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Two historical views of the media

The love–hate and good–bad views of the media are not new: since the advent of the printing press, commentators and analysts have put forward two contradictory views of the media: a utopian belief in the media’s positive possibilities versus a fear of and wariness about its dangers. Every new medium has inspired similar debates. The distribution of information through printing supposedly threatened to corrupt, pervert, and destabilise society in various ways, for example in the nineteenth century by mobilising the working class, uniting them around common concerns, and facilitating the formation of trade unions and lobby groups. The emergence of the printing press also decentralised power by enabling widespread communication and distribution of information by organisations other than the state and the church. Some argued that these were positive qualities as they helped society become more democratic and equal. In the nineteenth century there was also concern about how the reading of romantic novels would influence the minds of young women, who were a huge market for such fiction; Thomas Hardy’s novel *Jude the Obscure*, for example, was banned for its moral dangerousness. Others saw the broadening of women’s minds as part of the move towards women’s emancipation. We are seeing similar contradictory debates today over satellite communications and the internet, both of which can cross state boundaries and are difficult to police, or computer games that may be excessively violent, encourage teenage lethargy, or, alternatively, that may develop swift reaction skills, computer literacy, and engage people much more actively than does television. Currently, it is argued that the technology of the internet and mobile phone cameras allow the development of new kinds of journalism, through internet blogs, citizens’ journalism, and cameras that can report images across the globe, that provide far more democracy and diversity within the media. The use of the social networking website Facebook encourages media participation, developing communication skills, and broadening horizons. Alternatively, it is argued that the internet is dumping down our culture, is potentially dangerous in that it encourages internet stalking and surveillance, and brings with usage new ailments, such as ‘internet addiction affliction disorder’. Media fears are based on the political, moral, and cultural damage of which the media are capable. The optimistic flip–side are hopes that the media will help solve all our social, political, and communication problems and lead us into a new utopia.

Current debates about the good and bad aspects of the media echo earlier arguments. Note how easily the following idealistic prediction about the telegraph in the 1840s could be used to describe today’s hopes if we substituted ‘the internet’ for ‘the telegraph’:

Universal peace and harmony seem at this time more possible than ever before, as the telegraph binds together by a vital cord all the nations of the earth. It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should any longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for an exchange of thought between all nations of the earth (quoted in Czitrom 1982, p. 10).

In contrast, here is the negative view, fearful of the dangers of the new media, from an 1889 article, 'The Intellectual Effects of Electricity':

All men are compelled to think of all things at the same time, on imperfect information, and with too little interval for reflection ... The constant diffusion of statements in snippets, the constant excitements of feeling unjustified by fact, the constant formation of hasty or erroneous opinions, must in the end, one would think, deteriorate the intelligence of all to whom the telegraph appeals (quoted in Czitrom 1982, p. 19).

Once again there are similar arguments being used against today's twenty-first century media. We will examine these long-held fears about the media in more detail.

Fears about political use of the media

The fears about the political ends to which the media can be put relate to the way the media can be used by political parties to control people. While totalitarian fascist and communist states of the 1930s inspired these fears, political uses of the media also occur in democratic societies, where advertising can be seen as a form of propaganda and brainwashing that supports capitalist consumerism, as first shown in Vance Packard's book *The Hidden Persuaders* (Packard 1957). It is often argued that there should be controls placed over the media so they are not misused. Fear that the media may be used for political purposes is one reason many countries insist that the government should not own and/or control the media; this fear also lies behind many of the debates about who has the right to media ownership. Note, however, that media practitioners often see themselves as political watchdogs, and in this respect are referred to as the 'fourth estate'. The term 'estate' derives from the time of the French Revolution, when the judiciary, the parliament, and the Church were referred to as the first, second, and third estates respectively. The media, as the fourth estate, are a body who can comment on, criticise, and investigate, through free speech, what these other institutions do, which is why freedom of the press is so important. It was, for instance, the media that publicised the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the South African apartheid government, prompting the global community to impose sanctions against South Africa and to exert political pressure. The government explicitly blamed the press for giving the National Party a negative image overseas, and for drawing international criticism of the apartheid policy (Fourie 2001, p. 429). The political, cultural, and economic pressure exerted by the global community as a result of this bad press contributed to the downfall of apartheid. More recently, social networking media have been used to mobilise protesters and lobby for regime change and democracy in what has become known as 'the Arab Spring'. The 'Facebook Revolution' in Egypt is a noteworthy example: on the 'Revolution Day' Facebook page developed by Egyptian political activists,

more than 85 000 people developed a list of demands for the Mubarak regime and pledged to attend antigovernment protests in Egypt in January, 2011.

Fears about the media's influence on morals and health

The moral fears arise from the concern that the media will be a corrupting force, particularly in relation to sex and violence. It is argued that people's values can be corrupted by the media they consume. This has led to moral panics and campaigns against too much sex and violence on television. Moral panic tends to focus on the effects of media consumption on young people because they supposedly have less experience on which to base sound judgments and less developed critical faculties with which to position fiction or other media content in relation to external reality. It has been suggested that the cumulative effects of consuming media that contains violent and/or sexualised content might be particularly harmful for young viewers, due in part to the tendency of young people to learn by mimesis (mimicking or imitating what they see and hear). Because interactive media forms such as video games require participation in the acts of violence they represent, they are considered to be especially worrying. Another perspective on this issue is that the prevalence of high levels of gratuitous sex and violence in the media naturalises such material, making comparable behaviour in real life seem natural, normal, and acceptable. The danger here is that the media might inadvertently legitimate unacceptable ethical positions, such as the use of violence as a method of conflict resolution, or a lack of respect for one's sexual partners (see *censorship/effects*, pp. 48–51). The flip-side argument in relation to sexuality would say that in today's media-world we are better educated and informed about all sexual matters than at any other time in human history.

Health concerns might focus on the messages conveyed by the media, such as the prevalence of junk food advertising for young people, and the media themselves, such as television and computers, which encourage a more sedentary, less active lifestyle.

Fears about the media's influence on culture

There are those who fear that the media devalue a society's culture because what they produce is so trivial or superficial. This is best illustrated in the debates around the relative importance of so-called high and low culture. High culture is supposedly the great art produced by a society, art that is morally uplifting, complex, and serious. It is said to be found in such cultural products as opera, painting, and literature, the understanding and interpretation of which require training and specialist instruction.

Low, or popular, culture, on the other hand, is what the masses consume; it is found in magazines, mass-market paperbacks, popular cinema, and on television. Critics of low culture deride it as morally degrading and simplistic.

Traditionally, low culture has been denigrated as inferior and potentially damaging, and the fact that it was a product of mass media was used to disparage it. Educators thought they needed to protect people against the damaging effects of low culture. The first teaching about the media was an ‘inoculation’ approach. Teachers would analyse mass media products in class, aiming to show students how corrupt, cheap, worthless, and harmful they were. It was thought that by giving students a little bit of low culture, they could be protected or inoculated against it, just as you inoculate against disease by administering a small dose of it. The high–low opposition still informs the way a lot of people think about the media.

Such oppositions are partly the product of class-divided societies—high culture is the province of the ruling and middle classes, the bourgeoisie; low culture is the province of the working class. But it’s interesting to note that both right-wing conservatives and left-wing radicals have disapproved of low culture and the popular mass media: the right wing sees the media as offering a diet of cheap, tawdry, corrupt entertainments, the left wing sees these entertainments as a political sweetener, acting to distract the workers from their political grievances.

Since the 1970s there has been much study done of popular culture in media studies, mainly due to the need to understand the dynamics of the huge media audiences attracted to it—if so many people are consuming media texts, it is important to understand them—but it is also an attempt to validate popular culture itself, to see it positively and avoid labelling it as something inferior to high culture (p. 38).

Fears about contemporary consumerism and advertising

It may be that the media in the main simply reflect the dominant values of society that are based on the values of continual economic growth and consumerism. Advertising is a crucial media form that supports consumerism. Consider the following critique of advertising by musicologist Robert Fink:

Because [advertising] *promotes goods*, it produces *materialism*; because it advocates through *incomplete truths and deceptions*, it creates *cynicism*. When advertising appeals to *mass markets*, it promotes *conformity*; when it appeals to *status*, it promotes *social stratification* and class conflict; when it appeals to *fear*, it promotes *anxiety*; when it appeals to *newness*, it creates *disrespect for authority*; when it appeals to *youth*, it *undermines the family*; and when it appeals to *sexuality*, it creates *erotic obsession* and dysfunction. Because it appeals to the *individual*, it makes people *selfish*; because it must be *simple* and easily understandable, it deals in *social stereotypes* and *debases language*. Because advertising is *emphatic* and repetitively *insistent*, it promotes *regression* and *irrationality*, putting consumers into a *hypnoid*

trance that leads to *compulsive consumption*, inability to defer gratification and disregard of future consequences; at the same time, because it *idealizes 'the good life'*, it creates *perpetual dissatisfaction* and feelings of lack (Fink 2005, p. 64).

It is not necessary to agree with everything in Fink's critique to acknowledge that the way advertising is linked to ever-growing consumerism is of concern and is worthy of note and discussion.

Table 2.1 Points for and against the media

For	Against
The media's huge range of cultural information and entertainment contributes to the development of popular knowledge. People are more aware and better educated through the media than ever before.	The media offer people a repetitive diet of worthless trivia. Like bread and circuses, they cater to the lowest intellectual abilities.
The media can inspire and develop us, actively encouraging us to do new things in our lives.	The media make us passive observers—couch potatoes—whereby we lose the ability to think or act for ourselves.
The media help us explore and develop our understanding of sex and violence by depicting social attitudes and inviting critique of the behaviours that are represented.	The media corrupt and pervert us and our children, desensitising our feelings and emotions, and encouraging immoral sexual behaviour and violent acts. The media need to be heavily censored.
The media are truthful and informative and, as such, make a major contribution to democracy and social accountability by offering us a window on the world.	The media are a series of false constructions serving minority political interests.
The media are democratic in that they allow all people in the world a voice.	The media serve commercial interests and are totally controlled by multinational corporations and advertisers.
The media enable free thought and speech to be disseminated.	The media are in the business of controlling our consciousness, thereby controlling who we are and how we think. Access to the media is limited.
The media are shrinking the globe, uniting us and bringing us closer together, thereby creating a global village.	The media are making us all the same and destroying marginalised cultures.
The media give space to the voices of different social groups and cultures.	The media are a form of cultural imperialism, whereby dominant cultures impose their values on less powerful cultures.
The media are agents for social change.	The media maintain the status quo.