

“The Influence of the Media”

An essay discussing specific instances in which the media was thought to be influential over audiences. This essay takes these selected events into context and discusses the views raised from different groups contributing to debate on the matter. Additionally, this essay briefly touches upon the communication theories that such reactions reflect. Within this essay, the Hypodermic communication theory and the Structural Functionalist communication theory as they are defined are compared and contrasted and the strengths and weaknesses of each theory are discussed.

The influence of the media has been without a doubt an issue in many societies during many different periods of time. It was not difficult to find an array of articles discussing the influence of the media in Australia and other countries both generally and to specific formats and texts. Many of these articles were commentaries on violence in the media and its influence upon the prevalence of violence in ‘everyday life’. This pervasiveness outlines an explicit and increasing concern regarding media influence upon violence in many societies. These concerns coming directly from the horse’s mouth, lead me to my investigation of violence and in particular murder cases associated with the media’s influence. More specifically, I will discuss the influence of Oliver Stone’s 1994 film *Natural Born Killers* on violence in society. The nature of this film makes it a unique choice when discussing media influence. The film follows a married couple; both victims of disturbed childhoods, as they engage in a violent killing spree across America. All the while their actions are recklessly sensationalized by the mass media or more precisely a television show; *American Maniacs*’ an indisputable accolade to the activities of mass murderers. The ironic fact regarding this particular film is that it was intended to be a satirical examination of the influence of the media in society. However following the film’s release there were a number of murder cases, which were allegedly influenced by the film.

Perhaps the most noted influence of this particular film is related to secondary school students Harris and Klebold of the Columbine High School Massacre. The code name that the two students used for the murderous rampage that took place at Columbine High School in April 1999 was *NBK*. These letters subsequently form an acronym for the film’s title. Moreover, Klebold has been noted to have mentioned the same acronym multiple times in undated journal entries and also to have referred to the massacre as *“The holy morning of NBK”*.

Moreover, the film’s director Oliver Stone was put under some media scrutiny as he faced a lawsuit by the relatives of a victim killed in a crime allegedly influenced by the film. Eighteen-year-old couple Sarah Edmondson and Benjamin Darras carried out a robbery, which resulted in the murder of the victim supposedly directly after watching Stone’s film. Perhaps one of the most haunting cases regarding this film was that of Ronnie Beasley and Angela Crosby. The couple are said to have watched the film nineteen times and set off on a criminal riot, which included carjacking, theft, kidnapping and murder. The two used the alias *‘Mickey’* and *‘Mallory’* these are the names of the two protagonists of the film.

These alleged criminal escapades suggest that the film did have some impact upon society. Although the film received a mixed critical reception, most critics maintain the view that the film did have some influence on society whether that is negative or positive. It is impossible for any media form that enjoyed so much debate

and controversy to not have some level of impact. Many believed that Stone should be held accountable for his 'violence prompting' work.

Regardless of the supposed influence that this film had on society, Stone maintains "almost everything that was important about 'Natural Born Killers' was overlooked amid all that hysteria over the death toll, and all the nonsense about whether or not I was promoting violence or instigating murder." He obviously doesn't feel that he should be held accountable for the deaths of many but he does contend that his film may have had an influence upon those deaths. When asked whether film could influence tragic events such as these he replied; "Of course it can. But it's not a film's responsibility to tell you what the law is. And if you kill somebody, you've broken the law ... And yes, people may have been influenced by the film in some way, but they had deeper problems to contend with."

The poor critical greeting that the film did receive can be quite closely related to the *Hyperdermic* communication theory. This theory regards the audience as a passive 'sponge-like' entity who 'soak-up' the message that the media (in this case Stone) actively submits. Believers of this theory would see the film and the director as manipulative and very powerful over the audience. The main contention of critics was that Stone was in fact adding to violence in society and negatively influencing the population. It was rarely taken into account in the history of the influence of this film that the audience had a choice *not* to be manipulated or sucked in by the violence portrayed in *Natural Born Killers*.

Stone's reaction to his film's influence was more closely related to the *Structural Functionalist* communication theory. Through his comments to the mass media, Stone attempted to bring to the public's attention that the audience (inclusive of those who committed crimes alleged to be influenced by the film) always had a choice. Stone brought up the idea clearly outlined in the *Structural Functionalist* theory, that audiences are active. He brought forward the view that audiences don't need to soak in the film but rather have the individual choice to react or not to react to the film. For the reasons outlined in this communication theory he didn't hold himself responsible or accountable for the deaths that followed those influenced by *Natural Born Killers*.

Moreover, in researching media influence on audiences I was able to come across a multitude of information exploring the influence of media on youths and more specifically upon the sexual activity of youths. My investigation of media influence on youth's sexual activity will be based upon the influence of song lyrics with underlying or in some cases blatant sexual connotations.

According to survey results "Teens who said they listened to lots of music with degrading sexual messages were almost twice as likely to start having intercourse or other sexual activities within the following two years than teens who listened to little or no sexually degrading music."

Moreover, according to research undertaken by 'Associated Press' the influence which song lyrics with sexual undertones or overtones have on youths is dependant upon the way in which sex is represented. It is undeniable that in this generation of music, many songs in many different genres do contain sexual references and are targeted at youths.

With lyrics such as “*You and me baby aint nothin’ but mammals, so lets do it like they do on the discovery channel*”, “*It’s getting hot in here, so take off all your clothes*” and “*I see you baby, shaking that ass*” it certainly can’t be denied that sexual undertones are present in many genres of popular music. *Associated Press* maintains the view that songs with “explicit references to sex acts” are more likely to prompt premature sexual activity than those with oblique sexual references. I myself can think of at least five or six songs off the top of my head that unambiguously refer to sexual acts.

The article that I have based my report upon takes a dim view of the music industries influence upon the sexual activity of youths. As with my research upon “*Natural Born Killers*”, this critic takes his viewpoint almost directly from the *hyperdermic* communication theory. This is largely due to the fact that the target audience of these sexual lyrics is often youths who are “*too immature and easily influenced to receive [them] responsibly*”. The article clearly patronizes those of the music industry that are “*careless enough to target an audience who absorbs such lyrics with little constraint...or understanding of the consequences that casual sexual activity can lead to*”. I think the key word here is “absorb”. This view clearly adopts the ‘passive audience’ approach of the *hyperdermic* communication theory. This critic, and other critical reception of sexual song lyrics targeted at youths seem to take on the viewpoint that the audience (youths) simply ‘take in’ the lyrics and in an “*alarming number of cases*” act upon them. This suggests that the audience doesn’t have much of a choice at all. It also assumes that the media is a very powerful entity and that the audience is almost completely passive (or powerless) against the influence that lyrics with these types of connotations have upon them.

The two communication theories that I’ve chosen to compare are the *Hyperdermic* theory and the *Structural Functionalist* theory. The reason that I have chosen these two theories is because I feel that I am most knowledgeable about these out of the five different theories. Furthermore I based criteria one for this outcome largely upon these two suppositions and in effect I feel that it would be more consistent and contextual to contrast and discuss these two theories than any of the others.

The *Hyperdermic* communication theory presents the viewpoint that the media is active and that it’s audience is passive. It believes that audiences inactively ‘absorb’ information put to them aggressively by each media form. It believes that the sender (media) is in complete control of what its audience receives and furthermore, the way or level to which it is influenced by this. This theory presents the view that the easily lead audience is cleverly manipulated by the ‘insidiously controlling’ senders; the media. Believers of this theory often slip into a view of the media as an evil, scheming or sinister corporation or entity. Moreover, they see the audience as sheep, ‘suckers’ or as being easily duped.

Contrastingly, the *Structural Functionalist* communication theory presents the view that audiences are in fact active. It doesn’t necessary put forth the view point that the media is passive, but more so that it is, as anything else in society an object or a resource that can be used, taken in, or manipulated in any way that the (very active) audience chooses to do so. This theory follows the view that audiences have a choice over what they absorb by having the choice over which specific films, programs, songs, etc. they choose to tune into or to avoid. This theory is largely based around the idea of “supply and demand”. It follows the contention that the media gives us what we want (e.g. programs that we don’t tune into are taken off the air) not necessarily what *they* want.

The main difference between these two theories is who holds the power; the media or the people. In the *'sitting duck'* theory, it is believed that the media is controlling and powerful. Dissimilarly, the *structural functionalist* theory presents the idea that it is the audience that controls the media. Both of these theories reflect definite problems with imbalance. The first allows people to be seen as effectively 'stupid'; passive to any manipulation that the media might exercise. People have no choice over what influences them. On the other hand, the second allows the media absolutely no power. The audience controls what the media show in accordance to their own amusement, tastes and interests. Both of these theories to a degree show elements of correctness, however both show obvious faults that cannot be overlooked. Many of these faults lie within the power imbalance that each view portrays.

These errors central to the power inequity discussed in each theory beg further questions of believers or critiques. For example, the Hyperdermic theory in its belief that the media is an 'all powerful' and hence 'unchallengeable' entity then suggests that texts can have only one meaning. This places critics of the theory to discuss the fact that audiences are then seen to respond to a text in exactly the same way. It is obvious, even after watching a film with a friend that different people with different personalities, interests and problems are able to gain different insights or pick up things in a text from each other. Different people view/listen/read texts with different motivations and intentions, it is therefore ignorant to suggest that audiences are basically 'zombies' when it comes to the media. Not everybody absorbs one intention of a director/writer, etc. at all, let alone in the same way.

Differently, the Structural functionalist communication theory suggests that audiences have an absolute majority of power over the media. This then begs the question of whether any sender (director, writer, actor, etc.) can have any intention for their work for their work at all. This theory leaves the media in a completely powerless position. This theory is too, obviously faulted as we know that the media does have intentions. Through studying films in media if not any thing else we know that directors do have some explicit intentions in executing projects. Moreover, there is obvious intent in such things as news reports, point of view articles, etc. These basic facts outline the fundamental flaws in this particular element of the Structural functionalist theory.

The contrasting flaws blatantly present in these two theories is a perfect reason to make sure that the remaining communication theories are understood. In order to get a well rounded perspective upon media influence, it is vital to form a more well-rounded and less radical view of both the media and of its audience. Looking at theories such as the reinforcement theory, the agenda setting function theory and the post modern theory assist us in forming well substantiated and unbiased views of the way that the media operates in society.