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MASS MEDIA CONTENT: A SUBTEXT FOR STRUCTURAL MAINTENANCE IN SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper discusses the structural functions of the mass media. It views the mass media as an integral part of the society within which they operate and are, therefore, in their functions intrinsically geared towards the maintenance of the structures of the society. Being an institutional part of the society, the mass media relate with the rest of the society in such a way that the existing rules and norms are promoted and maintained. To achieve this, the media engage unobtrusively in political socialization and reinforcement, give negative labels to anti-society behaviours, and in their contents structure both issues and personalities. The paper also examines the structural functions of the international mass media in the present global village. It views the mass media, though largely a product of the cultures of their different societies, as nevertheless performing similar functions, albeit in different forms and degrees. It concludes that as long as mass media activities are controlled by the elite, so long will the mass media function to preserve the structures which have given such societies their present identities.

Introduction

The mass media are among the most important institutions in the society today. The world outside is usually too big, too tumultuous and too fleeting for us to directly experience. Hence there is growing dependence on the mass media for daily information that in turn helps to shape individual, group and corporate living.

Reliance on the mass media for daily information is consequent upon the mass media's unique position in the society, a position made possible by the various functions which they generally perform or are assumed to perform. Yet in the discharge of their roles, the mass media, advertently or inadvertently, position their products or contents to ensure the survival of the existing structures in the society. In other words, mass media content is geared towards the servicing of the status quo and therefore ensure the continuity, with minimal conflict or disruption, of the society. Whether the mass media are set, ab initio, to achieve this function is somewhat controversial, but what may not be

denied is that mass media functions are intrinsically directed towards the maintenance of the structures of the society. Thus, the mass media are engaged in structural functionalism.

The Concept of Structural Functionalism

Functionalism, according to Almond and Powel (1996, p.22), is concerned with a set of institutions at a particular time and how the status is maintained. According to Dowse & Hughes (1983), functionalism sets out the prerequisites for the survival of any society, or system. They suggest that societies must meet certain individual and group needs - shelter, nourishment, replacement, a measure of security, etc. which lead to norms, forms (language, magic, religion) and institutions which control and co-ordinate men in the attempts to meet these needs (Dowse & Hughes, 1983, p.75). Thus rules and norms are connected with society in the sense that they are inter-related in such a manner as to support each other and represent solutions to the functional imperatives of system maintenance. In effect, therefore, the mass media, being an institutional part of the society, relates with the rest of the society in such a way that the existing rules and norms of the society are promoted and maintained.

As an indispensable sub-system in the society, the mass media, in their operations and functions, promote the survival of the social system to which they belong. To that extent, the mass media are functional. According to Eminue (2001, p.89), "a system is therefore functional if it promotes the survival of the political system and other structures. Conversely, a relationship is considered to be dysfunctional if it limits or reduces the chances of the survival of the political system and related structures or if it impairs its functionality."

Dowse & Hughes (1973), Eminue (2001) & Almond and Powel (1996) list four functional imperatives if the society must survive. These are:
Adaptation - adapting itself to an environment.
Goal attainment - achieving collective goals.
Pattern maintenance or tension management -maintaining control of tension in the system; and
Integration - Integrating the diverse actions of members of the society.

The argument is that the mass media are a structure (institution) whose functions (activities) are skewed (latently or manifestly, intentionally or unintentionally) towards meeting the functional imperatives as listed above.

Theoretical Framework

This article is supported by a number of theories, namely media hegemony theory and social

construction of reality theory.

Media Hegemony

According to Severin and Tankard (1992), media hegemony has its roots in Marxism and argues that the dominant class in society controls the media and that the media in turn assist that class in exerting influence over the rest of the society and maintaining the status quo. Media hegemony theory has been well articulated by Altheide (1984) who argues that "the socialization of journalists involves guidelines, work routines and orientations complete with the dominant ideology" and that "journalists tend to cover topics and present news reports that are conservative and supportive of the status quo." Media hegemony theory stresses that news and media content generally is shaped by the requirements of the dominant ideology, which is the ideology of the ruling elite.

Social Construction of Reality

This theory, articulated by Gaye Tuchman (1978), looks at news as a social construction of reality, a social resource whose construction limits the analytic understanding of contemporary life. Tuchman (1978, p.14) highlights this point when she stresses that "through its routine practices and the claims of news professionals to arbitrate knowledge and to present factional accounts, news legitimates the status quo." Tuchman does not talk about a 'picture of reality', but

sees media content as reality constructed or reconstructed, not reflected, by the media for the audience in order to preserve the structures in the society.

A major point in mass media functionalism is the tendency to "relegate force to a minor position in the social order, stressing much more the process of inducting people into the political culture(s) of the systems" (Dowse & Hughes, 1983,p.78). This process is called political socialization.

The Mass Media and Political Socialization

One of the major ways in which the mass media contribute to the sustenance of the structures of the society is through political socialization. The mass media are one of the agents of socialization in the society. In discussing political socialization, we are concerned with "the ways in which people 'structure' their political world, cognitively and affectively, as well as the effect of overtly non-political socialization agencies in generating attitudes and behaviours which have political consequences" (Dowse & Hughes, 1983, p.182). There is need to stress that much of political socialization has its origins in non-political institutions such as the mass media. Political socialization is latent in process but manifest in effect.

Thus the mass media are effective in socialization which,

according to Almond & Powel (1996, p.42), "is the way one generation passes on political ideas and beliefs to successive generations, a process called cultural transmission". That is, the manner in which citizens are introduced to the values of the society. Citizens generally acquire their behavioural patterns and political attitudes at a tender age, and this is the result of the activities of the various agents of socialization of which the mass media are one, alongside the family, the school, religious institution, peer groups, occupation, class and status, interest groups, political parties, etc.

Implicit in the mass media menu are direct and indirect ingredients of political socialization. The media are genuinely concerned about law and order in the society; they need a conducive political, economic and social environment to engage in their free enterprise; therefore, they provide the menu - information, values and norms - intended to mainstream the citizen's ideas and beliefs. Sometimes, the mass media engage in direct transmissions of the values and norms, including society's don'ts, to the citizen in which case they communicate the values, information, or feelings towards politics explicitly, or indirectly when they mould political views. The media socialize the citizen into' the authority structure of the family and the nation, which leaves the person with values and roles expectations. McQuail (2005, p.494)

explains the socialization function of the media further: "The main logic underlying the thesis is that the media can teach norms and values by way of symbolic reward and punishment for different kinds of behaviour as represented in the media. An alternative view is that it is a learning process whereby all learn how to behave in certain situations and the expectations which go with a given role or status in society. Thus the media are continually offering pictures of life and models of behaviour in advance of actual experience."

Mass Media and Reinforcement

Socialization is continuous, a process that occurs through the life of an individual. The mass media, therefore, continuously engage in making the citizen to adopt attitudes and values that will ensure the survival and smooth functioning of the structures of the society. This is the process of reinforcement that binds the individual faithfully to the system. According to Almond & Powel (1996 p.46), "In addition to providing specific and immediate information about political events, the mass media also convey directly or indirectly the major values on which society agrees. Certain symbols are conveyed in an emotional context, and the events described alongside them take on a specific emotional colour."

This is true of every political system in the world, be it authoritarian, democratic or a hybrid of the two. Political

communications are geared mainly to maintain the status quo. The point of divergence is that while the mass media in a democratic setting tend to undertake the function of maintaining the structures of the society voluntarily, hence willingly, the mass media in an authoritarian system are often coerced or compelled into discharging the function of political socialization.

Mass Media and Anti-structure Behaviours

Though not an aberration, it is unlikely that the mass media will engage in the transmission of attitudes and values which turn round to threaten the fabric of the society. Even when a variety of social experiences pushes the individual to behave contrary to past learned behaviours, the mass media are always on the standby to reinforce the dominant values of the society by giving negative labels to the individual, his sponsors and his channels. In short, he is labelled as society's undesirable that need not disturb the peace of the society and cause chaos in the system.

According to McQuail (2005, p.99), "studies of media content have also often found that mainstream mass media tend to be conformist and supportive rather than critical of dominant values. This support takes several forms, including: avoidance of fundamental criticism of key institutions such as business, the justice system and democratic politics; giving differential access to the 'social top'; and symbolically rewarding those who succeed according to the approved paths of virtue and hardwork, whilst symbolically punishing those who fail or deviate."

This aptly explains why behaviours that put the society on the edge of precipice or upset the apple cart are always roundly condemned by the mass media as being 'anti-society'. Where the media appear to rationalize the causes of such anti-society behaviours, it is done patronizingly. The ultimate intention is the preservation of the status quo by giving a sense of official concern to the roots of the crisis. However, the large stream of communication from the mass media usually focusses on what the authorities have done and are doing to ameliorate the circumstances that gave rise to the ugly situation in the first place. In situations where the mass media plead for leniency for a group of 'treasonable' persons, it is done to emphasize:

1.   The dangers that such behaviour poses to the well being of the society.
2.   That the structures of the society should not be toyed with.
3.   That the structures that they sought to upturn are caring and accommodating enough to consider pleas from 'well meaning' individuals, groups and organizations to tamper justice with mercy.

It should be noted that the

media are a product of corporate business and they in turn support the system. The support comes in various ways particularly through content content that approves and accepts the present structure and disapproves and censures societal derivations.

The situation described above opens up opportunities for the mass media, in their structural maintenance, to re-socialize the citizenry into internalizing the values of the society, with particular emphasis on patriotism and loyalty, obedience to authority as well as reward for obedience and the price for disloyal tendencies.

International Mass Media and Structural Activities

Since the present global village is media-driven and is founded on rapid communication that makes an event in one part of the world a common knowledge in other parts within minutes, the mass media have also become an agent of international political socialization. Increasingly, the dominant international media have socialized their audiences who are citizens of other countries into the dominant political culture of the media's countries of origin. The international media convey - in addition to specific and immediate information on events - the major values of their countries of origin. That is to say, the media latently encourage the internationalisation of the major values of such countries.

Of all the international news media, the Cable News Network and the BBC have created a state of frenzy in the world on America's democracy, its driving force and beauty, every four years during the presidential nomination and election campaign of the two parties in the United States. Citizens of the world appear to be more informed, more excited and more interested in the process of electing the President of the United States than in their own countries. Gradually, citizens of other countries ask, some though in a muffled way, why their countries cannot emulate the seeming transparency in a presidential or governorship or municipal election in the United States. The audience tends to accept the mass media's explanation of any seeming inconsistency in the system, such as a scandal, by emphasizing the process of house-cleansing through the full exposure of the content of the scandal, the consequent resignations of the principals involved and their possible prosecution in the court of law. These international mass media, as Charles Wright (1995, p.97) says, "provide their audience with an interpretation of the world in terms of what is, what is important, what is, what is right, and what is related to what else. In this manner, they cultivate the audience's images of reality."

Structuring Issues and Personalities

Udoakah (1993, p.89) argues

that the processing of news into a finished product leans towards making the mass media to service the existing structures of the society. According to him, "there is no doubt that the facts of any event given a news status by the mass media managers are selected and presented within the framework of public ethos. In editing stories brought in by the reporters, they try to retain some facts about the event, reconstruct others to sharpen a point of view or understanding from a particular perspective."

Severin and Tankard (1992,p.295) underscores this point when they say that the "media tailor their content to meet the interests of upscale audiences", while failing "to acknowledge the concerns, views and perspective of other classes." This is partly so because the media operatives are more frequently drawn from the 'upscale' segment of the society.

Both those who own and man the media institutions are of the elite class. Therefore, there is muted consciousness among the media owners and the operatives to sustain the system to which they belong. As Udoakah (1993, p.90) points out, "such people cannot raise dysfunctional questions about the system". Hence in their pursuit of both news and the truth, the operatives primarily consult those who are similarly manning other structures in the society. To quote Udoakah again, "those who make up their accredited sources are the government officials, experts,

successful businessmen and women." Without doubt, this category of persons will almost certainly say those things that will continue to ensure the maintenance of the status quo. According to Lang & Lang (1969, p.19), "the mass media structure issues . and personalities. They do this gradually and over a period of time and thus the impact seems less spectacular than the shift or crystallization of a particular vote decision". In reaching this conclusion, the authors consider, "among other social effects, the ways that public events, especially political, are structured and influenced by the presence of mass media, and the ways in which mass communication helps to shape the image of public events for individuals, with related social consequences for the political process."

Altschull (1984), cited by Severin and Tankard (1992, p.291), maintains that

In all press systems the news media are agents of the people who exercise political and economic power. Newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting outlets thus are not independent actors, although they have the potential to exercise independent power.

The content of the news media always reflects the interests of those who finance the press.

Schools of journalism transmit ideologies and value systems of the society in which they exist and inevitably assist people in power in maintaining their control of the

news media.

Many a time, particularly in the mass media controlled by the government, the preservation of society's structures is taken to a ridiculous dimension. This category of mass media often assumes the interest of the society and that of the ruling elite (government) to be synonymous. Hence, views or opinions that are critical to government's views, policies and programmes are assumed, with vehemence, to be against the interest of the society. Such views are not allowed to pass through the news gate in the first instance, while the media operatives then launch vituperations against the promoters of such views, assigning them many negative labels. This scenario creates a situation where social upheavals in the society go unreported until, no matter how long it has taken, the government has made comment on the upheavals. At this point, the official position rather than the upheavals becomes the news. No wonder someone once said that in Nigeria, a reporter will not identify a corpse until the Minister of Information has said so!

Two of the many ways that news and personalities are structured are framing and the use of government dressed-up releases.

Framing

According to McQuail (2005, p.378), "news exhibits a rather stable and predictable overall pattern when measured according to conventional categories of subject matter." This, according to him, is achieved through framing. An idea which was originated by Goffman (1974), a frame "is needed to organize otherwise fragmentary items of experience or information...In journalistic content, stories are given meaning by reference to some particular "news value that connects one event with other similar one." (McQuail, 2005, p.378).

In other words, news is presented within an existing frame - the frame of reference common to both the media and individual audience members. The frame defines problems, diagnoses causes, makes moral judgments and suggests remedies (Entman, 1993). The idea is that the reporter need not, and will hardly, present his news outside the existing frames which had already been defined by the structures in the society. His duty, therefore, is to work within the existing frame in order to sustain the smooth running of the system.

McQuail (2005, p. 378) lists the of textual devices that can be used to perform framing to include "using certain words or phases, making certain contextual references, choosing certain pictures or film, giving examples as typical referring to certain sources and so on...Framing is a way of giving some overall interpretation to isolated items of fact."

Such framing gives rise to what Dowse & Hughes (1983, p.266)

call "social communication and presentation of clustered ideas and juxtapositions of ideas and opinions", which they explain as such stereotypes "as black, devil, bad, crime, darkness; white, pure, virgin, unsullied, good, clean; red, danger, communism, anarchy and rape." In the same vein, McNair (1988) notes that almost all news about the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was for decades reported in terms of Cold War and the Soviet 'enemy'.

Fitting news stories into an already existing frame could produce negative effects, including bias, which may be unintended. The bias is, however, located in the processes involved in news production. As McQuail (2005,p.379) notes: "When information is supplied to news media by sources (as much often is), then it arrives with a built-in frame that suits the purpose of the source and is unlikely to be purely objective." Thus, from the source of the news, which may be a wired service or the medium's reporter, down to the editor, framing is in-built, the operatives having been framed overtime.

Dressed-up Government Releases

It is an already accepted fact that government regularly embarks on aggressive news dissemination to ensure that the content of available mass media is, to a great extent, tailored to maintain structural relations in the polity. That is to say, it does actively attempt to mould

public opinion. Government does not relegate itself to the receiving end in the discussion of public issues, but attempts the influence public opinion through opinion management process (Dowse & Hughes, 1983). Aiming not only at providing its own version of reality, but also ensuring that the status quo is maintained, government has vigorously become a news provider and distributor to major media houses. Rosen (2005) in an online article notes: "Given the proliferation of media outlets and the eroding of boundaries between news, comment and punditry, someone will use government-provided information as news", particularly as "government is presenting itself as a neutral, disinterested, just-thefact style information provider."

This posture blinds the user of such information the news channels to the obvious motive of structural maintenance embedded in the news. Through dressedup releases in print, video and audio, government's hidden hand supplies the news to the news channels to disseminate. According to Rosen (2005),"the reports themselves, though, are designed to fit seamlessly into the typical local news broadcast. In most cases, the reporters are careful not to state in the segment that they work for the government. Their reports generally avoid overt ideological appeals." The motive is to make such reports as acceptable as possible while at the same time pushing forward the

agenda of maintaining structural relations in the society.

Conclusion

The mass media in every part of the world, regardless of the prevailing political system, play an important role within the society they operate. Although largely a product of the culture of their societies, the mass media, nevertheless, perform similar functions, albeit in various forms and at various degrees, depending on the society. Maintaining the structure of the society is one of such functions. In some cultures, the media are coerced to perform that role, but in others, they discharge the duty on willingly and unobtrusively, depending on the level of political development. As long as the elite controls mass media activities, so long will the mass media function to preserve the structures, which have given such societies their present identities.

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