MODULE 3: THE LINEAR APPROACH

The linear, effect-oriented approach, propaganda & powerful media

LECTURE 1: INTRODUCTION

As discussed in the first class, in this course we have divided the main theories in our field into three broad approaches. The first approach is the **linear transmission** perspective that focuses greatly on **effects** of communication. This was for a long time, and perhaps to some extent still is, the dominant approach in our field. It is a perspective that is largely concerned with the presumed effects of mass (mediated) communication, or in other words, the **power of the media**.

This theory, and how it developed in the 20th century, is the focus of this module.

**Linear Effect Oriented Theories**

We left off last week at the start of the twentieth century when scholarly thought had now accepted the idea that the media were a political, economic and social force to be reckoned with. The eighteenth and nineteenth century had been riddled with practical examples of their persuasive powers. People were surrounded by a rich media landscape. Different channels, most noticeably print media like pamphlets, newspapers and magazines clamoured for attention. New audience groups had been discovered and quickly targeted.

The political parties that were born in the nineteenth century already had faithful followers at the turn of the century. Their party media could count on a returning audience. These political press served as a signpost, telling their voters the viewpoints of the party and engaging other parties in lively media debates.

Freedom of the press was seen by politicians as necessary for the media to fulfil its purpose as a fourth estate; a political institute and check on government power, and therefore press freedom was adopted in many constitutions all over the world.

It’s not surprising that economists, political scientists and sociologists respected the power of, and sometimes voiced an opinion on, mass communication. But it was not yet a full-fledged scientific perspective – the idea of a powerful media was based on anecdotal evidence rather than research. This would soon change.

LECTURE 2: THE POWER OF PROPAGANDA

After several years of rising political tensions, World War I erupted in the year 1916. This is not a history class, but it’s important for us to realize the impact of this war on our topic.
First of all, that the war was brewing was quite apparent for all in the Western World. Newspapers, magazines and even the new up and coming mass medium of the radio gave a lot of attention to the political and military manoeuvring on the European continent.

A student of media history might be surprised to read inflammatory articles and hear radio broadcasters goad the world leaders to rise up against the enemy. In short, some in the media landscape were actually campaigning for an aggressive stance and seemed to be looking forward to a coming conflict – perhaps under the misconception that it would be a short and relatively clean skirmish that would restore the preferred balance of power.

In reality, populations all over the world were bombarded with patriotic messages and a call to arms. Of course this wasn't the only content in the media landscape, but several years later, scientists that studied what had happened, noticed the two correlating variables:

1. media that were campaigning for war and patriotism, and
2. a motivated, patriotic population, set for war

When the war started, all sides made use of propaganda campaigns. Jowett and O'Donnell in Propaganda and Persuasion (1999:6) define propaganda as:

> The deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.

The world had in 1914 never seen such a huge ‘push’ to influence so many at the same time with use of mediated communication. The political and military leaders had perhaps learned their lessons from the ancient Greeks and Romans. They too wielded the sword of communication as if it was just one other weapon in their arsenal, piercing the mind with its persuasive message.

Again, scholars who studied events directly after WWI noticed a correlation between an intensive propaganda attempt and all kinds of effects that were assumed to be the effect of this propaganda. It was seen as a reason why soldiers marched cheerfully into war. Why the home front showed such a uniform support and respect for their military. Why enemy soldiers decided to defect en-masse, to be imprisoned in military camps for the remainder of the war.

The importance of World War I on communication theory is, to put it simply: it created a huge belief in the power of mass communication through the media. We call this the all-powerful media paradigm.
The correlation between presumed cause and effect during World War I had massively increased the belief in the power of the media. It was seen by many as an immensely powerful tool, either for good or ill. Therefore, not only scientists but governments too wanted to understand how persuasion through mass communication worked.

Scientists all over the world received funding to further study these phenomena, which of course fuelled research into this area. Persuasion through mass communication was a hot topic, both as a danger and as a potential solution for many problems. Economists were looking for ways to use the media to turn the financial crisis of the twenties and thirties. Sociologists thought that the media could be used to strengthen or weaken role patterns, and they used these ideas to study the emancipation of women for instance.

All of these scientists basically studied the question:

How could you guard against the power of the media, and how could you harness its potential for your own benefit?

The underlying notion is of course the premise that media have a huge effect on the behaviour of people.

Also commercially the all-powerful media paradigm thrived. The advertising industry boomed. Also, market research agencies started to study who read or listened to which medium. Media organizations needed this info to sell more ads for better prices. These commercial market researchers further added to existing knowledge on the media landscape and its audiences.

They also standardized techniques to conduct audience research, for instance by large-scale surveys which were then statistically analysed via a fixed format and repeated by others all over the world. The market research industry quickly grew and maintained its own standards on high quality research.

Many students who studied these issues in the university went on to work in one of the growing research firms, using their theories and methods in a more practical setting, but with the same dominant attitude prevailing that media have a potential for great effects on the behaviour of their audiences. The main goal of commercial market researchers was to determine the reach of a medium.

We call the theory that mass media have a direct, immediate and powerful effect on its audiences the hypodermic needle theory. Basically the sender ‘injects’ the message into the audience with use of the media. The audience is seen as passive.
and more or less unable to resist and immediately affected. It should be noted that effects, in this perspective, are seen as:

- short term
- immediate
- focused on change rather than reinforcement, and finally
- uniform among the audience, which means that audience factors are not really important

Another word for this theory is the 'magic bullet' theory, another cool name for basically the same metaphor: a sender 'fires' his message into the brain of a receiver with use of mediated communication.

Scholars found many examples of the presumed power of mass communication and went forth to study these systematically. The most famous example is perhaps that of the Martian Invasion of 1938, when multitudes panicked because of a radio show in which Mars attacked the earth.

We'll discuss this example in the next section of our MOOC, first from the perspective of the all-powerful media, then from a different angle.

**LECTURE 4: POWERFUL MEDIA PUT TO THE TEST**

In New York, October 1938, CBS aired a radio drama about a Martian Invasion. Director Orson Wells had adapted H.G. Wells's famous book War of the Worlds for the radio. Most of the show consists of news reports on the ongoing Martian attack. It starts slowly with an interview with a leading astronomer. Nothing seems very wrong yet, as the interview is followed by a weather report and performance of an orchestra for the listeners at home. While the story progresses the reports become more frantic and describe several lost battles of the human army.

This example is often used to illustrate the power of mediated communication since the broadcast reputedly led to mass panic. Newspapers report that thousands ran scared into the streets, fires broke out and we get the idea that complete pandemonium ensued. This would of course indicate exactly what the magic bullet theory predicts: immediate, short term, uniform effects among the masses.

However, scientists that studied this incident, most notably Paul Lazarsfeld and Herta Herzog, actually found evidence that suggested a more nuanced picture. First of all, many people had tuned in long after the show started, thereby missing the introduction that explained it was a show. More importantly, they found that contextual factors had influenced the collective reaction. It was 1938 and news media had informed their audiences on the potential of an upcoming war with
Germany. So people were forewarned that a war might happen. Research showed that some who panicked actually missed the part about the Martians and assumed it was a German invasion that took place.

Another important finding was that newspapers had probably exaggerated the ‘widespread panic’ that followed the broadcast. Reality was perhaps less sensational: yes, hundreds of thousands were frightened to some degree, but in reality most of them had not acted on their fear – there was no evidence of hysterical screaming masses in the streets, no suicides by people who wanted to stay out of the hands of the Martians.

Later Lazarsfeld again criticized the magic bullet theory, this time together with Berelson and Gaudet when they disproved the hypothesis that voters were persuaded to vote for Roosevelt because of his extensive campaign.

These studies are examples of a line of questioning in to the all-powerful media paradigm by scholars. They were systematically testing the magic bullet hypothesis and had been unable to reproduce the presumed effects in an experimental setting.

Also scientists found that often in cases of presumed huge effects in real life scenarios, like the Martian Scare of 1938, there were many other variables to take into consideration, besides media influence. Because these critical notions were the result of a long list of scientific studies. We call this paradigm the powerful media paradigm put to the test.

LECTURE 5: MINIMAL EFFECTS

I just explained that the belief in the all-powerful media had fuelled academic research into the topic of mass communication. Although many anecdotes, like the Martian Attack of 1938, seemed to indicate great effects, further scientific exploration actually failed to prove this hypothesis. Many researchers now argued that the effects of mass communications had been overestimated. Also the idea of a passive audience that is either shot or injected was also rejected.

World War I and later World War II propaganda was again looked at in this light and scholars, like the influential psychologist Carl Hovland, found that audience members were often not passive at all but quite able to select messages and block persuasive attempts, especially when they were aware beforehand that there was going to be a persuasion attempt. This is the so called inoculation theory.

Also they found that it was often difficult to prove the power of media in reality because there are too many variables in real life to reliably ascertain the effect of one specific variable like media influence.
When Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet studied the effects of the Roosevelt presidential campaign of 1940, they found that people were not swayed by the campaign efforts.

There was some influence, but this had more to do with reinforcement of a position someone already had than with change; this was a further element of the magic bullet theory debunked. Also the researchers found that people were in fact influenced quite a lot, not by the media but by so called opinion leaders. Typically opinion leaders expose themselves to media in order to be informed and reinforce their standpoints with arguments.

A so called two step flow model was proposed where people are influenced by opinion leaders. The media use of these opinion leaders was of course very different than the old powerful media model would suggest. They actively sought out media they wanted to use, made selections based on their own opinions, wants and needs. Opinion leaders are therefore quite powerful and not easily manipulated at all.

The powerful media paradigm was discarded and scholars like Lazarsfeld proposed a minimal effects theory instead. Media are only one of many variables in a situation, and often not the most influential one. People are more likely to be persuaded through social means and therefore media use and influence should be studied from this perspective. Not viewing the audience as uniform and passive but in fact taking into consideration audience factors, seeing that effects can differ from person to person and group to group. This approach can be characterized by a famous quote from Berelson:

"Some kinds of communication, on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people, under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effects." (1949)

Although the minimal effects paradigm was becoming more popular, two things happened that sparked a new popular belief in the powerful media idea. Firstly we gradually learned more and more about the Holocaust. The world needed theories that explained how this could have happened and why so many had kept silent during the reign of Hitler. Secondly, a new mass medium quickly rose to prominence, drastically changing the media landscape and people’s daily lives. Television.
While scientists all over were adhering to the minimal affects hypothesis, a different, contrary trend led to the so-called powerful media rediscovered paradigm. One important reason for this were the many presumed effects of communication during the Second World War.

Not only historians but sociologists too pointed at the concerted propaganda efforts of both the Allied and Axis forces. Specifically the situation in Nazi Germany that had caused so many to agree with and later not object to Hitler’s policies was an important theme for study. This new paradigm that formed, the Powerful Media Rediscovered was slightly more nuanced then the older Powerful Media paradigm.

Scientists had learned from the studies of Lazarsfeld and Hovland and such that direct, immediate and uniform effects were difficult to prove. But ever since World War II there was a growing body of scientific work forming that suggested strong, long term, indirect and personal effects. New theories on powerful media were more nuanced than the older ones, and saw the effects more in terms of reinforcement than actual change.

Not only scientists objected to the minimal effect theory: popular belief in the Powerful Media Paradigm remained strong, and only grew after the war. Many people working in advertisement, political campaigning or in the media could not come to terms with the minimal effects thesis and added anecdotal evidence that further supported the idea of a powerful media. World War II propaganda had in the popular eye been extremely influential (even though scientists were still arguing this) because it had helped create a huge social support for the war effort.

The idea that the media had failed pre-war Germany was also apparent. Why hadn’t the Fourth Estate stopped to rise of Hitler?

These and other instances (were media owners misused their powers for instance) led to a Commission on Freedom of the Press to investigate the democratic role of the media. In 1947 they published their report, which is still the basis for most modern thought on this. They concluded that yes, like the fourth estate model the press is crucial for a healthy political system, because they serve as a platform for opinions of the people and serve as a check on
government power. However, unlike the Fourth Estate model, which included that the media should be free of any constrictions, the Commission proposed:

a) that in order for the media to serve the people, there should be **guidelines that govern media behaviour**

b) That the basis of these guidelines should be a **feeling of social responsibility**

c) The Commission stated that every political institute needs **checks and balances**, therefore also the media can’t be completely without restrictions. There is room for government interference in extreme cases.

d) However, it is preferable to avoid extreme measures, therefore the media should govern themselves through a **system of a professional codes of ethics**, upheld by a self-imposed regulatory body

It is this **Social Responsibility Model** that is in fact dominant today. Every country has of course its own variation, but usually there is some system were media organizations adhere to the rules set out by a committee made up of media professionals. They don’t hold any official legislative power but media organizations agree that courts can impose fines and such whenever the professional code is breached.

The introduction all over the world of this new system of media governance clearly shows that (despite the fact that scientifically the issue was under debate) the powerful media idea was still widespread. This belief further increased with the rise of television.

**LECTURE 7: A REVOLUTION IN THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE**

In the last session, we discussed World War II as a reason for the popular and scientific reluctance to accept a minimal effect conclusion. A second reason was the arrival of television in the 1950s and 1960s as a new medium with even more power of attraction than its predecessors.

The effects of television were presumed to be huge, but not in the old ‘magic bullet’ way. Not so much direct, short term and uniform, but:

a) **Long term**, with repeated exposure. This was the basis for **cultivation theory**.

b) More attention was given to **indirect effects**. For instance, when we see a commercial of a muscular man eating ice cream we might not run into the shop to immediately buy an ice-cream, but perhaps after several commercials like this, we will associate this particular brand with a healthy appearance, thereby increasing the likelihood that we’ll prefer this brand. These types of effects are typically longer lasting that the ‘bullet’ effects.
c) **Personal effects.** Now it was appreciated that one audience member is not the same as the other. Effects therefore are **pluriform** and have to be studied in context. A violent cartoon might have a completely different effect on a child that watches it alone than on a child that watches it with siblings or parents.

d) **Reinforcement rather than change.** Studies increasingly indicate that reinforcement effects are quite strong, people remember and process content selectively, based on their own knowledge and predispositions. Therefore **things that connect with their preferred reality will sooner be processed.**

Television was in so many ways a new platform: it **captivated** its audience, created new worlds within a media reality. Television shows had a huge impact. Unlike the newspaper, people watched TV together, so in many ways it was a **social medium** as well. It was a **topic for discussion** in everyday life. You could quickly **isolate yourself** if you weren’t aware of new programs and shows on television.

**Hypermediality** became one way of opening yourself up or closing yourself off to a group. We can imagine the new co-worker who is the only one who hasn’t seen a new series on TV. He’ll probably feel as though he’s less part of the group now. And probably, to some extent, this is true. Television became a preferred way to spend time, alone or together, shows and series were a way to identify yourself, as an audience member or even a fan of that particular program.

**Social Learning** proved to be quite effective through television. Even though I have never been in a fire, I have some idea of what to do and avoid because of many movies and TV series. If these ideas are correct of course remains to be seen, but I do have some inkling based on media exposure.

In just the same way, I think I know what to expect in a courtroom, space shuttle or dinosaur attack. Not because of direct experience, but through **mediated** experience.

Other scholars established **socialisation** effects or television. Just like we learn from our parents, family and friends, teachers and classmates, we learn from television as well.
All of these effects were probably not unique for television compared to other media, but they were very apparent in television.

So was probably the rise of television more than anything that caused a final paradigm, a compromise between minimal and powerful effects. This is the dominant paradigm of today, that of negotiated media effects.

**Lecture 8: Negotiated Media Effects**

The final paradigm for this week is a compromise between the minimal effects and powerful media perspectives. Combining elements of both models the negotiated media effects model states that media and communication in general (not only mass, the focus is broader than that) have the potential for great power.

Effects can be short term, direct, immediate, after one shot exposure et cetera. However, more often, strong and enduring effects are based on long term, repeated exposure where the content reinforces rather than changes the audience’s beliefs.

This perspective:

- Combines the insights of political and economic scholars with those of psychologists, sociologists and even cultural anthropologists
- Looks at human development and sees persuasion as something continuous; something that is not to be avoided, because we need it to function.
- It can’t be avoided without losing that which connects us with others.
- Many studies with children were now done, to find out more about the role of communication during crucial development phases. Also, many societal problems, like crime, prejudice, aggressive and anti-social behaviour were now linked to communication, either as a cause or a possible solution (often both).
- Sometimes tries to back qualitative statements with quantitative data, thereby aiming to measure the subjective.
- Looks at all kinds of effects.

The agenda setting theory suggests that the media agenda influences the public agenda; if the marriage of some celebrity is much discussed in the news it will probably feature higher on the public perception as well. The media tell us which items are important, where important things happen and why. The amount of attention given to environmental pollution by the media causes a higher percentage of people thinking about this subject and a higher percentage of people evaluating environmental pollution as a serious or important problem.
A second theory is **framing**. In the photos below the same news event, the tearing down of Saddam Hussein’s Statue, is depicted. The frame is however quite different, thereby probably changing how we deconstruct the message.

We can see that these types of theories no longer focus on the **intention** of the sender but rather on message **construction** and **deconstruction**. So no longer the linear effect oriented approach but a focus on the **construction** and the **reception** of a message; on **processing** and **signification**.