

The Uses of Mass Media Theories

Senarath Tennakoon

Modern mass media have captured everything everywhere in the universe. There is growing fragmentation of the media with increases in the user groups of different types of mass media. The use of newspapers is growing fast despite the increased growth, development, and proliferation of other forms of mass media. Research in USA has revealed that better educated readers have higher incomes and those in the 35-55 year age group are likely to be the most committed readers.¹ Newspaper use measurement would be improved if standardization were sought and if use measures were based on an index of use, established by combining answers to several questions asked most frequently.²

There are four mass media theories that attempt to explain and assess newspaper audience effects. The first of these uses the user and gratification approach that came into being in the late 1950s. This theory has three basic tenets;

1. The people choose from the media the messages that interest them most.
2. The selection of media messages is largely influenced by the gratification produced by the message.
3. The choice of the media message is individualistic. But this is influenced by the socio-economic status of the audience.

The lower socio-economic audience are influenced heavily by the entertainment and the immediate gratification effect of the media content. The higher socio-economic audience are influenced

by the delayed reward content of the media message. The former do not rely on newspapers. The user and gratifications theory is generally regarded as a "weak media theory" as the media have very limited control over the audience effects³.

The second theory deals with information diffusion. It originated from the diffusion studies of the US Department of Agriculture in 1920s during the investigation procedures of farmers' adoption of hybrid corn varieties⁴. The four key areas in this theory are:

1. Information flow follows a diffusion curve. Some individuals receive information directly; some indirectly and the rest do not receive it. Although the news dissemination is simultaneous the audiences do not receive it at identical times in an identical manner.
2. The speed of arrival of a media message depends on an individual's socio-economic status as the socio-economic status relates to media use. The literate read more newspapers than the illiterate and they are better informed.
3. Different messages are received at different speeds. Election results would reach the audience more quickly than the news of a famine.
4. In a crisis situation most people first learn of it by word of mouth and last from newspapers. In non-crisis situations the nature of the situation will determine the most appropriate medium for information

transfer. For instance, the radio medium was the first to report the bomb blast at Pettah and Havelock Town in Sri Lanka in the recent past.

Diffusion theory is also a weak media theory as there is a lengthy and involved process in information transfer. There are flaws pertaining to the assumptions about crisis topics, speed of transmission, media effects and inconsistencies in methodology⁵.

The third theory deals with knowledge gap considerations. People in low socio-economic strata are the media poor audience and those in the upper socio-economic strata are the media rich audience. There is a knowledge gap between these two audiences. When the flow of information increases due to additional new media such as the cable television and the proliferation of magazines, the media rich will be using these new channels and the media poor suffer from a lack of knowledge, thus widening the knowledge gap between the rich and the poor. This theory is a powerful media theory. It assumes that the media poor makes less use of the print media and spend more time enjoying television entertainment. Apart from the socio-economic status, education and perceived need for specific information exert a great effect on media attention and knowledge gain. In the media rich there could be a "ceiling" effect despite continued increased information flow. Previous knowledge on a topic exerts an inverse effect on knowledge gain. Interpersonal communication could counteract one's lack of print media use in case of highly relevant issues⁶.

Agenda setting function is the modern theory of audience effects. In this the media identify the issues that are interesting to the audience and focus their attention. Those important to the media are given wide and vivid coverage. Thus the media sets a public agenda revealing the philosophy that the people carry mass media messages.⁷

In the developed industrialised countries there is wide privatization of the media and the information offered to the public reflects the media owners' interest. In many less developed countries the radio and the television are state monopolised organisations. Hence, public

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agenda setting could become an affair instrumented by the state. Further, poor Asian countries are influenced and fed by the western electronic media. What is known most and best about the Gulf Crisis or the disintegration of the Soviet Union has been learnt from the western media inputs. This media dependency will continue as long as poverty continues to exist in the Asian countries.

The theories on mass media are helpful to understand the intricacies of media proceedings. Organisations and colourful individuals find it very difficult to hide from the media watch. The personal problems of the Royal Family of Great Britain, in particular, that between Prince Charles and Princess Diana, have been highlighted by the mass media as very sharp sensational issues. The media watch is extremely sharp and vivacious. The media theories, could to some extent, help the audiences to assess and validate media messages.

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