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## Relationship Between Mass Media and Mass Culture: Frankfurt School and Cultural Studies School

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### Abstract

Mass media and mass culture are probably the two most frequently used terms to depict the current human life in most parts of the world. In the light of definitions available the article first reviews mass media and mass culture historically. Then it deals with the relationship of mass media and mass culture. Frankfurt school and Cultural Studies school are analyzed respectively and their strengths and deficiencies are commented accordingly. It concludes that a synthesis based on the complementarity of the two school works well to clarify the relationship between mass media and mass culture.

**Key words:** Mass media; Mass culture; Frankfurt school; Cultural studies school

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### INTRODUCTION

Mass media are pervasive in modern life. Everyday we listen to radios, read newspapers, watch televisions and surf on the Internet. We are virtually living in a mass-mediated world. Mass media are so influential that we have to know what they are and how they work. But it is a great challenge to define mass media despite the numerous definitions produced by relevant disciplines. This is also

true of mass culture which is used interchangeably with folk culture and popular culture. Even challenging is the relationship between mass media and culture, which attracts increasing efforts in academia recently. The article tries to review historically definitions of mass media and mass culture and clarify the relationship between them.

### 1. DEFINING MASS MEDIA AND MASS CULTURE

We call a medium a “mass medium” if it meets the following two requirements. “First, it must reach many people. Second, it requires the use of some technological device, located between source and destination” (Whetmore, 1985, pp.6-7). To understand mass media better, it is necessary to brief the evolution of media. In pre-agricultural societies, most people lived in small groups as hunters and gatherers. These people depended on the spoken word, rather than written language, to transmit their message, for they did not have well-developed alphabets or systems of writing. Agricultural societies are more settled and more complex than pre-agricultural societies, so people created written language for easier and wider communication. The primary medium in agricultural societies was hand-copied books. Different from today’s books, however, books at that time could not be regarded as a mass medium. First, the handwritten books were too expensive to reach the masses. Second, the ruling class was reluctant to see the enlightenment of the masses through reading. The circulation of books was rather limited then. In fact books were produced exclusively for the literate elite ruling class. Therefore hand-copied books failed to meet both of the above requirements of mass media. Then came the industrial societies when mass media appeared and flourished. Although it is widely accepted that the Industrial Revolution dates back to Thomas Newcomen’s invention

of the steam engine in 1712, it may date further back to the publication of the Gutenberg Bible in 1455 from the perspective of media. Johannes Gutenberg invented movable metal type and mechanical printing in 1455, which made the appearance of mass media possible. By 1500, millions of books were printed and the price of books dropped dramatically. This made mass literacy and mass communication possible. Literacy and reading began to change the way people thought and acted. Culture, history and religion could be made available to everyone through books. It was argued by some scholars the burgeoning of popular culture. As the industrialization and technical innovation sped up, the other print mass media such as newspapers and magazines appeared and boomed. But the enlargement of readership was still hampered by the illiteracy and lack of money, which were called cultural capital and economic capital respectively by Pierre Bourdieu.

Economical capital is essentially a person's personal wealth. Economic capital tends to determine what kinds of media someone can have access to. Cultural capital is based on education, family background, and other sorts of learning. These sources provide a kind of intellectual capital that people use in understanding things. Cultural capital tends to determine what kinds of things people like, can use and can understand. (Bourdieu, 1984, p.58)

In the early 1900s, many people in the United States had neither the economic capital nor the cultural capital to buy or to read print media products. Echoing the situation the film came into being, which ushered in the new age of electronic media. The electronic media have ever since been joined by radio, television and the Internet. The rise of electronic media paralleled the coming of mass production. With the advent of mass production, businesses began to think about mass distribution and mass consumption. In the process of creating a mass consumption society, advertising on mass media proved to be of critical importance in terms of shifting the masses' belief in self-denial and frugality to that in consumption, materialism and hedonism. Mass media hence became an indispensable part in the process of mass production and mass consumption in the post-industrial society which is also referred to as the mass consumption society. The function of mass media intensified. When human societies entered the information age, information itself became a commodity, which paved the way for the dominance of mass media in contemporary societies, the mass-mediated information societies.

The term culture has a complex history and diverse range of meanings in contemporary discourse. Culture can refer to Shakespeare or Superman comics, opera or football. Culture is found in your local street, in your own city and country, as well as on the other side of the world. Small children, teenagers, adults and older people all have their own cultures; but they may also share a culture. Therefore it is essential to begin this part by defining

what culture is. The British cultural historian Raymond Williams has written that culture "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." (George, 2001, p.1) As Williams further explains, this is because the term culture has acquired new meanings over time without losing the older meanings along the way. Based on an analysis of the development of the concept, Williams provided an influential ordering of the modern uses of culture. According to Williams, the term culture is chiefly used in three relatively distinct senses to refer to: "The arts and artistic activity; the learned, primarily symbolic features of a particular way of life; and a process of development." (Baldwin, 1998, p.4) In everyday talk, culture is believed to consist of the "works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity". (Williams, 1983, p.90) In this sense culture is used to refer to music, literature, painting, sculpture, and theatre. In other words, culture here is referred to as "high culture" and is closely related with the idea of becoming cultured, or of cultivating good taste and discriminating judgment. Thus those people who equate culture with high arts will most likely think that popular music like rock "n" roll and popular entertainment such as talk show does not belong to the domain of culture. As a way of life, culture refers to the creation and use of symbols which distinguish "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group, or humanity in general" (Williams, 1983, p.90). Many people argued that only human beings can create and transmit culture because we create and use symbols. Then what are symbols? They may be words, flags, hairstyles, road signs, smiles, BMWs, business suits—the list is endless. It seems that culture is everything and everywhere. Indeed, such a position has been widely accepted and applied by many scholars, especially anthropologists. The nineteenth-century anthropologist Tylor gave the following definition of culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871, p.1). In this way, culture means not only masterpieces of art, music, and literature, but also a people's lived experience—what go on in the everyday lives of individuals and groups. From a historical perspective, the earliest uses of the term culture in the late Middle Ages refer to the tending or cultivation of crops and animals. Later it was transferred to describe the cultivation of people's minds. "This dimension of the word 'culture' draws attention to its subsequent use to describe the development of the individual's capacities and it has been extended to embrace the idea that cultivation is itself a general, social and historical process" (Williams, 1983, pp.90-91) To get a better understanding of the concept of culture, let's look at the following example. A play by Shakespeare might be said to be a distinct piece of cultural work, to be a particular (English) way of life, and to represent a certain

stage of cultural development. When the term culture is used in this thesis, it is much closer to the second definition than to the first and the third.

The term Mass culture is always confused with folk culture and popular culture. In fact the three terms are both interrelated and distinguished from each other. To define what mass culture is, we have to begin with an introduction of folk culture and popular culture. In early times there were distinct differences between the elite culture of the rich ruling class and the folk culture of the common people. The elite culture is sometimes referred to as “high culture” as mentioned in the previous paragraph. The folk culture consisted of street talks, tavern drinking, folktales etc.. People who participated in the elite culture could also enjoy the folk culture, but the reverse was not true. In the nineteenth century, the distinction between the elite and folk cultures began to blur following the development of political democracy, mass media, mass literacy, and the Industrial Revolution. The nineteenth century marked the beginning of the era of the popular culture. And the term popular culture was developed in the nineteenth century to replace the term folk culture. Later, pop culture scholar Ray B. Browne defined it as

the cultural world around us, that is, our attitudes, habits, and actions: How we act and why we act; what we eat and wear; our buildings, roads, and means of travel; our entertainment and sports; our politics, religion, and medical practices; our beliefs and activities and what shapes and controls them. In other words, it is to us what water is to fish: It is the world we live in. (Browne, 1978, p.12)

As the above definition suggests, popular culture is so pervasive that it is almost invisible. Today most popular culture is mass produced and is disseminated through the mass media. Because of the mass mediation of our popular culture, the term mass culture came into being. This refers to the things in popular culture that are mass produced and shared through the mass media. In the modern world it is very difficult for us to think of anything that is not mass produced or promoted in the mass media. Virtually everything we see, touch, smell, hear and taste has something to do with mass media. For instance, even golf and tennis which were once exclusively elite is now popular or mass, for the television promotion of golf worked effectively to popularize it among the masses. Now the terms mass culture and popular culture have come to be used almost interchangeably. In this thesis the term mass culture is used in a broad sense, covering the connotations of both popular culture and mass culture.

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## 2. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MASS MEDIA AND MASS CULTURE

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In the pre-mass media era, culture was exclusive to the well-educated and wealthy elite. Culture was then called

high culture in contrast to folk culture of the common people. Since Gutenberg’s invention the distinction between high culture and folk culture has been blurring, for mass media got to make mass production and mass consumption of cultural products possible. As the industrialization and technology developed, mass media flourished and molded gradually the mass audiences, who enjoyed the ever-falling price and found easier access to the mass-produced cultural products such as books, newspapers, magazines, records, CDs, movies, radios and so on. Along with the advance of mass media, the massification and popularization of culture intensified, which led to heated debates among the intellectuals about the role of mass culture and mass media in a mass society. These debates fall into two categories, media determinism and cultural determinism.

Media determinism maintains that mass media change everything else in society. Some extremists even argue that media technology alone, in spite of the content of media drives social changes, which are called technology determinism. For example, Marshall McLuhan put forward his famous statement that the medium is the message, by which he implied that media technology determines culture, and that it is the form of media rather than the content that really matters. Some other theorists also attach great importance to the dominant role of media in mass culture and mass society, but they emphasize media content over technology. As early as in the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold, a cultural theorist in Britain, argued that by consuming media products, people could become refined or cultured. Implied in Arnold’s argument is the idea that the function of media is to educate. But, he failed to realize another important function of media, that is, to entertain, for, to Arnold, media only referred to the high culture media from Western Europe, such as painting, ballet, opera and the symphony. In the twentieth century mass media reached deeper into society and made mass audiences alienated and isolated from their cultural roots. Theodore Adorno argued that “mass-produced cultural products of low quality replaced high culture and traditional folk culture” (Adorno, 1972, p.48). As mass audiences consume mass culture, they tend to act and behave alike and finally become mass men and women in a mass society. Neil Postman further argued that literacy and reasoning skills decline as a result of overexposure to mass culture. In his words, we the masses are “amusing ourselves to death” (Postman, 1986, p.5).

Scholars that fall into the school of Cultural determinism tend to interpret human history in terms of deeper economic, psychological, and cultural factors instead of the superficial manifestations such as mass media. The idea that culture shapes the media is not a new one. As early as in the nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman in the United States

celebrated the rise of mass media as a genuine reflection of the common people and their culture. To them, the masses are active and selective rather than passive in their consumption of mass media. As an editorial in the British media review *InterMedia* commented, “there never was a mass audience, only ways of seeing people as masses” (Straubhaar, 2002, p.460). For example, new immigrants to the United States use mass media to remain deeply rooted in their traditional cultures, instead of being melted into a homogeneous culture. From 1940s onward, researchers began to realize that the use of mass media depend on many factors such as age, gender, income, origin, education and cultural identity.

In order to understand these two schools well, we will comment on the Frankfurt School and the Cultural Studies School respectively in the following two parts.

### **2.1 Hopeless Salvation: Frankfurt School**

The Frankfurt School refers to those social theorists who worked for, or were related with, the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, which was founded in 1923. The key members of the Institute were Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno and Herbert Marcuse. Walter Benjamin, though not a member of the Institute, sided with it theoretically. After the Nazi came into power in 1933, due to the Jewish origin of many of its members, the Institute exiled to the United States, where it began its critiques of the Fascism in Germany and mass culture in America. For instance, Adorno made well-known critiques of popular music. Other critiques of mass culture were best expressed later in *The Dialectics of the Enlightenment* by Adorno and Horkheimer. After World War II, the Institute returned to Germany. Their method known as critical theory has greatly influenced the study of mass media and mass culture, which they called “social cement.” This school’s critiques of mass media can be generalized into two respects, the capitalization of mass media and media determinism.

The Frankfurt School pointed out that in the capitalist societies the capitalized and commercialized mass media have little difference from the other commodities in nature. Indeed, mass media resemble the other commodities very much when it comes to that both are used to profit for the capitalists. Under this circumstance, mass media are bound to be heavily dependent on the capital, for their operations are ensured by the sponsorship from the enterprises and advertising revenues. If so, the independence of mass media is nothing but an illusion. Furthermore the capitalization of mass media leads inevitably to their subordination to the capital politics. Adorno and Horkheimer revealed the nature of mass media in their *The Dialectics of the Enlightenment*, highlighting that mass media are involved in the reign of the capitalism as a “mike” for the governments. Thus the Frankfurt School turned most of their attention to the hegemonic control of mass media over mass culture and

mass society, which was systematically expressed in their media determinism.

According to the Frankfurt School, mass media are, in nature, hegemony. Although non-violent, the mass media hegemony works more effectively than the violent ones in maintaining the stability of capitalist culture and society. Horkheimer once said that it could not be exaggerated that radios and movies as a hegemonic power were not inferior to fighter planes and guns. But, why are mass media so powerful and influential? The School listed the following four reasons. First, in the process of communication, the hegemonic mass media is held tightly by the message makers, the privileged few, while the masses are powerless message receivers who have no choice but to be exposed to the implantation. Second, mass media confuse reality and art, which cause among the masses a decline of their sensibility to reality and an increase of their illusions. What makes the situation worse is that the masses that get trapped in mass media are likely to behave under the control, at least under the influence, of mass media. For instance, the movie viewers are prone to take what they see in movies as real life, and therefore to follow it in life. However, what they see in movies is virtually constructed mediated reality, which is taken from real life, but larger than real life. Unfortunately the masses fail to realize this. Third, under the control of mass media the masses lose their ability of free thinking. Mass media extend political and economic governance into the cultural domain and control individual consciousness. Adorno contested the idea that the mass concepts are spontaneous and consumers are the arbiter of the mass-produced cultural products. He argued that the mass concepts are a manipulated internalization of the “orders” from mass media. Marcuse put it more explicitly that mass media annihilate the intellectual and human diversity and finally mold the “one dimensional man”. Fourth, under the control of mass media, the masses unconsciously act on the will of the ruling class that is preached by mass media. In all, with the rapid dissemination of mass media, the desires, thoughts and behaviors of the masses have been homogenized, which was expressed in Frankfurt School’s writings as “the end of individuality.” To sum up, the Frankfurt School’s view on mass media was almost in accord with the magic bullet model or the hypodermic needle model that prevailed in the 1940s, which advocated that once the media message reaches the masses, it will exert overwhelmingly powerful and uniform effects on everyone who receives it.

The critiques of the School on mass culture mainly come from Adorno, who coined the term “culture industry” instead of mass culture to reveal its nature. To him, mass culture is used to cheat the masses into serving the interests of the ruling class, rather than being created by the masses themselves. Adorno’s critiques on

mass culture mainly rest on the idea that mass culture is, in nature, ideology. In Adorno's perspective, mass culture functions thoroughly as ideology and in fact have become part of ideology. Mass culture as ideology has two characteristics, fraudulence and manipulateness. Fraudulence refers to that ideology is disguised by mass culture so that the masses cannot detect the inclemency and cruelty of ideology. Instead of being directly imposed, ideology is subtly implied and instilled through mass culture. In a sense, the masses are entertained to say Yes. As a result, the masses will never feel being cheated. Instead, they will hold a strong belief in what ideology advocates. Manipulateness refers to that the purpose of mass culture is to maintain the existing social, political and economic orders. The culture industry occupies the masses' leisure time with amusements designed to enable them to bear the exhaustion and boredom of their increasingly rationalized and mechanized work. The masses are never left alone long enough to consider resisting the economic and social system. The standardized, repetitious forms of entertainment provided by the culture industry take up any free time that the masses might use to consider the reality of their exploitation. Gradually the masses lose their ability of critical thinking and tend to reconcile themselves to their fate and the reality. Thus, mass culture work effectively as "social cement" in building and maintaining the capitalist system.

The Frankfurt School made an anatomical analysis about mass media and mass culture with their critical eyes, revealing the destiny of the masses in the mass society. Yet, their stand with the traditional elite culture blocked their insight into the other side of the culture industry that it has incorporated into human cultures despite the challenges and critiques against it. As a result, pessimism prevailed in their views and made them unable to think out any workable solutions to the culture industry. This is why the School's views are described "the hopeless salvation." One-sided as it is, the Frankfurt School is still frequently studied and quoted today because of its critical and in-depth revelation of the nature of mass media and mass culture.

## 2.2 Rebirth of the Mass: Cultural Studies School

The Cultural Studies School refers to the intellectual school rising in Britain after the World War II. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) founded in Birmingham University in 1964 was a key site for the development of cultural studies. The Centre, directed successively by Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson, greatly promoted cultural studies in Britain and then extended it to Canada, Australia and the United States from the early 1980s onwards.

Unlike the pessimistic Frankfurt School, the Cultural Studies School embraces all kinds of cultural products from the perspective of the masses, rather than the elite

perspective adopted by the Frankfurt School. The theorists in the Cultural Studies School admit the differences in content between mass culture and elite culture, but deny the inferiority of mass culture to elite culture in aesthetic value. In fact, they deny any hierarchical classification of cultures, arguing that culture is life, or a particular way of living. As a result, mass culture, to them, is anything but something trivial, vulgar or evil. Besides, they paid more attention to the active role of the masses in the communication of mass culture. They argue strongly that mass culture is bottom-up rather than top-down. If mass culture is produced among the masses, though not by the masses, it must be possible for the masses to consume it actively and selectively. To them, the masses are not merely the target of the magic bullet from mass media. In fact, the masses interact with mass media in the production of mass culture. Naturally, they made strong defense for mass culture. McLuhan once said that he wasn't sure who discovered water, but it was not the fish, by which he meant the passiveness and powerlessness of the masses in the mass-mediated world. The Cultural studies School, on the contrary, tries to help the masses step out of the "water" and interpret cultural images and representations better, to which Stuart Hall has contributed a lot.

Stuart Hall developed an encoding-decoding model of mass media. "In this, the meaning of the text, which is located somewhere between its producer and the reader, is framed (or encoded) by the producer in a certain way, and the reader decodes the text's message slightly differently, according to his/her personal background, and the various different social situations and frames of interpretation" (McQuail, 2002, p.89). Implied in the model is that the masses only want to see and accept things that they find to be agreeable. Although, at the first sight, the "Hall Model" seems rather simple, it is the simple model that solves an important problem that the meaning of mass media text is not transmitted by the producer (encoder), but produced by the reader (decoder).

To explain this further, Hall proposed the reception theory—an approach to textual analysis which allows for a measure of "dominant-hegemonic", "negotiated" or "oppositional" readings of the media text by the masses. The "dominant-hegemonic" reading means that what the masses decode is exactly what has been encoded. Yet, it must be pointed out here that the identity is not imposed on the masses as the Frankfurt School Argues. Instead, the identity simply shows that the views of the decoder happen to be identical to those of the encoder. The other two readings mean that "audiences/readers don't simply take in a TV show, newspaper, etc., dumbly, accepting the textual meaning intended by the producer or editor. Instead, they negotiate meaning in the media text, that is, they take in some of the meaning supposedly embedded in the text, but they also infer some of their own meaning into the text. Depending on their cultural backgrounds,

some people might accept most of the media text's message, while others reject it almost entirely, preferring an oppositional reading of the text" (Hall, 1980, p.61). For instance, a TV commercial with the implication of racial discrimination against the blacks may be highly attractive or taken-for-granted to the whites and partly taken in by the Hispanics, but unease or even offend the blacks. Undoubtedly, the "Hall Model" granted precious rights to the masses and helped them to establish their authority in their consumption of mass media and the production of mass culture. Thereafter, the masses are no longer the passive followers or the targets of mass media, but become simultaneously both the consumers and makers in the production of mass culture.

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## CONCLUSION

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The Cultural Studies School seems more concerned with the workings than with the nature of mass media and mass culture, which makes up the main body of the writings of the Frankfurt School. Obviously, two schools are both one-sided in their critiques on mass media and mass culture in spite of their great achievements. In other words, the Cultural Studies School concerned too much about what the masses do with the mass media message while the Frankfurt School what the mass media message does to the masses. As a result, a synthesis based on the complementarity of the two school works well to clarify the relationship between mass media and mass culture.

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