
The Sociology of Mass Media

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Introduction

The sociology of mass media examines the institutions, products, and audiences of broadcast, print, and, more recently, online media. Its origins can be traced back to traditions governing early American and European sociological thinking, which recognised the growth and influence of the media (the press, specifically) as important to the transforming or modernising of society (see Hardt 2001). Since then, however, media sociology has developed primarily outside of mainstream sociology, in departments of media, communication, and journalism (Pooley and Katz 2008).

The displacement of media sociology from mainstream sociology has influenced the direction of its research. It has been able to engage creatively with media institutions, media culture, and media audiences. Nonetheless, its interdisciplinary home has encouraged media sociologists to often reappraise the contribution of their work and reassert its importance (e.g. Waisbord 2014; Schudson 2004; Manza and Brooks 2012). This chapter builds on this effort by describing the development of the subfield and introducing the themes explored in this subdiscipline, including the study of (1) media institutions, professions and practices; (2) content, representations, and social power in media; and (3) media influences, audiences and

technology. It concludes with a reflection on some present developments in, and the general influence of, the sociology of mass media.

Identifying the sociology in media enquiry.

Most media sociologists occupy positions outside of mainstream sociology departments and publish their research in specialised media journals (e.g., *Journal of Communication*; *Media Culture & Society*). This ensures the difficulty of locating a coherent body of media sociological studies, as it guarantees that the reviewer must establish and follow dominant research themes, rather than rely on the presence of recognised sociological works, thinkers, or traditions to build a review. Given this situation, the work of John Thompson provides a useful starting point. Thompson (1990, 60) summarises much of the creativity found in media sociological work when he defines the study of mass communication as “historically specific and socially structured forms and processes within which, and by means of which, symbolic forms are produced transmitted and received.” The “media forms and processes” that Thompson introduces reveal the direction that media sociology has taken in exploring the complexities of its subject matter. Yet, the amount of sociological attention to these forms and processes has altered with time. Both the influences of particular views of society and later dominant research interests help to explain the ways that sociologists have understood and studied mass communication.

Ideas about the modernising nation or “mass society” informed sociological thinking about the media until the 1950s. Reacting to the assumed power of a growing mass media and the assumed susceptibility of the “rootless, mobile and lonely city dwellers” (Boyd Barratt 1995, 69) formed from the process of urbanization, both European and US sociologists discussed the media’s contribution in shaping social behaviour. On the other hand, pluralists argued that the media should help democracy by facilitating the dissemination of ideas. By

the 1960s, however, these views were contested and debated alongside alternative Marxist conceptions that had grown in importance. Scholars from these traditions clashed over differing conceptions of (1) the autonomy of the media organisations and media professionals from elite power, (2) the diversity of ideas in media content and (3) the influence of mass media and agency of media audiences (Curran et al 1985). In the 1980s, feminism, globalization, and work on media audiences helped shape sociological perspectives on mass media. Although interest in power, the agency of social actors inside and outside of media institutions remained, these concerns were explored within sociological work that fragmented according to their focus on (1) media institutions, (2) media content or (3) media audiences. Therefore, we will now turn our attention to these aspects to build our view of this subfield.

Institutions, media workers, and practices

Media sociology studies of media institutions and their operations have followed insights from early sociological writing. For example, Max Weber (1919/ 1998), suggested that sociological research should focus on the institutions of journalism and examine them in terms of who owns and controls them and the political and commercial influences on how they operate. Weber's suggestions provide an early example of researching how wider political and economic societal contexts influence media organisations. Following this line on inquiry, Siebert et al. (1956) claim that organisations take on the form and structures of the social systems in which they operate, and Hallin and Mancini (2010) add that media organizations' relationship with the State (or government) is a key feature in this process. In western democratic countries, governments establish rules to regulate media organizations, including how large they can grow, who can own them, and how they can operate (e.g., according to impartiality and freedom of speech). In other political systems (e.g., non-

democratic), governments tend to exert direct control over how media organisations can operate and what they can produce.

Media sociology has also argued that the connections among media organisations and other elites in western democracies are more varied than a singular relationship with state governance. For example, the shareholders and funders of media organisations bridge media organisations and other industries (Curran 2005). In their positions, they can influence the direction of a media organisation and prevent them from covering issues or areas that will harm their interests. Moreover, (private) owners of mass media outlets exercise authority by defining “the overall goals and scope of the corporation” and determining “the general way it deploys its productive resources” (Murdock 1982, 122). Seen in specific terms, these owners have “allocative control” over resources (funds/personnel) and “operational control” over the management and day to day operations (ibid). They apply influence in the process of hiring and then shaping ideologically compatible employees, who will reproduce preferred stances and ideas when shaping media products (Chomski 1999, 592). Equally important, but significantly less commonly observed, are the direct interventions of owners into the operations of their organisations to “not allow their media to publish material that frustrates their vital interests.” (Altschull 1995, 259).

This approach to media institutions also highlights the profit motive as a significant factor that underpins the actions of most media owners. It recognises a growing trend toward monopoly (Bagdikian 2000) and the processes that led to these increasing interconnections among media businesses, including: (1) the buying of smaller competitors in the sector (horizontal integration or conglomeration) and (2) the purchasing of related business in production, distribution and retailing (vertical integration). Sociologists who examine ownership of film studios, music groups, and media organizations often voice considerable alarm about these trends (McChesney 1999). In addition to noting the disproportionate

influence of large monopolies, they argue that organisations that follow the profit motive help create a wider, standardized media culture (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979) that is uncritical and politically regressive (Golding and Murdock 2005). In essence, this media culture positions media audiences as consumers rather than citizens (with cultural rights) and imposes the cultural values of more developed nations onto those of others (Schiller 1976).

A second, more micro, approach to media institutions focuses on the organisation of media work and media workers. This work explores the shaping of media products, including the organisation of media work devised to produce “saleable” products and to overcome the risks associated with the marketplace. For example, Peterson and Anand (2004) analyse the forces shaping the music industry and emphasise the organizational structure of production as shaping its music products alongside the influences of technology and commerce. Much like other studies in this approach (e.g., Hirsch 1972), they explore the role of media workers in shaping products on their journey to consumption. Whereas early studies introduced workers as key decision makers or “gatekeepers” in managing the selection across the production process (e.g., White 1957), they focus on the routinized nature of workers’ decision-making, their roles, and practices.

As part of this approach, studies have charted the structural position of workers in roles within media institutions. This has not only helped to uncover the institutional authority over their work activities but also workers’ experiences of different levels of autonomy. Often introduced is the importance of a set of norms and values (i.e., professionalism) to the outlooks and practices of media workers. In one sense, this professionalism builds among workers a collective sense of autonomy from external pressures and criticism from governments and other bodies (Burns 1977; Born 2004). Those considered to have specialist professional knowledge however can exercise greater autonomy in their decision-making and time management than other workers within the media institution (Ursell 2004).

Nevertheless, this approach has examined the roles and activities of certain media occupations more fully than others (e.g., journalism), which has encouraged recent studies to explore other media-related occupations. Often positioned outside of media organisations, and between the production and consumption of media products, these “cultural intermediary occupations” (e.g. advertising, branding, public relations, etc.) are examined for how they shape “what counts as good taste and cool culture in today’s marketplace” (Matthews and Smith Maguire 2014, 1). Other research has highlighted the importance of diversity in media work forces (Cottle 2000; Matthews 2010), transformations in work activities due to the implementation of new technology (Tumber 2014) and the increasingly fluid boundaries between work and leisure due to new media-related technology (Deuze 2007).

Content, representation, and social power

Whereas the above research has looked specifically at the dynamics that surround media organisations and production, the sociological study of media products also offers insights into the wider connections among the media, culture and society. In short, research in this tradition has explored the relationship between media content and the social structure of society. Media representations, particularly those depicting gender, ethnicity, and class, reflect the influence of power and influence the thoughts and actions of individuals (Hall, 1997).

The term (media) “representation” commonly appears in discussions of media content. It describes the simple idea that media content constructs or builds a version of reality rather than reflecting actual reality, as would be produced from holding a mirror to the world. Early media sociology explored this process by comparing differences between observed political events (such as political rallies) and media reports of them. For example, Lang and Lang (1953) revealed that the media were constructing ideas of public sentiment

that spectators at a rally did not recognise as part of their experience of the event. Media researchers then moved to gather evidence of the influences that set the media agenda (McCombs and Shaw 1972), framed events (Reese et al 2001), and shaped public understandings. While studies on the process of framing events and news reporting continued in journalism scholarship, other, sociological, work looked to the latent (or concealed) meanings rather than the manifest (surface level obvious) meaning in media content.

Media sociology began to examine the latent meaning within media content in the 1960s and 1970s, reflecting a new interest in what media content *means* to audiences rather than a simple view of how media *affects* them. A branch of work in this tradition used the ideas of Emile Durkheim on religion and ritual to understand how media content provides collective shared meaning and, in turn, supports societal cohesion. They focused particularly on Durkheim's idea that society needs "upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality" (Durkheim 1912/ 1965: 474-5). Where religion made society divine in pre-modern societies, civic rituals, he suggested, were offering a functional equivalent to religious rituals in modern secularized societies. Inspired in this way, media sociologists have argued that media play a significant role in reproducing these secular rituals and reproducing collective ideas common to them (Carey 1989). This "ritual communication approach" has been explored in several ways where the media is seen to reproduce ideas of community and solidarity in (1) broadcasting of civic rituals (Chaney 1996), (2) constructing general media events (Dayan and Katz 1992), and in (3) depicting crisis situations, such as terrorist incidents (Elliott 1980; Matthews 2014).

By contrast, the desire to evaluate media representations in terms of the power relations they reflect or sustain has been developed in sociological discussions of ideology

and discourse. A strand of this work refers to the thoughts of Karl Marx on the formation of capitalist societies into bourgeoisie and proletariat economic groups, where the former group (bourgeoisie) owns both the means of production (land, labour and capital) and the “mental means of production” or the mass media. Taking this Marxist view of society as a starting point, these media sociologists suggest that media content legitimates the social and economic status quo through the reproduction of dominant ideas or “ideology.” According to Miliband (1973), media content commonly reproduces the following ideological characteristics: (1) identification with the nation, (2) a certain view of the (nuclear) family, and (3) a celebration of both free enterprise and individualism. Media sociologists have also analysed how ideologies have shaped the lens through which various issues and groups are viewed in the media, such as industrial conflicts (Philo 1995), crime and deviance (Hall 1992; Chiricos 1996), gender (Tuchman 1995; McRobbie 1991) and ethnicity (Van Dijk 1991).

Other recent studies have recognised that media content contains contested views around issues. Among these, some have favoured the Neo-Marxist concept of “hegemony” adopted from the work of Antonio Gramsci to study media content for the presence of dominant ideologies and challenges to them (Hallin 1986). Others adopt the term discourse from the work of Micheal Foucault (1980) in a bid to capture the complex meaning systems that underpin media representations and shape their influences on audiences. Used strictly in Foucaultian terms, “dominant discourses” are observed as offering claims to truth (truth claims) and underpinning the actions or “discursive practices” of audiences. Media sociologists who follow this approach examine media content as sites of contests between different truth claims or discourses (e.g. medical discourses, consumer discourses, political discourses), and observe the discursive complexity that underpins media content on a range of topics from representations of women and health (Roy 2007) to sport celebrities (Lines 2010) and tourism (Dann 1996). In sum, the work on media representations provides

evidence that the mass media mediates the flow of meanings and ideas in society and, in doing so, is privileged the presentation of some over others. How far media content shapes and underpins the outlooks of individuals has been the focus of other media sociological work to which we will now turn.

Influences, audiences, and technology

Early work on the influence of the media on audiences likened media outputs as the contents of a syringe which when injected could stimulate audiences and create “behavioural effects” – such as aggression. This notion of the unsuspecting and largely passive audience that underpinned this “hypodermic syringe” model (see McQuail 1997) was soon to be superseded. These works described the media as either setting the public’s agenda of issues (McCombs and Shaw 1972), cultivating a view of society among audiences similar to that reproduced on television (Gerbner 1972), or creating those ideological or discursive effects suggested in studies introduced in the previous section.

Contemporary media sociology continues to discuss the influence of the media. However, other studies have noted the importance of context in shaping the way audiences understand and consume media products. For example, studying the media and voting behaviour in the 1950s, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955, 15) championed “the part played by people” in the relationships among media, information, and audiences, explaining this process as a two-step flow of communication in their study *Personal Influence*. They argued that dominant members of groups (opinion leaders) intervened in the process to evaluate and disseminate to other (less dominant) members of their group information they heard from the radio and television. An approach based on individuals’ *Uses and Gratifications* (Katz, et al, 1974) furthered this interest in the intervening variables between the media and their audiences. Showing less concern for the transmission of ideas or views than other studies,

Katz and colleagues focused on the analysis of social and psychological “needs” of audiences which they argued actively shaped media consumption and the ways that audiences understood media content.

Work in the developing field of cultural studies adopted the idea of interpretation. For example, Halls’ (1980) encoding/decoding model stressed the social/cultural context that informs and links the actions of both media workers and their audiences. Scholars using this perspective describe media content as having a preferred (ideological) meaning encoded by media workers and decoded by audiences. As David Morley (1980) noted in research devised to test these insights, there is evidence that audiences use the social knowledge and understanding they acquire as members of groups to either actively accept, negotiate, or oppose the preferred meaning in media content. Other studies suggested that media content could produce varied or polysemic (Fiske 1990) meanings which audiences interpret according to their social contexts. This work introduced the contextual characteristics of age, gender and ethnicity as important to the ways that audiences react to and interpret media content (Kitzinger 1993). It also demonstrated that media audiences interpret media content using collective frameworks of meaning (“frames”). These frames can derive from wider civic, political and lay understandings that groups share (Corner et al 1990) and more localised views that they form as part of communities (Banks 2009; Gamson 1996).

An interest among sociologists in the wider cultural understandings that audiences use to interpret media messages has brought to light not only the importance of culture to the everyday context of ethnic minority audiences (Gilliespe 1995) but also audiences’ interpretations and use of media from other countries. For example, cultural understandings influence how audiences consume and understand global media products (Kim 2005). This understanding challenges claims that those in less-developed nations media are somehow susceptible to ideas exported in first world media that are “unwrapped in the minds of

innocents” (Liebes and Katz 1990, xi). Moreover, cultural understandings shape the media selection and appropriation practices of different groups. Research conducted with migrant groups for example, indicates that they consume their “home media” to both maintain connections with their past country and to assert their ethnicity in their new one (Robins and Aksoy 2006).

Recent studies on audiences find that they adapted their behaviors to adjust to new interactive media environments. Liebes (2005) suggests that this new era reveals previous concepts of the “(mass) media audience” as problematic in that they do not explain the common experience of individuals who now juggle multiple TV channels and move between “old” and “new” forms of media on a daily basis. Likewise, access to new technology appears to be blurring the traditional boundaries between media producers and media consumers or audiences. Such developments have opened the way to studies of the use of mobile phones, social media platforms and other forms to interpret these activities through the lens of what Bruns (2008) recognises as the “prosumer or prosuser” (a view of audiences as enacting both roles of the producer and the consumer). Certainly, these changes are creating new challenges for the sociological understanding of the media and point to new areas of research on media consumption and the construction of new social identities through the use of media.

Conclusion – where now?

This chapter has discussed media sociology and outlined its insights into media institutions and production, media content, and media audiences. In the process of researching mass communication in society, media sociology has worked creatively to adopt and adapt various different theories, concepts, and ideas. Together these insights demonstrate the strength and

breadth and overall reach of its approach. Nevertheless, this diversity has also led to uneven development in scholarship.

A common complaint among media sociologists is that most social theory concerning society, culture, and change does not incorporate media. Such a view has encouraged new theorizing, from within media sociology, that tackles the integration of media within society. This has become known as the “mediatization thesis” (Hepp 2013, Hjarvard 2013) and this thesis has developed alongside other equally loud calls for reinvestment in the specialities that emerged as central to media sociology in the first place (e.g., system or field theory, the study of media occupations etc.).

One thing that is clear, however, is that media sociology has become an increasingly important subfield in sociology. It has helped mainstream sociology to take the mass media seriously, not only in terms of the increasing use of media in individuals’ social lives but also in their economic and cultural lives, as media employees or as citizens of nation states in whose economies the mass media institutions play a significant role. It has also encouraged sociologists to view the media as more than a dependent variable (i.e., one that will function in a particular way in society) and to study it as a separate institution in its own right. Hence, between the pages of introductory sociology textbooks now emerge chapters on the social institution of mass media. This is a positive development for sociology and all those interested in understanding how society works.

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