

Media Dependency Theory

Alissa M. Monroe

Bethel University

In this day and age, media is inevitably something that is a part of and greatly affects our lives. Being the main means of mass communication, whether it be through television, published works, or the internet, people are able to connect with others and share or gain information, thus making media even a necessity that fulfills our needs. Being something that fulfills needs, the degree that media is important to a person can vary depending on that person's needs. Media Dependency Theory explores this relationship between a person's dependency on media for need fulfillment and the degree that media is important to that person. In addition to introducing this theory, other topics concerning the theory that will be discussed include the justifications for choosing this theory, further explanation, application to a modern scenario, a discussion on importance, and finally a Christian reflection on the theory.

Justification

The main reason I chose this theory is because media is something that I am very passionate about. While I see the consequences and negative effects it can bring about, I also see something very beautiful and powerful about it. Media has the power to connect people and ideas with others across the globe easily - something that is not possible without it. I also recognize the necessity and importance of media in our day and age. As this theory explains the importance of media to a person in relation to their dependency on media, upon encountering it, I felt that I had to dive deeper into it. Being a person that depends on media to fulfill my own needs, whether it be for my studies or personal satisfaction, it was intriguing to me that I can research this relationship I have with media myself. Furthermore, I believe recognizing how important media is to you is an important step in lessening the control that the negative effects of media can have over our lives. That being said, overall, I see this theory to be one that can be very beneficial to anyone, as we all depend on media to some degree in our lives.

Explanation

Media Dependency Theory was proposed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur in 1976. In their research, they came up with “a dependency model of mass-media effects”, and this model is presented as follows (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976):

The dependency model of media effects is presented as a theoretical alternative in which the nature of the tripartite audience-media-society relationship is assumed to most directly determine many of the effects that the media have on people and society. (p. 3)

Furthermore, Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) stated that their focus was on audience dependency on media resources as a condition for the changing of audience beliefs, behaviors, and feelings as a result of information that was mass communicated.

Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur’s research started with the question, “Do mass communications have widespread effects on individuals and society or do they have relatively little influence?” (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 3). Ultimately, they do believe that there are observable effects that mass communication has on individuals, groups, and society, and as stated above, their research focuses on the dependency of audiences on such media (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). When all is put together, the theory asserts that the more dependent a person is on media for having his or her needs fulfilled, the more important that media will be to that person. This proves that the relationship between a person’s dependency on media for need fulfillment and the degree that media is important to that person is a positive relationship; higher dependency means higher degree of importance.

Assumptions

Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur’s research presents four main assumptions that come from the theory. The first assumption is that dependency on media information resources is a prevalent

condition in modern society (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). In other words, there are many ways in which a person is dependent on media to gain information pertaining to his or her needs. This condition can be observed in many settings, “ranging from the need to find the best buys at the supermarket to more general or pervasive needs such as obtaining the kinds of information that will help to maintain a sense of connectedness and familiarity with the social world outside one’s neighborhood” (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 6).

The second assumption is that the greater the need and stronger the dependency, “the greater the likelihood that the information supplied will alter various forms of audience cognitions, feelings, and behavior” (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p.6). This means that the more dependent a person is on media, the more media is able to influence that person through the information they gain. For instance, many people depend on media information to find deals on certain things they want to buy. When a person finds the information they were looking for, say a half-off deal on kitchen supplies or a summer sale going on at his or her favorite store, that information will motivate them to take certain actions, namely purchasing those items. This information that media provides on such deals will also evoke feeling of excitement and happiness. In such ways, the information provided through media can influence a person when they are dependent on media to gain that information.

The third assumption is that certain “media information functions” are “more essential than others for societal and individual well-being” (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p.6). This just means that certain sources of media can benefit one person while perhaps not another. To further explain in the words of Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, some functions are more socially central than others, and this centrality can vary over “time, situation, and unit of analysis” (1976, p.6). They also give this example (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976):

Providing national sports coverage to politically active groups is probably a less central function than providing them with information about national economic or political decisions that strongly affect their lives, while the reverse may hold for politically apathetic groups. (p.7)

This is to show that people depend on certain kinds of media sources to meet their needs and that each person differs in what he or she relies on to gain information. This is also a concept that is applied socially, as demonstrated in the example, enabling one to think of this theory in terms of groups as well as in terms of the individual.

The fourth assumption is that dependency is heightened by three types of needs: the need to understand the world, the need to act meaningfully, and the need to escape (Yang, Ha, Wang, & Abuljadail, 2015). Because of these needs, people are motivated to gain information pertaining to these needs, and in order to gain information, people reach out to media, thus increasing dependency. Furthermore, such needs become more prevalent in times of societal change and conflict (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

Concepts

The tripartite relationship between society, media, and audiences. There is a tripartite relationship between media, audience, and society, and this tripartite relationship is the foundational relationship from which dependency relations are made (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Maxian, 2014). Within each section, there are certain things that vary. In societal systems, the “degree of structural stability varies”; in media systems, the “number and centrality of information functions varies”; in audiences, the “degree of dependency on media information varies” (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 8). Additionally, under audiences, there are three conditions that can be affected – cognitive, affective, and behavioral – and it is the altering of

these conditions that can “feed back in turn to alter both society and the media” (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 7-8).

Cognitive effects. There are five cognitive alteration effects that need to be considered. The first effect is the “creation and resolution of ambiguity” (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 9). The second effect is “attitude formation,” and the third focuses on the media’s role in “agenda-setting” (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 10-11). Another effect would be “the expansion of peoples’ systems of beliefs,” and the final effect is media’s impact on “values” (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 12-13).

Affective effects. This pertains to the impact media messages have on an audience’s feelings and emotions (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Areas where alteration can happen within this category include “fear, anxiety, and trigger-happiness”, and “morale and alienation” (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 15).

Behavioral effects. This pertains to overt, or open, action (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). The effects of media messages on behavior that Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur (1976) discussed are “activation” and “deactivation.” Activation refers to instances where audience members do things that they would not do otherwise because of the media messages they receive (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Deactivation refers to instances where audience members do not do things they would have done otherwise due to the media messages they receive (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

How the Theory Works

According to this theory, people are likely to depend more on media as long as media can meet their demands, thus enabling media systems to exert more influence and have power over the individual; this exposure to media also shapes people’s subjective realities (Yang et al., 2015;

Maxian, 2014; Hutchinson, 2013). People depend on media to satisfy needs, such as the needs mentioned in the fourth assumption above, and as media satisfies such needs, dependency can increase. As dependency increases, the degree of importance a person holds toward media increases as well, and as the degree of importance increases, so does the power and influence media holds over people. And ultimately, a person's reality is shaped by the way they are exposed to and influenced by media, as the second assumption stated above asserts that such dependency on media brings about certain effects, specifically cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects.

Other Researchers Who Have Used This Theory

Other researchers who have used this theory include Wendy Maxian, Liu Yang, Louisa Ha, Fang Wang, Mohammad Abuljadail, Debra L. Merskin, and Mara Huberlie. Maxian (2014) used this theory to explore the emotional components of media power, mobile ICTs, and their potential to alter individual-media dependency relations. Yang, Ha, Wang, and Abuljadail (2015) used this theory to compare media dependency perspectives of young and older people. Specifically, they examined three media dependencies, which were “dependencies of Internet, social media, and mobile phones” (Yang et al., 2015, p. 278). Merskin and Huberlie (1996) used this theory to explore the effects of personal advertisements placed in daily newspapers, particularly the advertisements for romantic partners.

Description

For a portrayal of this theory, let us consider a college student named John. Currently, John is a sophomore Computer Science major and Media Productions minor in Seattle, who quite often uses his computer for homework. In fact, most of his homework requires him to use the internet. For example, a lot of the coding work he must do requires him to obtain certain

skills from shared sources on the web, such as the Java API website. He is also taking a communications class that requires him to do research on and offline. And when John is not doing his homework, he likes to spend his free time watching television. He finds this to be the best way for him to destress.

It must also be mentioned that John is originally from Korea and moved to Seattle for college only two years ago. Because his family is still in Korea, the only way he can keep up with them and how Korea is doing in general is through social media and news articles. John feels the need to stay connected to his home, but because he is only able to visit home once a year, if at all, he must turn to media in order to do so.

Application

As described above, it is clear that John has certain needs, namely the need to complete his homework, to destress, and to stay connected with his family and home country. To fulfill these needs, John depends on media. In fact, one could say John has a rather high dependence on media, as his needs are very important for him to fulfill. Therefore, as Media Dependency Theory asserts, because John is highly dependent on media, media is very important to him. And as media is able to meet John's needs and demands, he becomes more and more dependent on media, thus making media even more important for him.

Media Dependency Theory also asserts that as the level of importance of media increases due to an increase in dependence on media, so does the power and influence media has over people. This means that because John is highly dependent on media, he is highly influenced by media and media holds power over him. Without access to media, John is likely to become highly stressed for not being able to use media to destress and for not being able to complete his homework. Not being able to contact family can also make him depressed, and not having access

to information regarding Korea will make him uninformed of the things going on in his own country. There is so much that John cannot do without media, and not being able to do these things can affect John in many ways. This provides a clear depiction of the power that media holds over John. The fact that John has access to media and is able to fulfill his needs makes him the happy, productive, and informed person that he is. This proves the great influence that media has on John. Furthermore, John's reality is shaped by the media he is exposed to. The things he sees on television and the internet, hears from his family, and learns about Korea all make up his reality, because that becomes what he knows. This is another way media is able to influence and hold power over John.

Importance

Media Dependency Theory is a theory that is relevant to all people, as all people are affected by media and depend on media to some degree. Researching this theory can help people recognize how they are affected by media, how dependent they are on media, and how important media is to them. In recognizing these things, one could possibly lessen the power media holds over them, as being conscious of such things is the first step in lessening one's dependence on media and therefore the power held over them by media. The point is that through this theory, one can be made aware of the effects media has on them, and thus take the necessary steps to reduce dependence depending on how bad such effects can be.

It is also important to note that we are raising a generation that is highly dependent on media, as many young people depend on it. With anything that people are highly dependent on as a society, I believe it is necessary to understand the effects such things can have on people and to understand the positive and negative aspects of these things. Studying this theory can help us

reflect on the benefits and problems of high media dependence, and therefore even help us avoid the potential dangers and problems that come with it.

Christian Reflection

From a Christian perspective, media can be useful and even good, as it enables people to spread and further the gospel. It also gives people instant access to the Bible anywhere at any time, to Christian resources published by other people, and to Christian communities online. Christians use media as a way to communicate with each other and to the rest of the world as well. However, media can also be a distraction in many ways. Among other things, focusing on the use of media for sermons, presentations, or lessons can be distracting for listeners and the speaker. Media unrelated to the Bible and God can also tempt us to pay attention to those things instead.

What this theory can do for Christians (and why it is therefore effective for Christians) is help in reflecting on the control that media has over us. As stated above in explaining the importance of this theory, this theory can help us to take the necessary actions to lessen the power and influence media has over us, especially when we recognize the negative effects of media. The first step is to be aware of things, such as how dependent we are on media in comparison to God and how media distracts us from God. Once we are aware, we can learn how to not be distracted and depend more on God instead; we can learn how to not let media negatively affect us and have control over our lives. This theory provides a good starting place for all Christians in this process and provides a great way for us to reflect on ourselves in relation to media.

Conclusion

Media is something that is very evident and inevitable in our lives, and it is clear that we are dependent on it, though our degree of dependence may differ. Media Dependency Theory thus holds that the more dependent a person is on media to satisfy their needs, the more important media is to him or her, and the more likely media is able to cause influence. The research of Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur explores this theory, and as part of their research they outline the tripartite relationship between society, media, and audience, and explain the three types of effects that such dependency brings about. Overall, this is a theory that ultimately applies to every human being, thus making it one very much worth to examine and important as well.

References

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