

What do we mean by 'mass media' and 'modern culture'?

Key concepts:

- **Mass media**
- **Situated culture**
- **Mediated culture**
- **Popular culture**
- **Postmodern culture**
- **Intertextuality**
- **'Bricolage'**

We are to a large extent dependent on regular contact with the mass media for information, entertainment, ideas, opinion and many other things all of which are connected to our attempts to 'make sense' of who and what we are.

Our cultural experiences are affected by the development of systems of mass communication. A look at current research shows that we spend from 18 to 35 hours per week watching TV, for example. It is 'normal' to spend 3 - 4 hours per day in the company of a TV set. Large amounts of our time are spent in a range of media related activities.

To study 'media' is to study also how we define our own sense of who and what we are. What do we mean by 'culture'? How does a media text shape or construct or change cultural identity? What exactly is 'mass media' or 'mass communication'?

We all inhabit particular situations and things like our surroundings, family, friends; school, work, neighbourhood and so on shape our individual identities. In media-speak we refer to this aspect of our cultural identity as our situated culture. In other words, the small-scale communications and interactions we have on a day-to-day basis with the place we live in and the people around us. This kind of culture is primarily an oral one - it is passed on and formed largely by intimate word-of-mouth communication.

Since the mid 19th century, we have come to live not only in a situated culture, but in a culture of mediation. The press, film and cinema, television and radio and more recently, the Internet, have developed to supply larger scale means of public communication. So now our situated culture exists within a much wider mediated world. The introduction of the term 'global village' in the 1960's illustrates how much our world has changed and the change is due almost entirely to the development of mass communications.

So what do we mean by 'mass communication' or 'mass media'?

Think of it as the transmission (sending) and reception of 'messages' on a very large scale.

Most communication is done on a direct face-to-face basis in a situated cultural context and it is a two-way process. The received message can be responded to instantly. There is 'feedback'.

With mass communication there are four main distinctive features, as follows:

1. There is a gap or an institutional break between the 'sender' of the message and the 'receiver'. The makers of the media texts, the 'senders' of the messages, do not have an obvious feedback relationship with the audience. (Shouting at the TV screen does not count as feedback!) Audience responses are rarely 'heard'. This means that mass-mediated culture tends to be a one-way process. Producers have to target imaginary, generalised or stereotypical audiences. They can (and do) 'shape' products accordingly. They also make assumptions about audiences that are based on conceptual ideas of what people are like, rather than how they really are. Look at any glamour magazine and you can see what the makers of the texts think men and women should look like, for example.
2. Specialised technologies, especially the internet, have begun to affect the one-way system of communication described above. In addition, these technologies have made it possible to 'capture' messages in a very physical form (photographs, film, tape-recordings) which in turn has led to historical permanence or records. Our sense of 'history' is thus affected (and some would say, constructed.)
3. Media messages can be extended 'outwards', so that events taking place regionally or locally now have global coverage (9/11, for example) Audiences are frequently calculated in billions! This has major significance in terms of media institutions. Lots of profit to be made from selling syndicated rights to the whole world's media!
4. Media messages have therefore become a modern commodity - an industry - a product. Market forces thus have a definite impact on the production and distribution of media texts. It is argued that as mass media have become 'facts of life' and we have all become socially and culturally more dependent on them.

It is argued that the media now occupy a central role in defining and interpreting the very nature of the world according to certain values, cultural principles and ideologies. We inhabit an information and consumer society as a result and concerns are expressed about exactly what effects the media have on society.

Ideology - a set of ideas or a view of the world that is selective and gives a particular version of reality. Sometimes seen as deliberately constructed by powerful groups in order to maintain power and control.

There are three major areas of concern, as follows:

1. Mass media has a political and a persuasive power over us. Radio, TV, the press and film can manipulate whole societies. Political propaganda, advertising and the so-called 'mind-bending' power of the media are long-standing causes of debate and concern.
2. Since the 19th century there has been a mistrust of so-called 'popular culture', which is thought to debase or degrade cultural traditions and standards. The ongoing debate about the future of public service broadcasting in Britain in the 1990's is an example of this. What exactly is 'quality' and cultural value in broadcast output?
3. The most contentious issue concerns the effects of the mass media on social behaviour, in particular violence and delinquency. The media have regularly been accused of 'causing' outbreaks of unrest in society.

How does culture relate to mass communication?

Culture can be defined as the beliefs, values, or other frameworks of reference by which we make sense of our experiences. It also concerns how we communicate these values and ideas.

Mass media are centrally involved in the production of modern culture.

Media production, media texts and media reception are like a series of interlinked circuits. What is produced is influenced by cultural values; how the texts are formed and

represented are influenced in the same way and the readings of the texts are also subject to both abstract and particular cultural viewpoints.

What is popular culture?

Historically (until the 19th century, at any rate) the term 'popular' was quite a negative thing, with overtones of vulgarity and triviality. Something not 'nice' or 'respectable'. In the modern world, the term means 'widespread', liked or at least encountered by many people. It has also come to mean 'mass-produced', i.e. made for the 'mass' of people. There is a downside to this, of course, in that it can also be interpreted as 'commercial' or 'trashy'.

This leads into a further consideration, which is the definition of 'popular culture' as 'low' culture, something not for the elite, but for the 'common' people. Cultural value ('high' culture) has been traditionally associated with dominant or powerful groups - those who have appreciation of classical music, art, ballet, opera and so on. 'Low' or popular culture is everything not approved of as 'high'. It is vulgar, common, or 'easy'.

Another definition of 'popular' is literally 'of the people', a kind of 'folk' culture and this is an interesting area, because it encompasses the idea of an 'alternative' culture which includes minority groups, perhaps with subversive values. The 'indie' music scene is an example of this. So 'popular' culture can and sometimes does, challenge the 'dominant' cultural power groups.

What is postmodern culture?

It is argued that modern culture has entered a so-called 'post-modern' phase. Put simply there are four areas of definition here:

1. Because popular culture and media images dominate the age, they dominate our sense of reality. The world is now 'intertextual' (images, copies, simulations and so on are so global that there are no authentic originals any more) The result is that popular culture has replaced art and 'high' culture and the contrived and the simulated has replaced the reality of experience and history. How and what we consume has become more important than what and how we produce.
2. Postmodernism is about style. Pastiche, collage, bricolage (the mixing and re-using of images, signs and symbols) are emphasised at the expense of content or substance.
3. Time, space history and place have become less secure - more confused. The forces of global communications and networks are eroding national cultures. This causes tension and uncertainty.
4. Postmodernism is sceptical about absolute truths, artistic, scientific, historical or political, so a secure sense of time and place is becoming more difficult to sustain. Once secure theories are now open to question and doubt.

Conclusion

The media have influence the development of modern life in three main ways:

- They represent the emergence of large-scale systems of public communication

Newspapers & print media from the 1850s

Photography from the 1880s

Cinema in the 1900s

Radio in the 1920s

Television in the 1950s

Key themes here are questions of power, access, representation and mediation

The development of the media has had an important influence on private life, the 'withdrawal into inner space' with TV and radio. Leisure activities have been concentrated in the home, although ironically still connected to the outside 'global village'. The media and mass communications have interacted and mixed with pre-existing cultures, forms and values, especially in the development of 'popular culture'.

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