Logan, 2021). Ultimately it explains the causes and effects of a wide range of topics and issues. This is important as it demonstrates the ways in which the humans are influenced towards one thing and not another (Ross, 2020). Clarity on such matters is important as it is becoming more and more evident that the so-called truth behind reality is being structured more and more by the narrative of media institutions (Miroshnichenko, 2021).

Roland Barthes explained this narrative as having two levels of understanding attached to it: the literal as well as the symbolic (Barthes, 2020). Further examination of media narratives proves that they work by highlighting different layers of meaning or by the omission of certain facts (Balfour, 2023). Having said so, the traditional function of such narratives is to reinforce certain notions of reality, and this is why media forms originating from one country may not be suitable in another. The cultural software to understand it in its proper context does not exist causing a break in perception (Heywood, 2022).

Dallas Smythe commented in The Blindspot Debate that most research in the field of media studies agrees that media texts are pregnant with seeds of the governing ideologies (Carter et al., 2013). These are later absorbed by the masses and eventually become a cultural norm. Some however argue that meaning does not come from the message being transmitted but rather from the mediums they are received through (Sreberny et al., 2009). Messages exported in this way highlight how media transforms the social structure of societies (Handel, 2018) essentially affecting how a culture deals with topics such as ethics, values, and norms. The fluidity caused from this results in a constantly shifting understanding of local identities that greatly depends on which group is the most dominant (Cover, 2023).

Stuart Hall writing in 'The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': The Return of the Repressed in Media Studies', goes on to detail that American mass media underwent a major overhaul in the 1960s shifting its focus from reflecting society to influencing and manufacturing behavior (Bennett et al., 2005).

The need, therefore, to influence and manufacture behavior further proves that Marx, Durkheim and Weber's theory of class structure is real and aided by the stratification of people (Das, 2017). This form of stratification occurs when groups of people reinforce their positions of power by developing lifestyles that are forced onto others for the purpose of subjugation and control (Curran et al., 2018).

Consequently, according to Michel Foucault, society is molded from a discourse between power and truth (Elden, 2017). Foucault argues that discourse is controlled through three means of exclusion being prohibited words, the division of madness and the will to truth (Levine & McLuhan, 1964). Each of these structures rely heavily on institutional support which these days is maintained by mass media (Buonanno, 2008). Any further narrative is channeled and sustained through these systems of control which govern 'what is said', 'whom it is said to' and more importantly, 'who controls what is being said' (Strate, 2014). Forms of visual hegemony such as TV can be represented by what Foucault termed the 'speaking eye' in which the world is organized through lenses of power (Taylor, 2014).

Today, the spread of such ideals is occurring so rapidly with the aid of globalization and mass media (Stam, 2017). It is important to note that globalization can be viewed as a tool to homogenize and localize cultures (Cunningham, 2015). Some claim that globalization is just another form of imperialism achieved through bloodshed but rather "imperialism without colonies," (McClintock, 2013).

Socialisation

One way of understanding the media and the social world is through the concept of socialization. Socialization is the process through which an individual learns, develops and builds a sense of self (Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2020). It is also during this process that individuals learn socially acceptable behavior appropriate to their own social groupings. Although the development continues throughout one's life, socialization is the most effective in young children and young adults (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019).

Social institutions such as family units and the workplace usually prescribe socialization (Lindner & Barnard, 2020). This is where individuals instinctively adopt dominant values, beliefs, and norms. Other less formal socialization mediators' function on

the micro level of society and relationships including friends, acquaintances and even the media.

However, despite the importance of inculcating positive values during the process of socialization, it must be acknowledged that members of a social group do not always uniformly absorb such values and norms (Hepp et al., 2015). The degree of social penetration differs from one person to the next, proving that the purpose of socialization may not be advantageous to everyone in the same way. Thus, understanding the philosophical role of socialization within a society with regards to topics concerning the balance of power, control, dominance and supremacy become essential (Longa, 2023).

Role of Media in Socialisation

Globalization has transformed media into a necessary component of daily life. Today, the media has evolved into this entity that occupies a large part of society and has the power to bring about great social change. However, media alone is not strong enough to effect change and the amount of influence it yields is inextricably linked to the community that it comes into contact with (Carah, 2021).

Current media studies have identified four main methods in which media has a socializing effect on people. These are the Individual Differences Theory, the Social Categorisation Theory, the Theory of Social Relations, and the Theory of Cultural Norms (Williams, 2021). All these theories detail the ways in which media affects social norms and vice versa. The only difference between the theories is that the Theory of Cultural Norms suggests that media has the ability to reinforce current cultural practices or create new ones by modifying existing norms and subsequently changing society itself as a whole (Thomas & Inkson, 2017b).

The Globalisation of Culture

The effects of globalization on culture have caused a homogenization of society. The entire world seems to be shaped by the hands of Western culture supporting Marshall McLuhan's projection of a Global Village (McLuhan, 2016). The erosion of identity happens slowly yet definitely.

The theory of mass communication is a hotly contested one with theorists disputing if globalisation really does have such a powerful effect on culture and societies. It is no wonder then that since the birth of the Hypodermic Needle theory, many more studies and empirical data has come out of audience research. Now, it is accepted that our traditional understanding of what / who the 'audience' is, is erroneous (Sullivan, 2012). This shift means that audiences are no longer seen as passive receivers but instead, take charge and come up with conclusions based on their cultural context, society, upbringing and so on (Wyness, 2018). Research is now taking into account the 'culture of everyday life' or the 'politics of the living room' and shifting the focus to see how research is reframing the question of media effects (Sperry & Scheibe, 2022).

Having said so, the 'schemata and routines' as David Bordwell (2012) calls them are pre-informed and pre-stylised. This is mostly accomplished via media awareness and the constant bombardment of media stories and images that flood the subconscious (Turnbull, 2020). In other words, audiences are able to immediately understand a sequence of events because of their having prior knowledge to it in one form or another (Marková, 2003) otherwise known as mind orientation (Hughey & González-Lesser, 2020).

On the other hand, Teun A. van Dijk in his article on Power and the News Media claims that media has the ability to influence but not directly affect actions (Gutsche & Hess, 2020). The audience, despite the media will still be able to maintain a minimum level of separation because they remain more or less engaged in the process of mass communication.

As far as communication is concerned, it therefore plays a pivotal role in the spreading of cultural practice. This spreading of culture is the means in which sets of individuals are defined as groups (or institutions) with similar or distinct preferences (Rein, 2021). Pierre Bourdieu argues that people react to situations according to the boundaries set out for them as defined by their own culture (Kramsch, 2020). Human reactions are thus learned through interaction with the environment as well as through social interaction with one another. Since these two variables are constantly changing responses to different situations will also change and therefore change society and its culture as well.

Therefore, it is vital to discover what audiences do with media texts. Bearing this in mind, audiences must not be viewed as an entity separate from the text and its organic links to situational context (Urbinati, 2014). Media texts should be viewed as an integral part of human communication, known as para-social interaction, rather than a concept to be dealt with (Giles, 2018). This para-social interaction is based the individual's likes and dislikes including the whole gamut of their psychological, emotional, social and cultural background (Forster & Forster, 2023).

The Identity Discourse

The construction of identity was thought to originate from a system of sciences based on one's subjective understanding of concepts, ideas and memories (Younge, 2020). This definition spread across one's whole being and encompassed space and time allowing individuals to identify with each other or differentiate themselves from certain groups (Táíwò, 2022). However, social scientists of this century argue that this construction of identity should also include the ways in which the media affects the psyche and what it produces and reproduces as a result (Younge, 2020).

This perspective fits into the traditional psychoanalytic point of view because it gives prominence to a person's social environment and how that contributes to the creation of an identity also known as their psychosocial identity (Mathew & Tay, 2021). Therefore, a psychosocial identity, or reflected identity refers to the person as an individual as well as a member of different social groupings (as a family member, member of the workforce, member of a social club, member of society, etc.) (Táíwò, 2022).

This is similar to the idea of a 'cultural identity' whereby members of a group share a common history in order to create a collective 'self' (Motion et al., 2015). The purpose of this is to unify members of the community as well as provide a stable context of meaning within their lives. Not only does it help define 'who we are', it also reveals the evolution of identity and helps position people in relation to change (Hall, 2018).

Identity however, is also affected and constrained by different limits including personal experience (Searle-White, 2002). This means that the process of constructing a cultural identity is an evolving process and is subject to change depending on its physical,

social, economic and political context. Personal experience forms an integral part of how one's identity and reality is constructed (Metzinger, 2010). It is constantly being augmented and re-purposed according to an individual's past as well as their on-going socialization (or identity politics) with 'society's traditional agencies of socialization and centers of ritual and myth' such as schools, festive celebrations, political upheavals, and mass media (Metzinger, 2010). These identity politics are shaped by and aided through media and often result in the legitimacy of identity within a person or a social group (Searle-White, 2002).

Having said so, George Gerbner et al., argues that we should not be concerned if media is involved with construction of identities but instead examine whether the 'constructions offered by the media are indeed internally consistent' with ours (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). This is important so individuals learn to decipher the 'media roles in the maintenance or undermining of legitimacy' or its ability to undermine authority (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

That being said, James Lull observes that although there is a trend towards the individualization of the self, some forms of cultural retrenchment still exist (Kurylo, 2012). This means that although globalization has fostered an environment whereby individuality is prized, there is still an opportunity for the 'collective culture' to exist (Kurylo, 2012). According to Lull, the term 'push' refers to elements that become part of our daily lives as a matter of course and without knowledge of it having done so. These elements could be inherited or passed down through generations such as languages or religious beliefs (Valsiner, 2022). The 'pull' however, is influenced by cultural communication and it sees audiences as active participators in the shaping of culture.

Identity and the Individual

The audience makes up an integral component of understanding media. Based on the stimuli received, audiences draw on their learnt knowledge or experiences in order to comprehend what they are being exposed to. A difference in opinion comes because the appreciation media experience differs from one individual to the next (Kember & Zylinska, 2014).

These limitations are unique to each individual. Not only do they struggle with the ontological aspects of media as a medium, but audiences must also make conclusions on its

narrative based on (personal) rationale (Sinnerbrink, 2021). The cognitivist perspective states that audiences interpret media's complexities dynamically in that it is performed in the same way one attempts to decode the real world (Damasio, 2021). This means that audiences will use perceptual and conceptual systems that are familiar to them (from the three-dimensional world) and relate it to what they perceive. With this tool of interpretation, decoding reality seems an easy obstacle for audiences because techniques employed to create this alternate reality are seen as extensions or objectifications of the human mental processes (Damasio, 2021a).

Media and the Identity of the Individual

Judging from a purely physiological aspect, when presented with images similar to those found in reality an audience cannot help but react to it (Hight & Harindranath, 2017). The different types of interpretation can lead to a lowered sense of consciousness similar to the effects of hypnosis (McQuail, 2010). This type of mental vertigo is often times followed by an internal quarrel about how to react to the stimuli (Winfield, 2023). Subsequently, a loss of control that leads to a re-assimilation of the self occurs as the audience is forced to identify only with the stimuli received (Csikszentmihalhi, 2020). This is a result of the psychological impact left on their psyche causing a flux between self-absorption and self-abandonment (Rajendran & Odeleye, 2020).

It is therefore no surprise that the medium of Hollywood has been dubbed the 'Dream Factory' because the effect of lowered consciousness is seen to mirror that of dreaming or day dreaming (Trend, 2015). Both psychoanalysts and film theorists have long acknowledged this dream or oneiric state (Moon & Taws, 2021). The main question is whether or not it reflects reality or is in fact an approximation of it. In fact, Sigmund Freud hinted at the relationship between dreams and film from the point of view that repressed thoughts always transformed to visual imagery (Sayers, 2020).

Having lost some sense of being, audiences may be said to be possessed or mesmerized. This creates a mental vacuum, and the audience is ready to receive suggestions that may be carried or encoded within the workings of the media (Armstrong, 2017). Perhaps the most brilliant thing this form of hypnosis is that it occurs without the knowledge and very rapidly.

Metz's view on spectator study is more inclined towards the active role of the spectator in bringing the media messages into being through personal experience (McQuail, 2010). This he deemed 'the imaginary signifier' in which the study of semio-pragmatics was created. Semio-pragmatism studies the production and reading of media based on its programmed social practices (Petrilli & Colapietro, 2017). Metz argued that semio-pragmatism is more interested in the 'psychic disposition of the spectator during the viewing of the text, not as they are in real life, but what the media wants them to be' (McQuail, 2010).

Jean Baudrillard, on the other hand, termed this effect on the spectator as 'plural energies' and 'fragmentary intensities' which is caused when the spectator is de-sensitized to the medium but rather more alert to the energetic exuberance of its context (Baudrillard, 1994). This sits comfortably with Baudrillard's ideas on simulation and simulacrum where ultimately the sign becomes more real than reality itself (Baudrillard, 1994). What follows next is the creation of a hyper-reality that is non-existent to others but exists only to the spectator who indulges in it (Kienscherf, 2007).

Identity and Para-Social Interaction

The debate on identity has become the main vehicle for understanding the relationship between personal and interpersonal communication (Bauman, 2013). Its rise to prominence is partly due to our increased fascination with human society in the age of globalization. However, it appears that the postmodern age has brought upon itself a hybrid form of the formation of identity (McNamara, 2018). The different conditions brought by the modern world means that new dimensions have been added to the idea of both the personal and collective self (Bauman, 2013).

The theories of note here are that of identification and parasocial interaction (PSI). The process of identification involves a loss of self-identity while parasocial interaction refers to relationship formed when viewers interact with characters (called personae) they encounter via the media (Van Krieken, 2018). Parasocial interaction is seen as a form of social interaction albeit one-sided because its effects can only be measured by an outsider observing the media user and not by the personae (Lawry, 2013). However, despite this, viewers have expressed a feeling of reciprocal interaction proving that verbal and nonverbal cues they

receive from media are accepted as real and authentic (Forster, 2021). This has become a central theme of media consumption because it creates an illusion of real face-to-face interaction leading to the formation of a parasocial relationship (PSR) between audiences and the personae (Bauman, 2013). Eventually this persuasion results in changes to public opinion as well as forecasting future trends (Ogolsky, 2023).

In recent years, further studies have defined the differences between PSI and PSR based on how long the effects last. The strength of a PSI is subject to the period of media exposure whereas a PSR can persist long after the exposure has ended effectively shaping future decisions and thinking processes (Forster, 2021). PSI and PSR is often accepted as one single entity called parasocial processing (PSP) in which audiences align their responses to those reflected in the media (Bauman, 2013).

Identification is made even stronger if the media reflects or reinforces audience beliefs and opinions on certain issues (Vorderer & Klimmt, 2021). The effect is that the audience grows to trust the media. The media is viewed as a role model that instructs on living skills and how life should be lived through examples that audiences find easier to relate to (Kurylo, 2012).

As trust develops, a bond is formed almost involuntarily suggesting that the viewer has no choice but to accept the media cognitively, affectively and / or behaviorally (Van Krieken, 2018). According to Gene Youngblood, this construction of reality changes in accordance with interaction with the media (Marshall & Redmond, 2015) and its representation of reality is accepted as real without much hesitation (Vorderer & Klimmt, 2021).

Media Ecology

Following along the lines of McLuhan's famous saying, the study of media ecology concerns itself with the study of organisms in their environment. In this case, it is how technology influences and impacts the society it resides in. And if, as mentioned previously, the medium is the mould from which society takes its form, therefore media ecology allows for an understanding of the relationship between media and its users and how it is used to maintain balance (Cali, 2017). In other words, because the media landscape is so volatile, when a new

media form is added to it, this new form not only joins the existing environment but also changes it (Cristiano & Atay, 2019). The supposition is that because media is ubiquitous, it pervades every aspect of society. It also influences our opinions and perceptions of reality and at the same time, effects the way we experience events. This theory also ties into the concept of media convergence because different media forms interact with each other and undergo change due to this interaction (Jeppesen, 2021).

The effect on media ecology and cultural dynamics therefore is obvious in that the individual, media, and culture cannot be taken as separate entities. They have become so closely intertwined that there exists an understanding that the person and media exists both as makers of meaning and translation. So much so the duality is seen as a source of meaning, consumption and making.

Conclusion

The concept of media ecology, as mentioned above, states that media not only influences society but also permeates and affects every aspect of it. As media ecology is viewed more as a framework rather than a theory, its basic premise surrounds how media forms impact human perception, feeling, understanding and value (Rose, 2017). Undoubtedly, the media has a hand in arranging the ways in which human reality is perceived (Rose, 2017). This coupled with the fact that social norms and culture cannot be viewed as independent entities, the symbiosis between media and culture must be acknowledged and appreciated. This inherently brings to the fore that culture and media are both dynamic processes and have a significant relationship to one another (Jeppesen, 2021).

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Authors' Bio

Dr. Edina M. Nasseri completed her Masters at Middlesex University, London, in Design for Interactive Media and went on to obtain her PhD in film at Multimedia University, Cyberjaya, Malaysia. She is currently the Dean for Foundation Studies at The National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage (ASWARA) in Kuala Lumpur.