

Media audience, media contents, and media-use theoretical discourse

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Abstract: The ferment in this theoretical discourse places the audience members at the heart of media effect process by presupposing that they, often thought to be at the receiving end, are self-willed and socially-deterministic individuals who decide their pattern of usage of media contents. The import is that audience-members decide what media content to consume, when, and how to consume them, and by implication, twist the nature of influence the media exert on them. This view finds explanation in the idea that as there are diverse use of divergent communication media, the audience members are hardly divested of their active participation in shaping and deciding what media/contents to turn to in meeting their individualised needs. It is sustained that based on the variations in audience's demography and psychography, different media contents and media sources would continue to strive in meeting audience members' different specific needs and not the other way round.

Keywords: Discourse, Media audience, Media contents, Media-use, Theoretical

1. Introduction

The mass media audience are dominant social forces in media-use analysis. The audience are demographically, psychographically, and psychosocially constituted in a way that their indices cannot be detached from media-use hypothesis and the patterns in which media contents are constructed. The audience are *primus inter pares* and cannot be disconnected from mass communication process. This is because media messages are created in patterns that must be appreciated by the audience. For this reason, mass media audience now decide what media content(s) they consume. Much the same way the media content defines the audience.

McQuail (2010) defines mass media audience in an overlapping and elaborate manner by postulating six cardinal indices for understanding the classification of audience members in a given mass communication encounter. The first index for understanding the nature of audience members, according to McQuail (2010), are in terms of spatiality, that is, defining audience members by physical boundary or place where they can be physically located or traced. This speaks to the audience members' geographical setting or social milieu. In this sense, local media are likely to have an audience based that is quite defined and set within a given physical boundary that, in some sense, may be considered as a community of people who have vested interest in the local media's offerings.

The second index for classifying audience members are in the sense of considering them as 'people'. In this sense, consideration is highly placed on audience members possessing the nature of individuality with an autonomous perception, feeling, and reaction to media messages. McQuail (2010) notes that audience members, in the sense of being considered as people, often consume media messages on the bases of their psychosocial, demographic, and psychographic characteristics. The differences that exist in their psychosocial, demographic, and psychographic nature make the differences in their individuality possible which significantly negates the philosophy of uniformity in media consumption pattern or trend. The audience members' individual differences often put the media under intensified pressure in catering to their (audience members') divergent media needs and tastes if the media must survive and become relevant.

The third index for audience classification is in terms of the specific or particular type of medium or channel they are involved with. In this sense is the idea that the media of mass communication do specifically define those who form the cores of their audience base. It follows from this perspective that print media audience may be defined as being overtly literate compared to audience members for broadcast media because the print media require high literacy skills in content consumption compared to their broadcast counterparts. Different classification may also apply to audience members of new or emergent media compared to those of traditional or conventional media. It is within this domain of discourse that audience members can be defined based on the technology or innovation driving their specific media. Hence, 'netizens', 'surfers', 'netflixer', 'readers', 'viewers', etc. are few of those concepts that define audience members based on the media technology or innovation in use rather than the generic concept 'audience'.

Media audience can be classified based on the content of media messages. In this fourth classification is the idea of considering some audience members as news audience while others may be considered as entertainment audience. This perspective define audience members based on genre, subject matter, or style of media contents which strongly appeal to their preferences, tastes, and needs and which influence their habitual consumption.

In the fifth classification is the index case of audience members defined based on the consideration of time. Here, we have such classification as 'daytime', 'primetime', or 'watershed' audience. The sixth classification weighs audience members based on attention span to media contents. It is in this consideration that there is such concepts such as fleeting, ephemeral, spontaneous and short term audience in comparison with audience members that endure.

This is to say that mass media audience are defined by media contents and circumstances. They are mostly structured when there are similarities and intersections in their individualistic perceptions, interests, needs, and tastes with recourse to media offerings (McQuail, 2010). The audience are those who are directly concerned with media contents. They are structured along the line of interest. Of emphasis to note is the fact that the audience of mass media are self-willed and socially-deterministic individuals who decide their pattern of usage of media contents. What this means is that they decide what media content to consume, when and how to consume them, and by implication, twist the nature of influence the media exert on them.

The foregoing position is deeply rooted within the theoretical precincts of the **Uses and Gratifications Theory**. The proponents of this middle-range theory strongly believe that it is the audience that actively choose, select, adopt, and utilise the media and the media's content(s) that best satisfy their needs and not the other way round. Hence, the audience are considered to be need-driven because they decide which medium to turn to in satisfying their predetermined needs. Elihu Katz and Jay Blumler, in their quest to understanding media-use patterns from the audience approach through their Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), believe that the audience members are now even more active, more dynamic, less passive, less linear, and consciously or decisively dependent on the media so much that they make for themselves niche of selectivity in the consumption of media contents, not just of selective exposure but also of selective influence.

In this perspective, the theorists argued strongly that media audience do not just choose what to consume and how to consume them but seemingly measure the level of influence adduce from their consumption. So, instead of having to bother about 'what the media do to audience', the focus of the UGT is now on 'what the audience do with the media' to the extent that they attach their needs to the media for gratifications (Daramola, 2003). In this theoretical tradition, the effect paradigm is shifted from an overtly media-directional pattern to audience-directional pattern. The audience members influence what contents the media make available for public consumption by shaping media practice from the filters of their perceived needs and tastes. The media can be consciously avoided and disregarded when the audience members consider them not useful in meeting their needs or tastes. Hence, the all-powerful effects of the mass media are reduced to subliminal and minimal effect and the audience members are at the heart of such media processes and effects.

Hence, the media audience attend to media contents with selective filters which are imposed upon them by their worldviews, exposure, needs, expectations, environments, and the context in which communication occurs. Because the audience selectively filter which media contents to use and which not to, the influence of media on them is minimal, and as a consequence, selective. Baran (2004) sees the power of the **selective processes** as limiting the influence that mass media contents presumably exert on the target members of the

audience. Thus, the selective processes help the audience to 'select' what media content to consume, remember, and interpret in personally important and idiosyncratic ways (Baran, 2004).

In view of this, G.A. Steiner and Melvin DeFleur in their **Individual Differences Approach** to media use, said that individuals using the media, sometimes choose what to consume, when and how to consume them and by implication, decide the pattern of influence the content wields on them. This is as a result of certain form of variations existing in audience's general frame of reference, attitudes, beliefs, values, demographics, and psychographic characteristics.

Furthermore, the underlying issue is that the media do not all become helpless in the face of audience selective approach to media-use due to their freedom of choice to content consumption and active exposure to, as well as, wilful or need-driven consumption of media contents. Extant literatures still point to the fact that the media maintain a 'pool of influence' on the audience. The media still interfere with what people think about, believe, and treat as important in their day-to-day life (Obeagu, 2011). They do this through **agenda setting, framing, and priming** of issues of public concern as filtered by the media's **gatekeeping processes** and determined by audience's information processing pattern.

2. Agenda-Setting, Media Contents, and Audience's Media-Use Discourse

The Agenda-Setting Theory, as developed in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, explains the relationship between media coverage of a story and the extent to which the audience think or consider the story to be relevant, salient, and important as well as worthy of public attention, discussion or debate. The bottom-line underscored in the theory is that, the mass media may not be successful in influencing their audience members on what to think or reflect on, but they are stunningly successful in influencing their audience members on what to think about (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). The core assumptions of Agenda-Setting Theory are that the media do not reflect social, political or cultural reality; they act as filters thereby filtering and shaping such reality; and that the media's focus, attention, and concentration on a few issues make the audience members to perceive and adjudge those issues as more salient or important than other social, political or cultural issues within their purview (Shaw & McCombs, 1977).

On a periphery, the Agenda-Setting Theory is predominantly concerned with the power the media wield in making certain issues popular amidst intended audience's perception as well as accompanying reaction as recourse to such mediated issues. The function of the media to keep the audience informed on issues of societal relevance is underscored as a framework to mould their attitude and reaction regarding the issues. Thus, the central tenet of the theory is that to put an issue on the media agenda is to make it popular and subject of public discourse. This is synonymous to conferring status on some socially-tensive issues they consider worth the public scrutiny while downplaying or ignoring others they, in their estimation, consider not worth the public attention. Here lies the strong nexus between the emphasis or status of saliency that the mass media imposed or conferred on certain social, political or cultural issues above others and the attendant perception of saliency attached to the issues by the mass audience.

The proponents of the theory posit that there is a link between what the media consider to be crucial, salient or important and what the general public consider crucial, salient or important. By repeating, framing, and priming issues, the media attach or confer significant reference, relevance, significance, attention, and popularity to issues in a manner that make such issues appear as the most important issues on the 'dissemination', 'discussion' and 'treatment' agenda of the media. The notion is that because the audience rely, depend or trust media contents as useful cues to making informed decisions, therefore, it becomes imperative to emphasise, prime, and frame the issue in a manner that the media intend.

This, supposedly, make the audience to perceive and react to the issue as the most important, topical and salient issue over other issues offered or presented by the media. The audience members, considering the issue as the most important due to the emphasis the media place on such issue, thus frame their thought, take concerted action, and engage in public discourse in line with the mediated issue. This takes root to the extent that the audience members who tend to hold divergent views from the 'dominant' views promoted by the media which are obtainable in public sphere are threatened with isolation (Noelle-Neuman, 1991). This adds to the body of claim that the media, in a way, shape the audience's thought in line with their views in order to persuade the audience in taking desired stand on the mediated issues.

On the flip side, there is a twist to the philosophy that the media can ultimately change, shape or alter the thought patterns of audience members with recourse to the agenda set on topical issues in the society and how the audience members respond to the issues. Though the idea in Spiral of Silence still persists, there are

high level of ambiguity, heuristic gaps, gaps in practical knowledge, and methodological weakness in the theory (Snadjar, 2016) given the fact that at times, people may be willing to express divergent opinions because their ego is involved in the topic even when such topic may be declining from media or public attention. In the contrary, audience members also might avoid holding or expressing opinions on mediated topics that conflicts with their own worldviews, idiosyncrasies, perception, values, attitudes, beliefs, self-concept and orientation even when such may be the dominant media views expressed in the public sphere.

According to McCombs and Reynold (2012), Agenda Setting Theory explicatively expounds the ability or clout that the news media wields in influencing an order of saliency on public discourse. "The core idea is that the news media indicate to the public what the main issues of the day are and this is reflected in what the public perceives as the main issues" (McQuail, 2010: 512). This theoretical position seeks to establish the nexus between the order of saliency given to the media 'issues' and the order of saliency implied from the same media 'issues' by the audience members. It concerns itself with the media's power to structure issues in ways that can affect public discourse.

The study of agenda-setting explicates the manner in which the media attempt to influence members of the audience in society by establishing or entrenching a hierarchy of value in the consumption or reaction to media contents. The theory holds the view that the media still maintain their influences on audience members through selection of issues and topics. By this, the media influence what people know, think about or talk about per time. From this perspective is the insinuation that the media professional inject and transfer their values, culture, beliefs, norms, views, attitudes, and many others, to audience members in view of manipulating, persuading or cajoling them to take stand with the mediated beliefs, notions, and values which are treated as the most salient.

Media influence cannot be under-estimated even in today's age where audience are better informed and aware of issues. The media still control their dominant thoughts and influence their pattern and course of life. A good example of this is seen during elections period, the media often determine what people know about election results. This makes people stay glued to the radio and television, read newspapers and acquire large volume of information on the Internet to satisfy their curiosity. In supporting this view, Davis (2006) says that though the audience of the mass media are now better informed with measurable span of media influence on them, the media still have a place in their lives by influencing them towards making informed opinions. The media do this, by setting agenda to determine what people should know and talk about per time. The general domestic issue in the frontline of politics, religion, terrorism, culture, social values, etc., gain prominence in media scale of the agenda and people get busy talking about every item on the media list. Another strategy through which the media keep dominating and influencing the audience is through **framing** and **priming** of issues.

3. Media Framing and Audience Media-Use Discourse: Navigating from Agenda Setting to Agenda Framing

Framing suggests the way the media of mass communication attempt to influence members of the audience through news angles, news treatments, news contexts, and media ideologies which contribute significantly to the way in which the member of the audience perceive, develop, and appreciate the meanings and respond or react to issues brought to the public sphere by the mass media through news reports (Chong & Druckmann, 2007; Fourie, 2010). McCombs (1997) is of the view that the mass media frame all their news reportage by emphasising specific values, nuances, perspectives, facts, positions, worldviews, and embellishing or streamlining them with significantly straight-jacketed applicability for making related judgment. To frame is to put the news in perspective, to give it focus.

The **Framing Theory** explains how individuals rely on the media to explain and understand social realities. Framing, as a media concept, was first postulated and used by Gregory Bateson in 1972 (Hallahan, 2008). By making reference to psychological frames, he sees media frames as "spatial and temporary bounding of set of interactive messages that operates as a form of meta-communication" (Hallahan, 2008). Framing lucidly conjectures the practice of thinking about news items and story content by embellishing them within familiar context (Hallahan, 2008). It is a way the mass media present, define, and construct mass-mediated messages to the audience members with preconceived bias or sentiment. The basics of framing by mass media is to focus their beam light on certain social, political or cultural issues and consciously attempting to overlap those social, political or cultural issues within the audience members' specific field of meaning.

Framing suggests a method the media decide to present an issue in order to provoke predetermined reactions, feelings, and attitudes to the issue. According to Chuma (2007: 21) “the essence of framing is selection to prioritise some facts, images or developments over others, thereby unconsciously promoting one particular interpretation of events.” Through framing, the audience can subliminally be persuaded or influenced to perceive an issue from the media’s perspective. Buttressing this point, Chong and Druckmann (2007) maintain that framing influences audience members and contributes to the diversified manners in which the audience members invent meanings to appreciate the issues reported in the news by the media.

Batta (2019: 193) citing Burgers, Konijn and Steen (2016) concurs that “framing is an important concept that helps to explain the ways in which media content influences those who attends to them.” In the views of Burgers, Konijn and Steen (2016) cited by Batta (2019: 193), a frame consists of two elements namely:

- i. **Framing Devices:** These are visible traits in a text or particular linguistic structure such as metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images.
- ii. **Reasoning Devices:** These are less perceptible information in a text from which we can distill the problem, cause, evaluation, and/or solution. The following are three reasoning devices: roots (justification on what should be done about its casual analysis); consequences (the specific type of effects brought to bear) and appeals to principles (a set of moral claims or justification).

The critical approach in which audience members classify and respond to mediated-information is also a focus subject to the framing theory (Chapeyama, 2016). Framing is to portray an issue from one perspective and to intentionally exclude alternative perspectives to the extent that it can be accepted to have significant influence on public attitude towards important issues (Boydston, Gross, Resnik & Smith, 2013). Gamson (1989) cited in Chapeyama (2016: 16) adds that media framing is “central organising ideas for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue.” Framing influences journalism by providing perspectives to media news and information made public for audience members’ consumption. “A frame organises information in a certain manner and with the aim of presenting it as reality to audiences” (Chong & Druckmann, 2007: 106). Framing is two-ended: It connotes the schemas for building, bounding, processing, and presenting news at media end as well as schemas for comprehending or appreciating media news from the audience members’ end. Hence, it ultimately influences how the media present certain information and how the members of audience perceives those information by the media (Chong & Druckmann, 2007).

McCombs (1997: 37) suggests that, “framing is the selection of a restricted number of thematically-related attributes for inclusion on the agenda when a particular object is discussed. News media frame all news items by emphasising specific values, facts, and other considerations and endowing them with greater apparent applicability for making related judgment.” More so, to frame agenda is to embellish the agenda with certain perspectives, sentiments, angles, or nuances which seek to advance the ideals or ideologies of the message source in ways that the audience members are subliminally directed to see meanings within the frame of reference of the message source. That the media advance, advocate or resonate certain worldviews, definitions, perspectives, interpretations, sentiments, evaluations, bias and recommendations at the expense of others thereby influencing the choices that less-critical audience members make with regard to processing mediated-information to the extent of demystifying the constructed meaning is a testament of the ever-presence of framing in media contents (Raychuk, 2015).

The critical idea resonating in media framing is the presupposition that the manner in which the mass media decide to present their contents has significant impact on the manner in which the audience members respond, react, and interpret the mediated-content. Sacrosanct in this perspective is the notion of framing connoting or implying the personalised modes of presentation and content delivery that mass media workers use in offering or delivering their contents in specialised approach that interfaces with the existing underlying schemas palpable among member of the audience (Freyenberger, 2013). This is to say that the specialised approach adopted by the mass media in presenting or delivering their reports on particular media events influence the manner that audience members receive such contents as well as how they tend to understand them. It follows that from the exposure that audience members have concerning framed media messages that their perception, opinion, worldview, and perspectives are built and shaped in line with the schemas or frames imported to construct the meaning they respond or react to. Frames, embedded in media contents that audience members are made to consume, influence their perspectives on issues and how they see the world. Hence, frames are the invisible prisms embedded within media contents which tend to

influence audience members' objective meaning of the world around them. As the media as McQuail (2010) have touted to provide the window in which the audience members see the world are not without frames, then audience members' objective perception of the world is restricted to the 'objective' coverage of the world from the framing lenses of the media.

It is from the above position that Scheufele (1999) agrees that audience members attend to, interpret, and process mediated-information which are replete with tonality embedded into the media contents by media workers. This is the reason the media, in any media-use discourse, are often thought of playing critical role in the development of audience members' perceptions, assumptions, opinions, reactions, and attitudes within a social milieu. Consequently, the ferment most media effects proponents often find time to express unequivocally is that when media contents are treated or embedded with negative or positive frame, there is a suggestion that some critical aspects of the media contents have been excluded, downplayed or silenced. This ferment gives validation to Tuchman (1978) presupposition of the mass media as instruments for setting the frames of reference that members of the audience adopt, adapt to, or utilise to form the bases for interpreting and discussing public events. As the media streamline their contents to reflect certain frame of reference in exclusion of others in order to achieve preconceived objectives or intents, the audience members' appreciation and interpretation of the media content are thereby impacted upon given the pre-existing frames of reference set in place by the media.

Framing is an agenda setting device that focuses on the essence of an issue rather than particular topic. By doing so, the media give perspective to issues and pay attention to them in a way that they begin to affect how the audience think about or perceive the social reality of the issue. From here, the audience begin to carry about mediated opinions on the matter through regular occurrence of issues in the media that audience may likely think of as having continuous flow of effects. This is what is called **priming effect**.

4. Priming of 'Media-Framed' Agenda and Audience's Media-Use Dilemma

Priming effect, as popularised by Iyengar and Kinder in 1987, is a more specific aspect of agenda setting function of the media. Priming effect is basically to promote certain media evaluative parameter in an attempt to manage media contents such as news. Priming plays agenda facilitation effect. It "is a process that can be understood simply in terms of associations" (Sparks, 2013: 105). Sparks (2013: 105) lucidly describe priming as "a process whereby one thing that you think about reminds you of other things in your mind that you associate with the first thing."

The mass media are potent sources, vehicles and reservoirs of images or ideas that can aid in priming audience members' thoughts, perspectives, perceptions, worldviews, and actions (Jo & Berkowitz, 1994). In situating priming effect within the framework of analysis for this discourse, Jo and Berkowitz (1994: 45) say that when "...people witness, read, or hear of an event via the mass media, ideas having a similar meaning are activated in them for a short time afterwards, and...these thoughts in turn can activate other semantically related ideas and action tendencies." The above points to the fact that the media influence people's attitude, beliefs, values and attention to issues, even when they have the freedom to assimilate media contents.

5. Conclusion

The discourse attempted in this work justifies the claim that although audience members exercise their free will in media use, their views, beliefs, and attitudes are guided actively through agenda-setting, framing, and priming of media contents. This view finds explanation in the idea that as there diversified kinds of use of different communication media, the audience cannot be easily divested of their active participation in shaping and deciding what contents or media to turn to in meeting their individualised media needs. It follows from here that based on the variations in audience's demography and psychography, different media contents and media sources would continue to meet their different specific needs. This buttresses the fact that though the media, through agenda-setting, priming and framing functions in presenting media contents, the audience are need-driven and can only be influenced by media content depending on their extent of and need for media use.

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