

MASS MEDIA AND SOCIETY

Mass Communication Theory

At this point in the class there are two directions we can go with an introduction to mass communications class. We can continue to look at communication and mass communication and how it works. Some schools in this state and this country go this route and spend the bulk of the rest of the semester looking at mass communication theory.

The second route we can take is to look at the various mass media and see how they operate. This is the route most schools take and the one we'll take. We'll look at the media and discuss not only how they operate, but how they got to where they are (history) and where they are headed. The media we'll look at are outlined in the next lecture: Media Themes.

But before we leave media theory behind, there are three major theories I'd like to introduce you to. They are:

- The two-step flow theory
- The gatekeeper theory
- The agenda-setting theory

They'll come up again in discussions this semester.

Scholars for years have tried to find a single theory that explains how mass communication works. Some theories look good and receive a lot of attention for a while until a new one comes along. No one theory completely explains how it all works, but there is value to each in understanding the overall process.

Two-Step Flow Theory

The two-step flow theory of mass communication builds on the reality that it is not always possible to get your message directly to your intended audience. Because of selectivity problems discussed in a previous lecture, communication is facilitated by a filtering process.

Rather than seek out everyone you want to get your message to, you instead seek out opinion leaders in society. Get your message to them and they will filter it down to those who listen to them. Some of those listeners are opinion leaders for others and will filter the message down to their followers.

An example of an opinion leader in the mass media might be a movie critic. The message sender, in this case the movie team, shows the movie to the critic who then writes a review that others will read. The review will influence the readers, who will decide whether or not to go to the movie.

Of course, it is well known that the best opinion leaders are people you personally know. How many of you know a movie critic? You will look to the opinion leaders you know for information. But where do they get their information and how do they form their opinions? One source is the movie critic.

We can each be opinion leaders and followers/listeners in different situations. The trick for the mass media folks is in identifying opinion leaders and then reaching them.

Gatekeeper Theory

Imagine that you are in charge of a flock of sheep. You've got the sheep in a fenced off field and they've eaten most of the grass. Next to your field is another field of luscious grass, but it is only half the size of the field your sheep currently are in. If you let all the sheep into the new field there will not be enough grass to go around. You've got to decide which sheep to allow into the new field. So you stand by the gate that joins the two fields and make decisions. Will you allow only the white sheep into the new field? Only the black sheep? The spotted sheep? The healthy sheep? The sickly sheep that need the grass the most? You are the gatekeeper and you decide the criteria.

Gatekeepers in the media are the same. They have many more messages --stories, ads, movies, television shows, songs, etc.-- to send than they can accommodate. So they decide which messages get through, which stories will appear in today's paper, which television shows will be broadcast, which songs to broadcast, etc. Newspaper editors, news directors, and others in the media are gatekeepers.

Agenda-Setting Theory

What's the newest must-see movie? What is the popular pharmaceutical? What's the latest on that war overseas? How do you know what I am talking about? It's because of the media, that's why.

We are all free to think what we want to think about the latest movie, but the fact that we are even talking about the movie is because the media have told us it is important. The idea behind the agenda-setting theory is that the media are good at telling us what to think about.

A plane crashes or there is a disaster in another country. We all have feelings about it even though it does not affect our lives at all. The media has set the agenda by the choices the gatekeepers have made.

An interesting aspect of the agenda-setting function is that editors --gatekeepers-- are all making independent decisions all over the country every day. But if you were to pick up a copy of the New York Times, The Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune, the Atlanta Constitution, the Denver Post, etc. you would find some of the same stories on the front page of each. Further, you'd find those same stories leading the national, and perhaps local, television newscasts. The news media at times can be quite homogenous even though their decisions are all made independently. Do you suppose that even the gatekeepers have their opinion leaders?

Reading Assignment

You should be reading Chapter One in your textbook to get more information about communication.

Exercise

Take a look at a local daily newspaper. Give an example of each of the following from today's news. Give a brief explanation of how each is an example. Send answers to rcameron@cerritos.edu.

- Two-step flow
- Gatekeeping
- Agenda-setting

Note that when submitting the answer start the subject line with:

J100x - YourLastName - Theory

Send to rcameron@cerritos.edu