

Chapter 2

Perspectives on Mass Communication



This chapter will prepare students to:

- understand the differences between the functional approach and the critical/cultural approach to studying mass communications
- explain the value of each approach in the analysis of the mass communication process
- describe the functions mass media perform for society
- explain uses-and-gratifications analysis
- recognize the dysfunctions of mass communication
- understand the concepts of *meaning*, *hegemony*, and *ideology*

Chapter main points:

1. Functional analysis holds that something is best understood by examining how it is used.
 2. At the macro level of analysis, mass media perform five functions for society: surveillance, interpretation, linkage, transmission of values, and diversion. Dysfunctions are harmful or negative consequences of these functions.
 3. At the micro level of analysis, the functional approach is called *uses-and-gratifications analysis*.
 4. The media perform the following functions for the individual: cognition, diversion, social utility, withdrawal, affiliation and expression.
 5. The critical/cultural approach has its roots in Marxist philosophy, which emphasized class differences as a cause of conflict in a society.
 6. The critical/cultural approach suggests that media content helps perpetuate a system that keeps the dominant class in power. It also notes that people can find different meanings in the same message.
 7. The key concepts in the critical approach are text, meaning, hegemony, and ideology.
 8. Although they are different approaches, both functional and critical/cultural studies can be valuable tools for the analysis of the mass communication process.
-

Paradigms are models to guide how we think about mass communication processes. They are helpful because they:

- provide a perspective from which to examine mass communication
- generate concepts to understand media behavior
- help us identify important components or elements in the process

Examples of paradigms include the **functional**, the **critical/cultural**, and the **empirical** approaches.

The functional approach (the way audiences use mass communication) and the critical/cultural approach (using techniques from the humanities) will be covered in this chapter. The empirical approach (using techniques from the social sciences) will be covered in the last chapter.

FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

The functional approach holds that something is best understood by examining how it is used. In mass communication, this means examining the uses that audiences make of their interactions with media.

The Role of Mass Communication

In mass communication:

- different media provide different primary uses
- **macroanalysis** considers what functions the media provide for society as a whole
- **microanalysis** considers what functions the media provide for the individual

Functions of Mass Communication for Society (Macroanalysis)

For society to exist, certain communication needs must be met. These needs existed long before the advent of mass media. As society became larger, these functions became too large to be handled by single individuals. We should consider the consequences of performing these communication functions via the mass media. Some of these consequences are harmful or negative and are called **dysfunctions**. Media functions are not mutually exclusive; any given example of media content may serve multiple functions.

Surveillance. Refers to the role media play in relaying news and information. There are two main types.

- *Warning or beware surveillance:* occurs when the mass media warn us about impending dangers such as storms, economic declines, military threats, etc.; also used to warn of long-term dangers such as diseases, pollution, population growth, etc.
- *Instrumental surveillance:* the transmission of information that is useful and helpful in everyday life such as movie schedules, stock quotes, sports scores, fads, new products, how-

to pieces, etc. Not all examples of surveillance occur in the news media; instrumental surveillance often comes from a wide variety of other media sources.

There are several consequences of relying on the mass media for surveillance:

- news (accurate accounts as well as mistaken ones) travels further and faster than ever
- news of events comes to us second-hand and is usually not personally verifiable; as such, we've come to place our trust in media, or grant the media credibility
- as a dysfunction, media surveillance can create unnecessary anxiety

Interpretation. This refers to the role media play in giving meaning and significance to events. Gatekeepers provide interpretations, comments, analyses, and opinions on various events to give the audience a better understanding of the events' relative importance to society.

There are several consequences of relying on the mass media for interpretation:

- audiences are exposed to a wide range of often contrasting viewpoints
- this allows us to weigh all sides of an issue before deciding on our position
- it also gives us a greater depth of expertise upon which to draw conclusions

There are also several potential dysfunctions of relying on the mass media for interpretation:

- there is no guarantee that media interpretations are accurate or valid
- individuals could become overly dependent on media interpretation and lose the ability to analyze situations or think for themselves

Linkage. Media can bring together various elements of society that are not directly connected. The linkage can be based on common interests, or on matching wants with needs. Examples of linkages are Internet outlets such as eBay, WebMD, Craigslist.org, and Match.com. The media can build totally new groups by linking people with similar interests.

Another potential dysfunction of relying on the mass media for interpretation:

- Sometimes the linkage function can have harmful consequences, such as hate groups' and terrorists' use of the Internet.

Transmission of Values (socialization). This refers to ways in which an individual comes to adopt the behavior and values of a group. Individuals exposed to media portrayals of certain types of behavior and value systems are likely to grow up and accept them as their own, and thus pass along these values from one generation to another.

Mass Media and socialization. *There are several consequences of relying on the mass media for socialization:*

- it helps stabilize society by creating common bonds between members in terms of shared values and experiences
- the values and cultural information presented in the media are usually selected by large groups that encourage the status quo
- the media can also transmit values by enforcing social norms

TV and socialization. Television may play a special role in socialization. Of all mass media, television has the greatest potential for establishing common social values. By age 18, the average person has spent more time watching TV than doing anything else except sleep. Dysfunctions can occur if youngsters watching violent content are socialized into accepting violence as a means of problem solving. It is argued that many TV images of minority groups reflect the stereotypes held by white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males.

Entertainment. The importance of this media function has grown as Americans have more leisure time. Motion pictures and sound recordings are devoted primarily to entertainment

There are several consequences of relying on the mass media for socialization:

- most entertainment content is designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator of taste
- it is quite easy to sit back and let others entertain you; critics believe that the mass media will turn Americans into a nation of watchers instead of a nation of doers

How People Use the Mass Media (Microanalysis)

At the individual level (*microanalysis*), the functional approach is called the **uses-and-gratifications model**. This model holds that audience members have certain needs or drives that are satisfied by using both non-media and media sources. Media uses are generally broken down into six categories: cognition, diversion, social utility, withdrawal, affiliation and expression.

Cognition. The process of coming to know something, which is closely parallel to the surveillance function. On the individual level, there are two different types of cognitive functions:

- using media to keep up with current events
- using media to satisfy a desire for general knowledge

Diversion. Using the media to “get away from it all.” Types of diversion include stimulation, relaxation, and emotional release.

- **Stimulation** involves seeking some sort of emotional or intellectual mental activity
- **Relaxation** involves seeking relief from sensory overload. The type of content is not the defining factor, because different people find different media material relaxing
- **Emotional release** involves seeking some type of emotional **catharsis**, generally by creating a vicarious participation in a situation or empathy with a character (fictional or otherwise) depicted in the media

Social Utility. Seeking social integration or affiliation with others, generally by using the mass media as a common denominator of experience. Social utility can manifest itself in several forms, including:

- **Conversational currency** provides a common ground of information and experiences, which can be used to strike up a conversation
- **Parasocial relationships** develop when individuals develop feelings of kinship or friendship with media characters (fictional or not)

Affiliation. The individual counterpart to the linkage function; refers to a person's desire to feel a sense of belonging or involvement within a social group.

Expression. Using the media to express one's inner thoughts, feelings, and opinions.

Withdrawal. Using media to create a barrier or buffer zone between oneself and other people or activities.

Content and Context. Media use is determined not only by media content, but also by the social context within which the media exposure occurs. For example, when going to the theater, the content of a film may be perceived as having less value than the opportunity to socialize with one's peers.

The functional approach to studying mass media makes several assumptions:

- Audiences take an active role in their interaction with various media, and people's needs provide motivation for media use
- The mass media are not the only sources to satisfy people's needs; for example, relaxation can be achieved by taking a nap
- The uses-and-gratifications approach assumes that people are aware of their own needs and are able to verbalize them. The approach relies on survey methodology

CRITICAL / CULTURAL STUDIES

The uses and gratifications approach relies on methods common to the social sciences. Researchers ask people questions and count their responses. **Critical/cultural studies**, by contrast, take a qualitative or humanistic approach in their examination of such concepts as ideology, culture, politics, and social structure as they relate to the role of media in society.

History

Critical/Cultural studies began in 1930s-1940s with a group of people committed to the analytical ideas of Karl Marx; they came to be known as the **Frankfurt School**. In general, their theory held that the best way to understand how a society worked was to examine who controlled the means of production that met the basic needs of the population. In the case of mass media, the question was extended to examining who controlled the production of cultural goods. The media industry was said

to be exploiting the masses by producing formulized media content that appealed to mass audiences, glorified capitalism, and encouraged the social status quo.

The Frankfurt School held that the culture industry helped destroy individuality by promoting the social dominance of large corporations. Often criticized for being pessimistic and gloomy and for underestimating the power of the audience, the Critical/Cultural perspective nonetheless caused many mass media researchers to take a closer look at the impact of the media industries on the political and economic life of society.

The theory was later modified in the 1950s and 1960s by British scholars who suggested that a mass media audience was quite capable of taking the products of mass culture, redefining their meaning, and creating entirely new definitions for the audience's own purposes and self image.

Values represented in media content, frequently the dominant values of the ruling class, were important to the cultural studies group. Feminist scholars in the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s adopting Critical/Cultural theory, viewed inequalities of wealth and power distribution as stemming from values steeped in a male-dominated culture (sometimes referred to as **patriarchy**). Other scholars looked instead at how communication can create, maintain, or modify a culture by looking at communication as a ritual – a drawing together of people who hold shared beliefs and values (e.g., *Monday Night Football*). Some scholars suggest we look at how cultural myths are embodied in mass communication (a story that celebrates society's common themes, heroes, and origins such as in the various *Star Trek* series).

The critical/cultural perspective is multidimensional and encompasses a wide variety of topics and analysis methods. It is difficult to summarize the important notions of such an eclectic approach, but the ones listed below have general relevance.

Key Concepts

Some of the key terms used in the Critical/Cultural Theory include:

Culture: a complex concept that refers to the common values, beliefs, social practices, rules and assumptions that bind a group of people together. Culture is studied through the practices and texts of everyday life.

Text: broadly defined, text is the object of analysis, such as TV program content, films, ads, or other non-traditional categories such as T-shirts, video games, and dolls.

Meaning: interpretations that audience members take away from the media text.

Polysemy: the concept any text can have many meanings; audiences can impart different meanings to any text.

Ideology: a set of beliefs, embedded within texts, especially regarding social and political themes.

Hegemony: has to do with power relationships and dominance. Hegemony is not based on force but instead depends on the dominated group accepting its position as natural and normal and believing that maintaining the status quo is in its best interest.

The functional approach and the cultural/critical approach are different. These differences have led to some (unnecessary) tension among scholars who highlight the differences as indicating one approach is “better” or “worse” than the other. Both approaches are valuable. Each can – and does – contribute to a greater understanding of the relationships between mass communication and its audience.

-- End of Chapter 2 --