

# Framework of Cultural Theories: A Theoretical Approach to Understanding Media and Society in Contemporary Times

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## ABSTRACT

Mass Media has over the years undergone transformation in ways by which it affects societies. Technology and society relationship has been a hallmark of these debate surrounding media. Theories of society and class domination initially provided for the framework of this understanding. While later many social theorists study the effects of media content on viewers. As messages and technologies changed, we find qualitative difference in the way in which audiences react. Thus, media studies today comprise of theories from diverse fields such as sociology, cultural studies, anthropology etc. to understand this relationship better. This paper picks up quite a few theorists such as Marx (1996), Marshall McLuhan (1966), Harold Innis (1951), Adorno (1944) etc. to analyze ways in which media today can be defined and brought under a theoretical framework.

**Keywords:** Globalization, Hegemony, Ideology, Culture Industry, Media

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper we are going to talk about Media and its relation to culture, looking at the ways in which media and society form a relationship that requires deep explorations of theoretical aspects of media and its role in democratic societies. Media has always been perceived to be a mass influencer of human habits and notions. In the initial phase of media, mass hysteria could be observed by way of reaction to some media event. A case in point would be Orson Welles (1938) 'The War of the Worlds' episode, where American listeners believed that earth was indeed attacked by Martians after this episode was played on radio in 1938. Such examples are galore where this kind of effect has been observed. Another example would be the first screening of Lumiere brothers' 'Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat' (1896) in a Paris hotel where the audience reacted with terror, panic and fear. The initial days of Communications research thus mostly centered around effects research or to categorically look at how media affected the minds and behavior of its audience.

## Ideology and Cultural Hegemony as Concepts of Power

Theorizing on the application of cultural domination Marx's (1996) scrutiny of economic class (base and superstructure), and taking it forward Antonio Gramsci (1971) the Italian theorist developed further to comprehend social class. Hence, the concept of cultural hegemony propositions that the predominant cultural norms of a society, which are enforced by the ruling class in from a position of authority (bourgeois cultural hegemony), must not be supposed as natural and inescapable, but must be documented as artificial constructs that borders on the social (institutions, beliefs, et cetera). This must be probed further to ascertain their philosophic roots as tools of society and class power domination. The idea that such praxis of knowledge is central for the cerebral and political deliverance of the proletariat is clear by now, so that feudal workers and farmhands, the people, can generate their own working-class culture, which explicitly addresses their social and economic needs as legitimate social classes.

I am quoting the British sociologist John Thompson (1990, p. 58) to understand Ideology, dominant ideology is enforced by 'symbolic forms' which includes language, media, schools, religion, political parties etc., are used

by those in power to 'establish and sustain relations of domination'. Ideology therefore becomes a necessary starting point in our understanding of media, culture and society. Some ideologies are elevated and amplified by the mass media, given greater legitimacy by them, and distributed persuasively, often glamorously, to large audiences (Lull, 2013, p. 16). Let's take the example of Indian Premiere League and its association with advertisements. A Virat Kohli or a Sachin Tendulkar would want you to drink a fizzy drink that they advertise. At the same time the brand IPL itself is tied with a multi-national brand. Film stars come to our living rooms and sell various goods during those extended breaks in the cricket match. All these image systems come together to sell their stuff and ultimately forward the message that consumption is good. This ideology of consumption comes to us in a systematic pattern spread by the mass media and circulates in our familiar surroundings. The cricket match, the cheerleaders, advertisements both off field and on field, celebrities, all amalgamate together to construct a mediational image system which procreate dominant ideology. If we actually see the size of the advertisement industry in India we will come to realize that the kind of consumption pattern that advertisements promote would be unsustainable for the nature. The kind of plastic overuse or environmental degradation such a kind of consumption would lead to is well documented and scientific studies abound. Irrespective of this knowledge the members of the audience are turned into consumers who relate to the products in a personal way, relating to the joy, emotional situation, fear, ecstasy that each advertisement wants them to go through. 'TV is an agency of the established order and as such serves primarily to extend and maintain rather than alter, threaten, or weaken conventional conceptions, beliefs, and behaviors ... its chief cultural function is to spread and stabilize social patterns' Gerbner and Gross (1976, p. 175). Commercial advertising too not only asserts, references, and reinforces preferred ideologies. For eg. Nationalistic rhetoric indulging advertisements are commonplace to sell goods. Using the tricolor to sell goods is a common phenomenon every Independence day. It induces in the audience a feeling of patriotism which is utter commercial in nature. Bashing the enemy too is common place phenomenon in advertisements and more so in films. Ridiculing Pakistan in advertisements or films are self-congratulatory idioms which has been overdone in Indian media.

I am sure you have met older generation people who opine that how the old days were better and everybody had time, and culture was not affected by television and internet. Well those observations are not uniquely true for us in India but universal in nature. The spread of modern communication technologies to every nook and corner has indeed resulted in far reaching effects, which we are trying to understand through Ideology. Media is not just a container but itself a subjective, interpretative, ideological form. With the spread of media let's say Disney characters which were unique to North America became popular to kids in most societies, rather posing challenge to some of the indigenous heroes in those societies. Michael Jackson for e.g. became a worldwide sensation by virtue of his song and dance skills. Even a generation of Indian youths could be seen copying Jacksons dance moves. You would have seen kids copying the mannerisms of their favorite cartoon characters in daily lives, or imitating his style of behavior. Japanese cartoons have become quite popular of late in India, and I have noticed kids imitating the character Shinden or Ninja Hatori. This is nothing but the ideological representations through mass media which are actively used by the members of the audience in their daily construction of reality. I am sure you have heard phrases such as 'aaj kuch toofani karte hain..' or 'dil maange more..' or 'yehi hai right choice baby...aha..' being used in everyday vocabulary by people. In this context it is important to mention that Harold Innis (1951), the Canadian scholar warned of the dangers that he thought modern communication technologies will bring about. Whereas Marshall McLuhan (1966) another remarkable scholar also Canadian, gave more importance to the idea of form and not the content of media. We will talk about McLuhan in details later in the lecture.

## Globalization and Media in a Transforming World

Mass media has affected cultural settings across the world in more ways than one. Media enters the traditional settings, cultural values, norms, styles and challenges these set values, transforms and realigns with the domestic forces creating new meanings. Neena Behl (1988) looks at the way in which the introduction of television had changed Indian households and found that television had brought about drastic changes. Men-women relationship had become more democratic, young old bonds have grown stronger, timings of household activities had changed, and food was affected by the television patterns. Familial ties, gender relations, societal relations have all be transformed in numerous societies as shown in researches where such studies have been conducted. To understand this better, I will introduce the concept of Globalization at this point in time. Two of the most

important factors that contributed to globalization are the advancement of transportation technologies and secondly, media and communication technologies. While traditional societies were confined to their villages or at best the next two, because the mode of transport made it impossible for most people to travel. Thus smaller communities were more compact in nature each with their own distinct cultures. With the advancement of faster means of transport such as bullet trains, long distance passenger planes it has become increasingly possible for people to travel for fun, pleasure and work. Thus, it is not out of the ordinary to see people travelling long distances in search of work both within the country and abroad as well. Large scale migration from Bihar to the agricultural fields of Punjab is a case in point, while immigration of people from Kerala to the Middle East in search of work is a case of cross border travel. You will find foreign players playing in the professional sports leagues such as IPL, Badminton league, Kabaddi league etc. Indian software professionals are everywhere today especially the North Americas where most technology firms are located. Global flow of tourists has increased exponentially as a result of ease of travel, and many small Island nations today depend on tourists for their economy. With faster transportation the world has become a smaller place.

The proliferation of media and communication technologies towards the later part of the twentieth century has resulted in a different sort of globalization. The rise in satellite beaming programming across the globe has made media immediate and global. The coming of digital media and internet is another case in point of technologies making the world a smaller place. Marshall McLuhan defines media into two broad categories hot and cold media based on their characteristics. He opined that each technology defined time and space based on its characteristics. Hot media are the traditional forms of media which did not have the luxury of a feedback system. By cold media he meant modern communication technologies that had inherent feedback system which resultantly made the world a colder place, a shrunk space. Hot media means expansion the world grows apart, cold media means implosion the world growing smaller, a global village as McLuhan termed it. This new imploding world rapidly increased the pace of globalizing forces to galvanize the globe into a single entity. While globalization might be understood in economic terms it is not only exclusively economic in nature. Globalization also meant the transfer of images and information from one part of the globe to another. Yes, indeed economic globalization had started quite early, probably the history of colonial India might also be termed as a process of economic globalization, but that would be also hiding the various other ways in which British culture came into contact with India and affected it and vice-versa. The communication technologies you might argue have just increased the pace of this process.

It is because of the forces of globalization that you see soap operas which run simultaneously in multiple countries. Indian Idol, The Voice, Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahi are few examples of Indian television programmes which are essentially foreign programming fine-tuned for the taste of Indian audience. Jassi Jaisi koi Nahi is an adaptation of a hugely successful soap titled Ugly Betty which has been adapted for more than 80 countries. The essence is a global culture which tries to be homogenous, yet the local always finds a way to harmonize the local and the global which might be termed as the glocal. Chinese food is a common fast food item in India which is essentially quite different from authentic Chinese fare and includes Indian spices. Hip hop in Punjabi music is another example how we have glocalized a culture which is thousands of miles away. English movies dubbed in Hindi are more popular than many of our Hindi films. The movie Avatar was a global hit and earned not only in America but also in India and China. Likewise, Aamir Khan's Dangal became a superhit in China, audience who connected with the theme. Cultures mix and combine in unique ways and give rise to hybrid notions of culture that take the best of both the world. The initial fear that globalization would sweep all indigenous cultures and make the world into a large America of sorts came out unfounded. Probably, those indigenous cultures have reached out to the world by way of digital media. America as the center of the globalization debate has long been negated. That the world after the Cold war no longer has a single super power but a web of power structures where each culture is important has been established. The world now realizes the importance of large countries such as Brazil, South Africa and India to the world economy. China, Germany, Japan all have their legitimate place in the globalization debate.

### **Culture Industry and Proliferation of the Popular**

If we do an analysis of the big media and technology firms who control our eye balls today, we will notice it is only eight to ten firms which own a majority of them. And indeed most of these firms are located in the west. Large corporate media firms who work as a big assembly line production of entertainment goods to be sold to

the unsuspecting public. As a result, most of the programmes that we see today are nothing more than just a rehash of some other programme in some other part of the world.

These forms of media are also called the ‘culture industry’, originally coined by thinkers from the Frankfurt School Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer and was presented as critical vocabulary in the chapter “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”, of the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), wherein they proposed that popular culture is akin to a factory producing standardized cultural goods — films, radio programmes, magazines, etc. — that are used to manipulate mass society into a state where they become dominant modes of entertainment. You have to remember that the time the Frankfurt school was writing assembly line production was a reality, most of Europe and America had become an industrial society and Germany was fast producing some of the deadly weapons and inventions of destruction. Standardized methods of production had taken over everyone’s imagination. Every product looked exactly the same and came in the same packaging. Even films and media were also not untouched by this phenomenon. Both these scholars argued that advertising had become a pseudo-technique, which fooled people into buying stuffs they don’t need, they induced false demands in the minds of the people. People became consumers although they knew that the tall promises made in these ads are false and misleading. As you would know today ASCI (Advertising Standards Council of India) prohibits many such ads each year because of their misleading nature. A good example here would be how fairness cream is sold on the notion that to be fair is beautiful. Such problematic assertions not only induce false cultural notions among the youth but also create demand for a product in a questionable manner. Such kinds of ads are prohibited from time to time.

## CONCLUSION

Consumption of the easy pleasures of popular culture, made available by the mass communications media, renders people docile and content, no matter how difficult their economic circumstances. Although the Frankfurt deemed the audience as sitting lame ducks scholar such as Dennis Mc Quail (1983) have negated this view and opine that audiences today are immune to the stimulations of media and receive messages in a much more critical manner guided by his or her own social and cultural context. The inherent danger of the culture industry is the cultivation of false psychological needs that can only be met and satisfied by the products of capitalism; and in turn the culture industry. With the turn of the industrial society Adorno and Horkheimer argue that leisure has come to be a major factor in the lives of the masses. And people had no option but to turn to the culture industry for solace. They argue that the American movie industry which is one of the earliest organized forms of the culture industry strives only for profits and in this endeavor they repeat the same formula again and again. Creativity takes a backseat and it’s in permutation and combination of the same tricks that the industry carries on earning profits. Originality is never the trademark of the culture industry. Of course it is true that movie industries across the world had relied on time and tested formulas to create value. Take the example of Bollywood where irrespective of the impressive numbers of films made each year we still have only a handful of films which are good or recognized globally. The theory that Hindi masala films sell is adage that has remained true, a successful Hindi film has to have songs, romance, and action and so on. Every other song sounds repetitive or a mish mash of some old song. Creativity in culture industry is at a premium.

This paper thus has framed an introductory praxis of theoretical assumptions to look at concepts like Media Ideology, Cultural Hegemony, Globalization and Media, Hot and Cold Media and Culture Industry. While these concepts are global in perspective I have tried to analyse these with relevant local examples. This puts into perspective the course of theoretical narrative that has shaped disciplines such as Cultural Studies and Media Studies.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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