

Lecture Notes:

① What is the “media”?

- I **media**: (literally, “middle”) are the possible channels through which discourse occurs or the “vehicles” through which cultural messages are transmitted
 - mass media**: technological forms that (effectively) allow one agent to broadcast a message (usually) unidirectionally to an **audience**
 - **communication**: “social interaction through messages” (Fiske, 1990); a communication has five fundamental elements: sender, receiver, channel, message, and effect
 - **discourse**: (from critical theory) “specialist systems of knowledge and sustained practices which are united by a common assumption and which function to close off the possibility of other ways of thinking, talking, or behaving”; they are used to maintain power and regulate social and cultural functions
 - I categories of media (Fiske, 1990):
 - **presentational**: face, voice, and body (direct communication)
 - **representational**: writing, photography, painting, drawing, sculpture, architecture, fashion, design, etc. (indirect or ‘creative’ communication)
 - **mechanical**: telegraph, telephone, television, radio, film, fax, internet, etc.
 - I a **mass medium** uses a mechanical medium to transmit messages encoded in both presentational and representational media from one source to many potential receivers
 - today, mass media are used primarily to convey different types of message:
 - entertainment: messages to divert, amuse, or evoke an affective response
 - advertising: messages to shape preferences or norms
 - news: messages to inform or educate
 - these 20th century distinctions in message form are becoming increasingly blurred
- classical model of “Personal Influence” (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955)
- I two-step model of communication flow:
 - mass media make information available to **opinion leaders**, who care about and attend to a particular topic
 - opinion leaders (with their socially affirmed expertise of that topic) then exert social influence within their personal social networks on that topic, fostering the spread of ideas and behaviors
 - I Gitlin’s (1978) critique of the “personal influence” model:
 - model ignores media’s ability to exert ideological dominance, set an opinion leader’s agenda, and limit and shape the available information (in other words, media presentations are not value-neutral and opinion leaders can only pass on that information already sifted and spun by the corporate PR machine)
 - ignores effects of **parasocial interaction** (Horton and Wohl, 1956/1989): audience members often react to public figures as if they had real, personal relationships, which may make information derived from some media seem as or more compelling than that obtained from social intimates
 - media forms are increasingly self-referential and mutually supporting, presuming and reinforcing one another’s legitimacy and effectively structuring consumer decisions
 - I other influential and classical ideas from Lazarsfeld, et. al.):
 - “uses and gratifications” model (Lazarsfeld, Katz, and Blumler):
 - individuals use media as “goal directed” information source to gratify needs
 - the media actually develops some of these “needs” in the audience
 - the effect of a medium is conditioned by the different reasons people have for using it
 - criticisms include: close ties with behaviorism, ignorance of unconscious or subconscious influences, and the power of the media to determine which messages people are even exposed to
 - **narcotizing dysfunction** (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948): though their original term never caught on, their concern has become important to sociologists studying the mass media; it means that, because people are exposed to an issue and form an opinion about it, they feel as if they had taken action, when, in fact, they have not; the effect actually results in a population and feels comfortable with doing less to correct a social problem

- ③ Media theorists (Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan) were publicly influential, but largely ignored by academics
- 1 “The medium *is* the message”: the form of the medium shapes the content of the message and our responses to it
 - 2 each medium has a certain ‘bias’ toward durability in time and mobility in space
 - 3 each society has a dominant medium, which tends toward either:
 - **temporal mobility** (e.g., stone or clay) and biases society toward smallness and decentralization
 - **spatial mobility** (e.g., papyrus or paper) and biases society toward largeness and imperialism
 - 4 modern electronic media allow instantaneous communication, fostered rise of the “global village” (McLuhan, 1964)
 - mass society is impossible without mass media
 - denser and faster media connections speed social processes and interactions
 - mass media make us more aware of (often simplified and stereotyped) view of other cultures and societies
 - mass media make us more aware of extreme attitude objects to anchor our comparisons
 - mass media force us toward greater multiculturalism and the perceptions of external threats to local ways
- ④ Critical theory (from Marxist theory) and the “Frankfurt School”:
- 1 studied the “culture industry” and argued that technology had created mass media that allowed the creation and dissemination of new forms of ideology through the widely available standardized and stereotyped goods
 - 2 mass media provides individuals with imaginary avenues of escape from modern life and dulled our critical and autonomous thinking abilities
 - 3 **ideological hegemony** (Gramsci, 1971): when a ruling class or alliance of classes systematically (though not necessarily deliberately) engineers an ideology that not only dominates, but goes even further and directs others in a society, those others are not only often coerced through the dominant culture, but they are often not even aware of their coercion and even support their own subordination
 [Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was an important Italian political dissident under Mussolini’s reign. An ardent communist, he spent most of his adult life writing about and agitating against fascism and wrote his most influential works while a political prisoner (1928-37). Though influential in Europe from the time of their original writings, English translations of his works did not appear widely until about 30 years later.]
- ⑤ Sociological study of the mass media today
- role of the mass media in globalization and cultural homogenization
 - why and how do individuals or groups interpret a message similarly or differently?
 - who owns the media?
 - the last few years have seen intense corporate consolidation in all of the mass media, resulting in many fewer decision makers determining what messages are widely disseminated through the mass media; since these people tend to represent the interests of those already in power, they reinforce existing inequalities
 - just six companies own almost all of the major worldwide mass media outlets in film, television, publishing, and other media forms; they are, in order of size: AOL Time Warner, The Walt Disney Co., Bertelsmann, Viacom, News Corporation, and Vivendi Universal.
 - how active is the audience?
 - a central (and unresolved) debate is whether individuals consciously and critically use the media as a tool to further their own ends (in other words, the media are value-neutral), or the media actually set agendas and shape individual views of the world
 - studies support both possibilities, but the preponderance of the evidence currently is that mass media shape us far more effectively and completely than we are able to critically use them

Key Ideas:

Mass media, communication, ideological hegemony, corporate concentration, culture industry, sociology of knowledge, influence.