**Mass Media Effect Approach**

**Poweful to Limited Effect Paradigm**

**Introduction:**

Since the late 19th century till now mass communication research has said to be evolved in many ways, but throughout this time one tradition seems to be resonating, most researches of mass media actually deals with the effect of media on audience and how and why these effects are introduced, absorbed, abetted or reinforced. The obsession of mass communication researcher with effect study is probably because media has surrounded society and individuals of society in one way or other. People consume media content in different forms from different outlets and thus it becomes a proposition for further investigation that what kind of role is media playing in our lives or otherwise what kind of role we have attributed to media. Mass communication theory has been categorized in different paradigms and some researchers have based their paradigms based on assumptions other than effect study. Though there is a disagreement among mass communication researchers about the numbers of paradigms. According to Lowery and DeFleur (1988) and Hall (1982), there are three paradigms of mass media research and they are chronologically in an order while Craig (1989) describes three paradigms existing parallel to each other.

**Powerful Effect paradigm:**

**Mass Society Theory:** Lowery and DeFleur (1988) and Hall (1982) have named their first paradigm of mass media as “mass society”. This paradigm or perspective of mass communication debates direct, powerful and unmediated effects of media. With the advent of industrialized and urbanized mass society, newspaper, films, then radio and later television and specifically after First World War the rise of totalitarian propaganda and its success led people to believe that mass media has all the corrupting effects on society. These effects were explained in three domains: cultural effect resulting in the debasement and corruption of cultural values, political effects talking about the propaganda and its influence on the masses, and lastly social effects breaking down the social ties between members of society (Hall, 1982).

This whole idea of strong media effects is sometime linked to transmission model of mass communication proposed by Claude Shannon and Weaver (1949) which speaks of direct effects once message is transmitted to the receivers.

**Magic Bullet Theory:** Major theories of this paradigm coming out of grand mass society theory are magic bullet theory and Propaganda model. It is difficult to credit magic bullet theory to one theorist or researcher, this theory was simplistic propaganda model according to which message of media reaches to the target and creates immediate and obvious strong effects.

**Lasswell Propaganda Theory:** Harold Lasswell (1930, 1935) presented simple propaganda model based on behaviorism and Freudianism. He furthered magic bullet theory by saying: a communicator can get the desired effect of message only if he attaches certain symbols with those ideas and emotions to be invoked and people are exposed to those symbols for a long time and in this way ideas are cultivated and become “Master symbols”. Once people are conditioned to these master symbols can be motivated to action. His propaganda model showed disbelief in common people’s intelligence and proposed the idea of “scientific technocracy” elites who would control mass media. According to Lasswell’s new science of propaganda elite social scientists would manipulate the minds of people for the constructive and democratic purposes.

**Public Opinion Formation Theory:** Walter Lippman (1922) also shared the idea of Lasswell’s “scientific technocracy” in his book public opinion and without pronouncing paved the idea of gate keeping on the hands of few elites. He was of the view that “the world outside and the pictures in our heads” were in contrast to each other for common people and media has further aggravated this situation by putting the vulnerable minds to propaganda. He also suggested the control of media in the hand of scientific elites who can distribute only relevant and appropriate information for decision making process of governance.

**Paradigm Shift:**

Thomas Kuhn (1970), who was a scientist, introduced and defined paradigms in the history of scientific research as “the entire global set of commitments shared by the members of a particular scientific community”. He explained that some set of theories having the same kind of notions start governing and guiding the researchers and theorists of that time. This theoretical perspective in research becomes the dominant paradigm of that time but then some new theories emerge and challenge the existing set of knowledge. Researcher of that dominant paradigm explore the findings in their data which are inconsistent with that existing perspective or paradigm and thus paradigm shift occur in the research of that particular field or subject.

**Limited effect paradigm:**

This perspective of powerful media effect was not based on scientific and empirical research instead many events confirmed the notions of this perspective and mass society theory. War of the Worlds, a radio program, also became an evident example for the supporters of mass society (Baran & Davis, 2012). Orson Welles broadcast a Halloween joke in his radio show, using the novel War of the Worlds of H.G. Wells. His regular program was interrupted by news and announcement of invasion from Mars on earth. It was a radio drama all fictionalized but people fearful of this whole program thinking it as real fled their homes in panic. The proponents of powerful media effect argued that if a single radio program can induce panic among people then definitely the influence of propaganda and persuasive campaigns cannot be denied. But later research proved otherwise, radio program did not have powerful influence on people instead word of mouth play significant role, most of the people sensed through judgment that it was a drama and people who panicked in this whole situation they were actually more prone to show extreme behaviors due to certain psychological characteristics (Cantril, Gaudet, and Herzog, 1940). This research heralded a new era in the mass communication research in which different researchers tried to verify and test the mass society assumptions, it changed the notions of media influence on society and individuals and ultimately concept of minimal or limited media effects emerged in place of direct effect paradigm. The people who brought this paradigm shift in mass communication; they were inspired by empirical and controlled experimental methodologies of physical sciences and brought surveys, interview methods and many experimental design in the research of mass media and this how limited effect perspective was designed on these parameters.

**Two Step Flow of Information theory:** Most important and groundbreaking work in this regard was two step flow of information theory (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944). Lazarsfeld analyzed voting patterns of people in American county during presidential elections of 1940. He and his team selected 600 panelists out of 3000 participants through personal interviews and then these 600 were interviewed every month before election in order to gauge the relation between media consumption and change in voting decision. According to powerful and direct effect paradigm, media must have played a vital role in voting patterns and people who were consuming media content must have altered their choice of candidate after exposing to persuasive speeches by presidential candidates. Lazarsfeld's findings were contrary to this. He divided his respondents into four categories: i) *early deciders* (who decided for a candidate in the start and never changed their choice), ii) *waverers* (who decided for one candidate, changed their decision but ultimately cast their vote to their earlier choice), iii) *convert* (chose a candidate but finally voted for other candidate), and iv) *crystallizers* (did not opt for any candidate in the beginning but finally made their choice near the election time). In his data, early deciders and crystallizers were larger in percentage 53 and 28% respectively while waverers and converts were only 15 and 18%. Patterns of media consumption also varied, heavy users of media were mostly early deciders and thus Lazersfeld concluded that media actually did not affect people to change their decisions, it merely reinforced what they were already thinking. Those who changed their decisions they were influenced more by the opinion of other people. Early deciders/ heavy media users utilized only that part of media content, which was resonant to their ideas and conveyed it to others helping them formulate their opinions as well. He termed these deciders/ heavy media users as “*opinion leaders*” and “*opinion followers*” to those who took advice from these leaders.

Later Lazarsfeld and Katz (1955) used another research data about women's choices of movies, fashion, politics and wrote a book “*Personal Influence*” in which they dismissed the notions of strong and direct media effect. Rather they consolidated two step flow of information theory and reported that in society opinion leaders are at every level and they influenced other people with their opinions but this influence was horizontal as followers were of the same social and economic status as leaders.

Two step flow of information theory invalidated the assumption of mass society and propaganda theories that media has direct and powerful influence on the minds of people thus altering their notions about social world, it also disproved the idea of the vulnerability of common people to media as they are isolated in these mass society. According to this theory, people were taking advice from opinion leaders, which is possible only if they are connected to them in a way.

**Attitude Change Theories:** Lazarsfeld introduced mediating variable of opinion leaders in overly simple and direct flow of communication. But after his research on war propaganda, Carl Hovland proposed more intervening variables which come into play between communicator and receiver. Hovland was a psychologist in Information and Education Division’s research branch of American army. His task was to analyze the effectiveness of movies and films of Information and Education Division in terms of their persuasive value for the soldiers. For this purpose experiments on the soldiers were conducted using the films like “Why we fight” made by Hollywood Frank Kapra. In his experiments, Hovland not only looked into the effects of these films on the soldiers but he closely looked into different elements of the content in these films as well.

According to mass society and propaganda theory, soldiers must have greater impact of these films as they were isolated from their families and thus more vulnerable to propaganda. Hovland and his researchers found the same results as of Lazarsfeld, that these propaganda films were not effective and powerful. They did not bring any change in attitudes except reinforcement of previously held notion. If any change was made possible through these films, it was after some time passed (Hoveland, Lumsdaine & Sheffield, 1949). Time was now added as intervening factor between source and effects on receiver for attitude change. Propaganda theories have demonstrated that in propaganda only one sided view must be more effective but Hovland refuted it as in his research for any controversial issue when people were exposed to both or multiple sides, the attitude change was more obvious.

Another factor introduced by Hovland was the credibility of source in the mind of receiver. People accepted the ideas from trustworthy sources and attitude change was made possible. When message was communicated through unreliable source then its effect were reduced and there was no attitude change. As days passed and people forgot about the source, they showed positive attitude for the same message, this delayed effect was called *sleeper effect* (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). This effect vanished as soon as unreliable source was restored in their minds (Kelman &Hovland 1953).

Hovland and his associates tested and verified another set of intervening variable in attitude change and they referred them as *individual difference.* These are the personal traits of individuals, which make them either more prone or reluctant to any change, intelligence, educational background, temper level and social standing were among different characteristics tested by Hovland and his team (Hovland, Janis & Kelly, 1953).

Among attitude change theories **cognitive dissonance theory** is another one, which refuted the idea of mass society theory that media can change the views of people about the world they are living in. According to this theory, dissonance is psychologically uncomfortable state of mind that will create discomfort. In order to achieve consonance people will avoid information and situations that might increase the dissonance and are in contrast to their ideas (Festinger, 1957). So, people decide according to their beliefs what they want to see and what not, this ideas was furthered in the discussion of selective processes. Researchers discussed three types of selectivity. Selective exposure is that people see media content consistent with their ideologies and avoid content that is dissonant. Selective retention is that people retain only that information in their mind which they like to and feel comfortable with. Selective perception is that while reconstructing or recalling any information people perceive things in order to fit them in their beliefs (Klapper, 1960).

**Phenomenistic Theory:** As Hovland introduced many intervening factors, Klapper also talked about intervening factors like family, school, church. According to him media does not act as a sole reason of change in people but actually media works in connection to these intervening factors to reinforce the existing beliefs, that is why this theory is called reinforcement theory as well (Klapper, 1960). This theory was an example of middle range theory, these theories helped in consolidating the limited effect paradigm. Middle range theories were specific in their approach, methodology and even focused on only specific aspects in term of their findings (Merton, 1967).

**Information Flow Theory:** Some researchers studied the flow of information and analyzed how news was learned rather than investigating attitude change. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of news, some researchers studied how quickly news is transmitted to masses (Funkhouser & McCombs, 1971). Barriers in transmission of the news were also focused, even hard news and soft news were separated to see how people learned them. Results showed that people remembered soft news more easily than the hard news (Davis, 1990; Greenberg and Parker, 1965). It was also noticed that with the motivation of getting any reward people did got the information and passed it on to others but still most of the people did not remember the accurate messages ((DeFleur and Larsen, 1958). This theory being a middle range theory also served the purpose of limited effect paradigm demonstrating that media cannot have powerful effect of the intended message is not reached to the target audience. This theory furthered the idea of Lazarafeld's opinion leaders who are elites with information and they must disseminate information to rest of the people.

**Diffusion of Innovation Theory:** Everett Rogers (1962) used the findings of information flow theory and developed diffusion of innovation theory. Rogers combined data from different empirical studies and concluded that any new idea, technology, practice or any object can become widely popular. It can be accepted after information about them passes through many stages thus it was an extension in two step flow of information theory. Once a new thing is introduced, its information is passed on to *innovators* from mass media. This information is passed on to next stage where small group of people adopt it, these are *early adopters*. After opinion leaders pass on the information to the opinion followers, then next level is *early majority* who adopt that innovation. Then comes late majority who is doubtful about that innovation in the start but finally adopt it. Lastly, laggards are the last to adopt any innovation. This whole process with all of its stages does not happen simultaneously but it takes time to penetrate innovation as far as laggards that is why Rogers developed a S-curve to explain these stages. This middle range theory also attributes limited power to media as media informs only small number of innovators, rest of the population is informed and influenced by opinion leaders.

Information flow and diffusion of innovation theories are source dominated theory as they talk about the perspective of elite class (Baran & Davis, 2012).

**Elite Pluralism:** This theory of limited effect also state that media has minimal effect in changing any system particularly politics. Data collected during the 1948 elections by Lazarsfeld and his associates strengthened the role of opinion leader but the inconsistencies of the data showed opposite to tenet of classical democracy theory that every citizen must be well informed then only democracy can prevail (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954). Lazarsfeld explained these inconsistencies as a positive sign for democracy and propounded that average people do not need to know everything and their voting decisions must be regulated by opinion leaders rather than the media. The same ideas were formulated by V.O. Key (1961) in which he proposed the idea of new political system with the merger of different elite groups. These elite groups are made up of different opinion leaders and average people will be influenced by them rather than directly from media so it also negated the direct effects of media.

**Functional Analysis:** Merton (1967) introduced the functional analysis approach in mass media that borrowed from the researches in sociology. Merton sees the society as a whole system in which interrelated and interconnected activities are playing their roles and maintaining the balance of system. According to Merton, society cannot be termed as good or evil rather every part of the system can be either *functional* or *dysfunctional.* In the same way, media and its effects cannot be labeled as negative as supported by mass society theory. Media can perform both functional and dysfunctional roles as in media content manifest messages are functional while latent messages may have dysfunctional role. As far as functionality of media is overpowering, media does not have negative effect so Merton in his functional analysis nullified the notion of negative media effects.

**Mass Entertainment Theory:** This theory also rejects the negative impact of media by implying that supporters of mass society were unreasonable. It adds entertainment to the functions of media. According to this theory, media did not debase high culture, instead it gave people relaxation and escape from the grave situation of real life so that they can renew their energies and then return to the routine activities of their life (Mendelsohn, 1966). So media does not have any negative effect. If some people may get negative influence then they can be addicted to any other thing, if media is not available to them so they are prone to addiction because of their tendencies.

**Conclusion:**

Some very prominent researches of this new limited effect paradigm has reversed the fundamental assumptions of powerful effect paradigm specifically uni-directional and direct flow of information, belief in the fact that same message is received as it was disseminated. Negative and threatening effects of media were challenged and overturned. New paradigm has its own supporters, who have researched with various political, social, commercial, and cultural agendas. But this is also the fact that these two paradigms both follow the same tradition of studying media effects so actually both the paradigms are two different sides of a coin.

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