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The Media and the Climate Change Debate

In the last20 years the media have been transformed by digital technologies and the way they seep into every aspect of our lives. But how does the media impact on public attitudes and social change?

Where once the sociology of the media analysed the influence of TV, radio and the press (the mainstream media or MSM), it now has to examine the proliferation of media content across different media, across platforms and across devices.

Nevertheless, the fundamental concerns and questions remain the same: what is the role of media in society? What is the relationship of media to social structures and power relations? And how does audience response and media impact on the direction of social change?

I want to address these questions through a discussion of a 'circuits of communication' model - a theoretical framework developed by the Glasgow University Media Group. In order to show how the circuits approach represents an advance on previous models, we will first look at existing debates and concepts.

Ideology and power structures

A preoccupation of sociology of media has been the role of the media in promoting or challenging existing power relationships. A contentious concept in this context is **ideology**. Defined in many different ways, ideology broadly relates to a set of ideas which promote the interests of particular social groups.

Antonio Gramsci, a theorist working in the Marxist tradition, developed the related concept of **hegemony** which describes the way that powerful groups structure the culture of society so that the dominant ideologies are able to promote their interests as common sense, beneficial to all and/or as inevitable.

A contemporary example of this ideological domination is the widespread promotion of the idea of 'trickle-down economics' in political and public debate, which claims that the accumulation of wealth by the rich will eventually result in higher incomes for all social groups, thereby benefiting society as a whole.

Of course, not everyone accepts this theory – and as times get tougher for the majority, it is increasingly challenged. One of the main strengths of Gramsci's work is his recognition that hegemony is always contested; this means it must be constantly reworked to be maintained.

The encoding and decoding model

The question of how this process might actually work, and how power might be exercised through ideology, was the focus of Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model (Hall 1994). While researchers had looked at audience reception before, Hall's aim was to define communications as involving two processes: the process by which media professionals produce (or **encode**) media texts, and the process by which audiences receive (or **decode**) the content.

Decoding might mean that different parts of the audience interpret the message in a variety of ways, and not always in the way intended by the media professionals who encoded it originally. The potential for different interpretations led many media researchers in the 1980s and 1990s, who were influenced by poststructuralist and postmodern ideas, to claim that meanings were fluid and open to many different interpretations.

This persuaded them to abandon the concept of ideology, and to focus on the power of the audience to rework meanings from the text. Ethnographic work examined the way audience reception and interpretation varied between social groupings such as those based on gender and ethnicity. Media researchers working in this tradition tended to deny that a dominant class could impose their own ideology because, even if they controlled the encoding of messages, they could not control the varied ways the audiences interprets or decoded them.

However, the Glasgow Media Group questioned whether the audience really *did* interpret or decode messages in such varied and unpredictable ways. This led them to look again at audience reception and its relationship to power and ideology (see Philo and Miller 2005). They refocused on the connections between the reception of meanings in the text, and the relationship between power and ideology.

Production, content and reception models

The Glasgow University Media Group argue that any understanding of the role of the media in shaping social processes must look at all of the three dimensions of **production**, **content** and **reception** of media.   Research by the group in areas including the Israel-Palestine conflict, representations of mental health, and media coverage of refugees examined the three areas identified in Box 1.

Box 1: The Glasgow University Media Group's Three Dimension Circuit Model of Media Effects

a) The production processes such as the supply of information and the way in which producers shape content from that

b) The patterns in media content, including the prominence of particular perspectives and their relation to interest groups

c) The way in which audiences receive the content and how that impacts on their opinions and beliefs.

Glasgow research on the representation of refugees in 2013, for example, explored the ways in which the changing political and public debate facilitated a shift in emphasis in media coverage, with refugees increasingly repositioned not as the victims of war or oppression but as people looking for benefits, and being a 'drain on the system' (Philo et al 2013).

Focus group research showed how such coverage helped to shape public sentiment, which was supportive of measures to discourage refugees from coming to Britain or being given asylum. This in turn influenced not just the way future coverage of refugees was framed, but also justified the harsh treatment of many refugees by policy makers.

Thus, communications through the mass media involves a *circuit* in which the different elements; production, content and audience reception feedback on and influence one another.

Although all elements in the circuit of communication are important, powerful groups can sometime bypass parts of the circuit to exercise power. For example David Miller (2015) has shown how corporations use lobbying and PR (Public Relations) to promote their own interests in direct communications with politicians and other decision-makers. The role of the media and public debate are marginal in this respect – much lobbying takes place off the public radar, but can still have a significant impact on policy decisions.

The circuits of communication model

The circuits of communication model therefore has been developed by the Glasgow Media Group in order to integrate these two elements:

- The cycle of interactive processes in which media and audience reception inform decision-making and as a result the supply of information;

- The increase in private communications between decision-makers and interest groups which bypass the media.

But it also addresses the way in which digital media is integrated into these processes. In these ways the model moves beyond conventional sociological theories of the media which focus simply on the production and reception of media messages. The circuits of communication model is a more complex one, taking account of a diverse range of elements and agencies facilitating the flow of information. These are as follows

1. *Social and political institutions and their influence on the supply of information*

These include a vast range of organisations, including government, business, trades unions and think tanks, and also corporate lobbyists who communicate directly with politicians to influence state policy.

2. *Media produced content*

This includes mainstream media (MSM) such as the press, radio and television and online news, for which content is shaped by editorial decisions, the need to follow credible speakers such as politicians (which is known as **elite sourcing**), and by the commercial need to deliver audiences.

But the model also includes social media content such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and so on. Within the circuits model, digital media, and in particular social media, play a dual and often oppositional role in that they construct audiences simultaneously as media producers *and* media consumers.

The interactive content produced by audiences sits in this category – audiences can publicly scrutinise and challenge the messages of MSM by drawing on their 'collective intelligence' through, for example, the use of social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter. This creates a parallel flow of information and can be seen as potentially empowering to audiences.

3. Audience reception

Audiences – or publics – who are stratified by class, gender, ethnicity, age and so on, receive and interpret media content in differentiated ways. Returning to digital media, audiences can also be seen as consumers often promoting and circulating the content of MSM with likes, and shares and other partly passive responses.

The consolidation of media ownership across platforms means that audience reception often operates to reinforce the increasingly narrow range of perspectives that audiences have to choose from, and this potentially increases the power of the mainstream media despite the apparent increase in choice and opportunities for participation by audiences.

4. Decision making

This is about the decisions that dictate the direction that society moves in. Most significantly these relate to policy making and those that contribute to this process include local, national and supranational government as well as business organisations, interest groups, universities, think tanks and lobbyists and PR consultancies.

Box 2 provides a case study of how all these elements work together in an analysis of media coverage of the climate change debate.

Box 2: Case study: climate change

1. Social and political institutions and the supply of information

In 2008, the ambitious UK Climate Change Act was passed by the then New Labour government. In the same year however the financial crisis shifted political priorities across all parties (to differing degrees) towards the shrinking of the state via austerity. As to the importance attached to carbon reduction strategies as opposed to reducing state expenditure, Chancellor George Osborne stated in 2011: 'We're not going to save the planet by putting our country out of business.'

Behind the scenes, evidence shows that the oil and gas industry expanded their efforts to discredit climate science or downplay the need to take action (Goldenberg, 2013). In 2012, the Chancellor met with representatives from Centrica, Exxon and other oil and gas industry groups for undisclosed 'general discussions' at least once a month.

In reflection of the changing priorities, at the launch of the Conservative party's manifesto in 2015, climate change wasn't referred to once.

2. Media produced content on climate change

The absence of political attention to climate change due to elite sourcing saw a dramatic reduction in media coverage from 2011 (Fischer 2011). Research shows that the media coverage treated the existence of man-made global climate change as controversial – whilst in fact there is a large consensus amongst the key scientists.

This is partially the result of the norms of broadcasting in which conflict-driven debates provide drama and meet the needs of balance, even when it is unrepresentative. But a crucial factor is also the access to MSM of well-resourced representatives of climate change sceptics such as former Tory politician Nigel Lawson who has appeared on the BBC's flagship political programme *Question Time.*

Factual inaccuracies in Lawson's answers were quickly exposed on Twitter. However, the debate over whether the science is robust or not became the media focus, rather than the need for action.

3. Audience reception and public attitudes and beliefs

A number of studies (for example Philo and Happer 2013) show that the British public largely believe in climate change and think it is important – but they also show that climate change is not a priority for the majority of people. Research conducted in Glasgow indicates that most people are not convinced by the sceptics' position – which may reflect to a degree the success of alternative media in debunking these arguments.

However, many people also confess to the existence of a nagging doubt about the legitimacy of the science and the need to prioritise action 'in case they're wrong' – which may reflect the MSM construction of conflict.

Whilst audiences increasingly engage in a dynamic process of multi-media content negotiation and engagement in social media interactions, MSM content continues to set the agenda. For example, climate change does not trend in comparable ways to, say, the economy or immigration.

4. Decision making on climate change

The Conservative government returned in 2015 has not prioritised meeting the objectives in the 2008 Act, and promotion of, for example, the further use of fossil fuels through 'fracking' and other market based 'solutions' indicate a general shift in focus.

The public facilitate climate inaction by their lack of interest and the low priority given to it. Concern about climate change on social media and elsewhere has not shaped the MSM agenda or mobilised groups and individuals sufficiently to change government policy.

Climate change is currently *not* on the political, public or media agenda despite its pressing importance and this, in itself, suggests the limited impact that digital media have had in challenging the dominance of ideological messages in the mainstream media.

Conclusion

The central point here is that all of these elements within the circuits of communication model interact and are dynamic. So policy makers may feed information into the range of media, and at the same time respond to what they assume are the beliefs and attitudes of audiences.

They may also consider in advance the reaction of MSM news outlets – indeed they may have close relationships with newspaper editors and sometimes even discuss policies in advance of releasing them.

However, trending topics on Twitter may penetrate the MSM agenda as well as influencing speeches that politicians plan to make. In this sense each element interacts with the other in overlapping and unpredictable ways. However, in the case of the debate about climate change, powerful interests were able to shape the media debate – and public policy.

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