

## **FUNCTIONS AND DYSFUNCTIONS OF MASS COMMUNICATION MEDIA**

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### **Abstract**

Mass communication provides a way of interacting, distantly, with unknown audiences. It is the process of sharing experience in which a huge number of people are involved simultaneously, or almost so. It often occurs through the use of mass media channels and technology. The mass media are all around us. To live even one day without mass communication would be impossible for most people. And yet many of us know little of how the media work and how they influence our lives positively and negatively. Accordingly, this paper x-rays the six assigned duties or activities of mass communication and shows that they may be viewed from a functional-dysfunctional perspective.

### **Introduction**

For a society to exist, certain communication needs must be met. These needs existed long before Johan Gutenberg, the German credited with the invention of printing, bolted together his printing press, and Morse started sending dots and dashes.

Primitive tribes had sentinels who scanned the environment and reported dangers. Councils of elders interpreted facts and made decisions. Tribal meetings were used to transmit these decisions to the rest of the group. Story tellers and jesters entertained the group. As society became larger and more complex, these jobs grew too big to be handled by single individuals.

Throughout the following discussion, we will examine the consequences of performing these communication functions by means of mass communication as opposed to interpersonal communication. Furthermore, there are instances where these consequences are undesirable from the point of view of the welfare of the society. Dominick (2002) observes that these harmful or negative consequences are called dysfunctions.

To Berger (1995), mass communication is the transfer of messages, information, texts and the like from a sender of some kind to a large number of people, a mass audience. He adds that this transfer is done through the technologies of the mass media newspapers, magazines, radio and television programmes, films, records, computer networks, CD-Rom, and so on. According to the author, the sender often is a person in some large media organization, the messages are public, and the audience tends to be large and varied.

We need our morning newspaper, radio, television, movies and records. Without these, life would be drastically different and for most of us, extremely difficult. Devito (1991) observes that these media help create the personal reality for many people and influence the reality of everyone. According to him, they influence us in complex and often subtle ways. He stresses that in fact, the media are always influencing us our views of relationships and our images of success, as well as those things that should demand our attention and interest.

### **Conceptual Clarifications: Mass Communication and Media**

According to Littlejohn and Foss (2005), mass communication is the process whereby media organizations produce and transmit messages to large publics and the process by which those messages are sought, used, understood and influenced by audiences.

To Baran (2002), mass communication is the process of creating shared meaning between the mass media and their audiences. Similarly, Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth and Harter (2003) say mass communication is communication mediated via a transmission system, between a source and a large number of unseen receivers.

Essentially, says Bittner (1989), mass communication is messages communicated through a mass medium to a large number of people. He explains that mass communication evolved from the fundamental process of human communication people exchanging messages through verbal and written symbols. He adds that technology has increased the efficiency of mass communication so that today, the process can send messages around the world and into space.

However, the emergence of the computer and the Internet as communications media has complicated the characteristics that typify mass communication. As Dominick (2002) notes, one person can become a mass communicator, thanks to the World Wide Web. Until the advent of the Internet and the Web, the source in the traditional mass communication situation was typically a group of individuals who acted in predetermined roles in an organizational setting. Furthermore, the availability of light weight, portable, inexpensive video equipment makes it possible for an individual to profitably produce and distribute videos to a quite small number of viewers. Thus, as Baran and Davis (2006) emphasise, the mass communication environment is changing.

### **Media**

Dominick (2002) remarks that in the broadest sense of the word, a medium is the channel through which a message travels from the sender to the receiver ("medium" is singular; "media" is plural). He explains that when we talk about mass communication, we need channels to carry the message.

Indeed, central to any study of mass communication are the media. Media organizations distribute messages that affect and reflect the cultures of society and they provide information simultaneously to large heterogeneous audiences, making media part of society's institutional forces, according to Littlejohn and Foss (2005).

"Media", of course, imply "mediation" because they come between the audience and the world. Several metaphors have been

suggested to capture this idea: Media are *windows* that enable us to see beyond our immediate surroundings, *interpreters* that help us make sense of experiences, *platforms* or *carriers* that convey information, *interactive communication* that includes audience feedback, *signposts* that provide us with instructions and directions, *filters* that screen out parts of experience and focus on others, *mirrors* that reflect ourselves back to us, and *barriers* that block the truth.

### Theoretical Framework

To place the discourse in a proper perspective, we shall anchor this paper on the functional approach, which Dominick (2002) says emphasizes the way that audiences use mass communication and the benefits people receive from media consumption. It is one of the models used to examine the media to describe the relationships among media, society and individuals.

In its simplest form, the functional approach holds that something is best understood by scrutinising how it is used. In mass communication, this means analysing the use that audiences make of their interactions with the media. According to Dominick (2002), the functional approach has several advantages:

- It provides us with a perspective from which to examine mass communication.
- It generates concepts that are helpful in understanding media behaviour.
- It makes us aware of the diversity of gratifications provided by the media.

Baran and Davis (2006) note that this functional analysis was widely adopted as a rationale for many mass communication studies during the 1950s and 1960s. Researchers tried to determine whether specific media or forms of media content were functional or dysfunctional.

Additionally, we can distinguish *manifest* functions those consequences that are intended or readily observed and *latent* functions those that are unintended and less easily observed.

This analysis takes a sociological perspective by looking through a wide-angle lens to consider the functions performed by the mass media for the entire society, the macro analysis approach.

### Mass Communication Media: Functions and Dysfunctions

The popularity and pervasive influence of the media of mass communication can be maintained only by their serving a variety of significant/functions. Below, six most important functions, and their dysfunctions, are discussed.

#### 1. To provide surveillance of the environment

According to Baran and Davis (2006), this refers to the media's collection and distribution of information. We know who was elected the governor of Borno state in the 2007 general elections because it was in the newspaper, over the radio and on television and we know whether to wear a sweater to school because the radio weather forecaster said that it would be chilly today. Similarly, Dominick (2002) says surveillance of the environment refers to what we popularly call the news and information role of the media. The media have taken the place of sentinels and lookouts.

The surveillance function can be divided further into two main types. *Warning*, or *beware*, surveillance occurs when the media inform us about threats from hurricanes, erupting volcanoes, depressed economic conditions, increasing inflation or military attack. These warnings can be about immediate threats (a television station interrupts programming to broadcast a tornado warning), or they can be about long-term or chronic threats (a newspaper runs a series about air pollution or unemployment). However, there is much information that is not particularly threatening to society that people might like to know about. *Instrumental* surveillance has to do with the transmission of information that is useful and helpful in

everyday life. News about films playing at the local theatres, stock market prices, new products, fashion ideas and teen fads are examples of instrumental surveillance.

Thus, people use mass communication to keep in touch with what is going on in society, to make sure they are not surprised by something that might be important to them. Berger (1995) remarks that the term "surveillance" suggests an element of anxiety that pushes people to be attentive to what is going on around them. The more alienated we feel, the more separated we feel from others (in large metropolitan areas this happens a great deal); the more dangerous we feel society is, the more we rely on the surveillance function of mass communication. Rabi (2007) observes that man does not live on bread alone. His other necessity is communication. In this connection, mass communication performs an explanatory function to the society. It is into exposition. Furthermore, Schramm and Roberts (1971) note that people follow the news to be sensitised to available opportunities and to be forewarned about possible dangers ahead. As a result, mass communication tries to satisfy these curiosities among people.

A consequence of relying on the media to perform this surveillance function is that news travels much faster, especially since the advent of the electronic media. A second consequence is a bit more subtle. In prehistoric times, if war broke out, it was fairly simple for people to find out about it: A stranger would appear and belt you with a club. The world of early men and women was small and easily surveyed. All of it was within the range of their eyesight, and seldom did it extend over the next hill. Today, thanks to the mass media, there aren't any more hills. Our world now extends well-beyond our eyesight, and we can no longer observe all of it directly. The media relay news from environments beyond our immediate senses that we cannot easily verify.

Much of what we know about the world is machine-processed, hand-me-down information. News is prescreened for us by a complex arrangement of reporters and editors, and our conception of reality is based on this second generation information,

whose authenticity we do not usually question. For example, human beings have allegedly walked on the moon. Millions saw it on television. Not many saw it in person. Instead, we took the words of the television networks that what we were seeing was fact, not fiction. However, according to Dominick (2002), some Americans felt that television staged the whole thing somewhere in Arizona as part of the massive, government-inspired publicity stunt. The author adds that the same phenomenon occurred in 1997 with the Pathfinder landing on Mars. There were still some people who thought the pictures received from Mars were fake.

The point is this: in today's world, with its sophisticated system of mass communication, we are highly dependent on others for news. Consequently, we have to put a certain amount of trust in the media that do our surveillance. This trust, called credibility, is an important factor in determining which news medium people find the most believable. The widespread use of the Internet for news does not change this basic idea. The stories posted on Cnn.com or other websites devoted to news have been screened by several reporters and editors. Some websites that purport to present news, such as the Drudge Report, may not have a layer of editors, a circumstance that may affect the credibility of the information on that site. Whether the news is filtered or unfiltered, we still have to decide how much faith we invest in the media to provide it.

On the dysfunctional side, media surveillance can create unnecessary anxiety. Consider the tumult that surrounded the Y2K bug that was supposed to turn computers haywire at the beginning of the new millennium (Year 2000). The media carried many stories about what might happen: air planes flying without radar, banks losing records of customers' deposits, power failures and generation disruption. Many so-called experts urged people to stock pile food to weather the chaos and apparently, some people followed their advice. In the tail end of 1999, president Obasanjo's government even spent time, talents and terrific funds to address the impending doom. Of course, the scare was bogus. The year, 2000, began without any disruption in cyberspace.

The fact that certain individuals or issues receive media attention means that they achieve a certain amount of prominence. Sociologists call this process *status conferral*. At the basis of this phenomenon is a rather circular belief that audiences seem to endorse. The audience evidently believes that if you really matter, you will be at the focus of mass media attention, and if you are the focus of media attention, then you really matter. Knowing this fact, many individuals and groups go to extreme measures to get media coverage for themselves and their causes so that this status-conferral effect will occur. Parades, demonstrations, publicity stunts and outlandish behaviour are commonly employed to capture airtime on radio/television or column inches in newspapers/magazines.

Devito (1991) observes that a citizen's personal list of the hundred most important persons in the world would almost certainly consist of people to whom the media give a great deal of exposure. Without such exposure, the people would not in fact be important at least, not in the popular mind. If people are at the focus of mass attention, then surely they must really matter. Conversely, of course, if people do not get mass attention through the mass media, then they do not matter.

Media's conferral of status is functional if those who gain status prove deserving and socially productive. It is dysfunctional if they prove undeserving and socially unproductive. Note, for example, that those who get the most media coverage are, for the most part, sports stars and film and television actors. By giving these people extensive coverage, the media tell us they really matter. Scientists and educators, for example, get much less media coverage. According to Devito (1991), the conferral of status is frequently dysfunctional, in its present mode of operation.

## 2. To give interpretation

Closely allied with the surveillance function, according to Dominick (2002), is the interpretation function. The mass media do not supply just facts and data. They also provide information on the ultimate

meaning and significance of those events. Berger (1995) describes this function as *integration and correlation*. He explains that the media, in this function, help people to organize and try to make sense of what they learn through mass communication. If surveillance gives us data, integration and correlation help us to read into these data and to connect them to our interests and everyday lives. Some of this organization is done by the people who operate the mass media, and some of it is done by individuals, who are selectively attentive; that is, people generally focus their attention on topics that interest them and neglect a great deal of other information.

One form of interpretation is so obvious that many people overlook it. Not everything that happens in the world on any given day can be included in the newspaper or in a television or radio newscast. Media organizations select those events that are to be given time or space and decide how much prominence they are to be given. Stories that ultimately make it into the paper, the newscast, or a media organization's website have been judged by the various gatekeepers involved to be more important than those that didn't make it.

Another example of this function can be found on the editorial pages of a newspaper. Interpretation, comment and opinion are provided for the reader, so that he or she gains an added perspective on the news stories carried on other pages. A newspaper might endorse one candidate for public office over another, thereby indicating that at least in the newspaper's opinion, the available information indicates that this individual is more qualified than the other.

Interpretation is not confined to editorials. Articles that analyse the causes of an event or that discuss the implications of government policy are also examples of the interpretation function. Radio and television also carry programmes or segments of programmes that fall under this heading. A radio commentary or a television documentary is an example. When the president broadcasts a major political address, network correspondents



usually appear afterward to tell us what the president “really said”. After the Supreme Court's pronouncement regarding the disputed 2007 governorship election in Rivers state (which dethroned Chief Celestine Umeihia and enthroned Chief Rotimi Amaechi), various legal experts interpreted, in the media, what the decision really meant.

Interpretation can take various forms. Editorial cartoons, which originated in 1754, may be the most popular form. Other examples are less obvious but no less important. Critics are employed by the various media to rate motion pictures, plays, books, records, football leagues around the world etc. Restaurants, cars, architecture, and even religious services are reviewed by some newspapers and magazines. Political “spin doctors”, defined by McQuail (2010) as those who have the job of managing (or massaging) the public presentation of information or ideas (especially on behalf of politicians) to maximum advantage, try to frame the way media cover news events in a way that is positive for their clients. McQuail (2010) explains that their work results in the manipulation of news and is related to public relations and propaganda.

Baran and Davis (2006) refer to the media's interpretive or analytical activities as *correlation of parts of society*. We know that the failure of the highway bond proposition means that gasoline taxes will rise to cover necessary road repair because of the editorial in the Sunday paper.

What are the consequences of the mass media's performing this function? First, the individual is exposed to a large number of different points of view, probably far more than he or she could come in contact with through personal channels. Because of this, a person (with some effort) can evaluate all sides of an issue before arriving at an opinion. Additionally, the mass media make available to the individual a wide range of expertise that he or she might not have access to through interpersonal communication. Should Nigeria adopt the IMF-recommended Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP)? Thanks to the media, a person can read or hear the views of

various economists, political scientists, politicians and government workers.

However, there are certain dysfunctions that might occur. Since media content is public, any criticism or praise of an individual, group or lifestyle is also public and might have positive or negative consequences for the medium involved. For example, in 1994, Amtrak pulled \$2 million in advertising from America's NBC because it was offended by comic Jay Leno's jokes about Amtrak trains. Many advertisers refused to buy time on Dr. Laura's unsuccessful television programme because of her views on homosexuality.

Furthermore, there is no guarantee that interpretations by media commentators and experts are accurate and valid. After the bombings in Oklahoma city and Centennial Park in Atlanta and the crash of TWA Flight 800, many in the media industry suggested these acts might be the work of foreign terrorists, an accusation that has yet to be substantiated, according to Dominick (2002).

Finally, there is also the danger that an individual may, in the long run, come to rely too heavily on the views carried in the media and lose his or her critical ability. Accepting without question the views of an influential newspaper or a popular talk-show host may be easier than forming individual opinions, but it might lead to the dysfunctional situation in which the individual becomes passive and allows others to think for him or her.

### 3. To create ties of union

Devito (1991) notes that this is one of the functions of mass communication that few people ever think of making us feel like members of a group. Consider the lone television viewer, sitting in his or her apartment watching television while eating dinner. The television programmes make this lone soul feel a part of some larger group.

Dominick (2002) sees this linkage from another perspective. According to him, the mass media are able to join different elements of society that are not directly connected. For example, mass advertising attempts to link the needs of buyers with the products of sellers. Legislators, in Abuja, may try to keep in touch with constituents' feelings by reading their hometown newspapers. Voters, in turn, learn about the doings of their elected officials through newspapers, television, radio and websites. Newspapers or broadcast stations that attempt to raise money for the treatment of an underprivileged member of the society suffering a serious ailment is another example of this linkage functions. The needs of those suffering from the disease are matched with the desires of others who wish to see the problem eliminated.

Another type of linkage occurs when geographically separated groups that share a common interest are linked by the media. Gulf War Syndrome linked those who claimed to be suffering from the disease, who formed a coalition that eventually prompted government hearings on the issue.

The best examples of linkage, however, are the various websites, newsgroups and chat rooms on the Internet. The online auction site, eBay, for example, links people who have some items to sell with people who are looking for such items to buy. When the media perform in this role, one obvious consequence is that social groups can be mobilized quickly. On the other hand, this linkage function may have harmful consequences. In December 1999, the World Trade Organization's meeting in Seattle, Washington, was disrupted by violent street protests that injured many and did extensive property damage. The protesters, says Dominick (2002), included, such disparate groups as the Teamsters Union; the Ruckus Society from Berkeley, California; environmentalists; airline pilots, anarchists; and farmers. Dominick (2002) points out that these groups were able to coalesce partly because they were linked by the Ruckus Society's website.

The media also establish the opposite of union and relationships namely, *privatization*. This, according to Devito (1991)

is the tendency for an individual to retreat from social groups into a world of his or her own. Some theorists have proposed that the tremendous quantities of information almost forced upon us by the media overwhelm us and make us feel inadequate. Intense reports on wars, inflation, crime and unemployment make some people feel so helpless that they retreat into their own private worlds.

However, Berger (1995) sees privatization from another approach. First, he points out that the development of mass communication media leads to *privatism*, as he calls it, in people and distracts them from more serious matters. He explains that if one considers a medium such as television, there is a good reason to argue that the commercials, the most expensive and dominant genre on television, do direct people's attention away from public matters and focus their attention on their private lives and on consumption.

#### 4. To inform and transmit values

Devito (1991) remarks that most of our information has been learnt, not from school, but from the media. People have learnt music, politics, film, art etc. from the media. They become aware of other places and other times from seeing a good movie as well as from reaching a history textbook.

One type of education (information) is to teach the viewers the values, opinions and rules that society judges to be proper and just. That is, part of the educational function of the media is directed at socializing the audience. According to Dominick (2002), socialization refers to the ways an individual comes to adopt the behaviour and values of a group. The media socialize people through dramas, situation comedies, stories, discussions, articles, comics and advertisements or commercials. In all these situations, the values of the society are expressed in an unspoken manner. We are taught how to dress for different occasions, what it means to be a good citizen, what a proper meal should consist of, how to hold a discussion or conversation, how to respond to people of different national and racial groups, how to behave in strange places, and so on.

Similarly, Liman (2008) says socialization is the provision of a common fund of knowledge which enables people to operate as effective members of the society in which they live and which fosters social cohesion and awareness, thereby permitting active involvement in public life.

Thus, the mass media present portrayals of our society, and by watching, listening and reading, we learn how people are supposed to act and what values are important. Individuals who are exposed to these portrayals are likely to grow up and accept this value. Thus, a social value is transmitted from one generation to another. Baran and Davis (2006) refer to the process as the *transmission of the social heritage*, which, according to them, relates to the media's ability to communicate values, norms and styles across time and between groups. Berger (1995) describes this as the *cultural continuity* function. He explains that by showing people what others do, mass communication affects social and cultural practices. In many cases, it leads to their modification. These modifications may help a culture or subculture or group survive.

What are the consequences of having the mass media serve as agents of socialization? At one level, value transmission via the mass media will stabilize society. Common values and experiences are passed down to all members, thereby creating common standards among them. On the other hand, values and cultural information are selected by large organizations that may encourage the status quo. For example, the "baby industry" in the United States is a multi-million dollar one. This industry advertises heavily in the media. It is not surprising, then, that motherhood is depicted in such an attractive light. To show mothers as harried, exhausted, overworked, and frazzled would not help maintain this profitable arrangement.

Mass media can also transmit values by enforcing social norms. In early 1993, two nominees for US Attorney General were forced to withdraw from consideration when it was publicised that they did not comply with federal law when they employed domestic

workers. In 1994, a United States newspaper photographer snapped a picture of two presidential aides boarding a presidential helicopter after playing a round of golf. The picture was carried by the wire services and prompted such an uproar that one of the aides in the photo was forced to resign and repay the \$13, 129 cost of the helicopter flight.

##### 5. To entertain

Another obvious media function is that of entertainment defined by Baran and Davis (2006) as media's ability to amuse. The media design their programmes to entertain. Indeed, two of the media, motion pictures and sound recording, are devoted primarily to entertainment. In reality, of course, they entertain to secure the attention of the largest possible group so that they may sell this attention to advertisers. According to Devito (1991), this is the major reason that mass communication exists. In societies where the state supports the media or where advertising is banned from various media, the process is different. The author points out that in the United States and in most democracies, however, if the media did not entertain, they would no longer have viewers or readers and would quickly be out of business. He further says the media, as entertainment, are generally viewed as functional or positive because they provide viewers with convenient, inexpensive entertainment much needed after a day's work.

Even though most of a newspaper focuses on the events of the day, comics, puzzles, horoscopes, games, advice, gossip humour and general entertainment features usually account for around 12 percent of the content, according to Dominick (2002). If we considered sports news as entertainment, that would add another 14 percent to this figure, he further remarks.

Television is primarily devoted to entertainment, with about three-quarters of a typical broadcast day falling into this category. The entertainment content of radio varies widely according to station format. Some stations may programme 100 percent news,



while others schedule almost none. In like manner, some magazines may have little entertainment content (e.g. **Forbes**), while others are almost entirely devoted to it (e.g. **National Lampoon**). Even those magazines that are concerned primarily with news **Time** and **Newsweek**, for example usually mix in some entertaining features with their usual reporting.

The importance of this entertainment function has grown as people, especially in developed countries, have accumulated more leisure time. In the centuries before the media, the entertainment function was fulfilled by story tellers, court Jesters, magicians and troubadours (12th-century and 13th-century lyric poets who composed songs often about courtly love). As Berger (1995) points out, there can be no question that entertainment is one of the most important functions of mass communication media. It is not easy, however, to try to separate information from entertainment, because information can be entertaining and entertainment can be informative. Perhaps the best way to deal with this complication is to suggest that in some cases, entertainment is the primary function and information is of secondary importance, whereas in other cases just the opposite is true.

In recent years, some programmes have been described as “*infotainment*”, indicating that the information and entertainment functions have been merged. Local news programmes are supposed to be informative; that should be their primary function. But many of them, with their focus on murders and other violent crimes, fires, and celebrities, have very strong entertainment aspects to them. An example is the NTA News Line programme at 9pm every Sunday. Local news programmes also devote a considerable amount of time to covering sports, which is a form of entertainment, and in some cases to obvious entertainment matters, such as film. The reason local news programmes focus on entertainment so much is that they have become profit centres for local television stations instead of functioning as services to the community, as they did in the past.

What are the consequences of having entertainment now

taken over by mass communication from court jesters and magicians etc? Clearly, the media can make entertainment available to a large number of people at relatively little cost. On the other hand, entertainment that is carried by the mass media must appeal to a mass audience. The ultimate result of this state of affairs is that media content is designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator of taste. On television for example, we are more apt to see sequels such as “Star Trek VIII” and “Lethal Weapon VII” than we are to see Shakespeare's “Much Ado About Nothing II” and “More King Lear”. Rock stations outnumber classical stations 15 to 1 in the United States, reveals Dominick (2002).

One other consequence of the widespread use of media for entertainment is that it is now quite easy to sit back and let others entertain you. Instead of playing baseball, people might simply watch it on television. Instead of learning to play the guitar, an adolescent might decide to listen to a tape of someone else playing the guitar. Dominic notes that on more than one occasion, critics have charged that the mass media will turn Americans into a nation of watchers and listeners instead of doers. Also, Devito (1991) observes that the steady and constant flow of entertainment may prove dysfunctional and discourage people from engaging in interpersonal communication, studying, learning, working and so on.

#### 6. To persuade

According to Devito (1999), while the most obvious media function is to entertain, the most important function is to persuade. He explains that persuasion comes in a number of forms.

(a) Reinforcing or strengthening a person's attitudes, beliefs, or values. It is difficult for anyone to convert someone from one attitudinal extreme to another. And the media, with all the resources and power at their disposal, are no exception. More often, the media buttress or make stronger our beliefs, attitudes, values and options. For example, democrats will expose themselves to democratic

persuasion and will emerge reinforced from the experience. Similarly, religious people will expose themselves to messages in line with their beliefs and will emerge fortified or stronger in their convictions.

- (b) Changing a person's attitudes, beliefs or values. The media will convert some people who are undecided on any issue. Thus, those who are torn between two presidential candidates from two political parties may well find themselves converted to one side or the other on the basis of media messages.
- (c) Activating the person to do something. From the advertiser's point of view, the most important function of the media is to activate to move consumers to action. The media try to get the viewer or reader to buy Wonder Bread, to use Gillette, and to choose close-up toothpaste instead of chewing stick.
- (d) Ethicising, or providing the person with a system of values. By making public certain deviations from the norm (e.g corruption in public service) the media arouse people to change the situation. They provide viewers with a collective ethic. In mass society, this function of public exposure is institutionalized in the mass media of communication. Press, radio and television expose fairly well-known deviations to public view, and as a rule, this exposure forces some degree of public action against what has been privately tolerated.

### Further Discussion

The functional approach, on which this paper is located, argues that a phenomenon or institution, such as mass communication, should be analysed in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the system in which it is found in the case of mass communication that would be society in general. Mass media are societal institutions. If an institution contributes to the maintenance of the society in which

it is found, that institution would be described as functional. If the institution contributes to the breakdown of the society in which it is found, that institution would be described as dysfunctional.

Thus far, as far as mass communication is concerned, we have seen that when we talk about functions, we must also keep in mind dysfunctions. On the commendatory side, mass communication surveys the environment, interprets it, links its members, transmits its values to them, entertains and persuades them. On the condemnatory side, over the years, there have been many attacks on mass communication by researchers, clergy, educators, and others including those who work in the media. Some of the more common criticisms include the following eight:

1. The media encourage *escapism*, defined by the American Heritage Dictionary (2000) as the tendency to escape from daily reality or routine by indulging in daydreaming, fantasy or entertainment.
2. Mass communication leads to media addiction. Some people watch television 70-80 hours a week, or read several newspapers/magazines or romance novels everyday, or see a dozen or 80 films per week.
3. Mass communication performs a *narcotizing* function one of the most interesting and most overlooked functions of the media. This means that when the media provide information about something, the receiver believes that some action has been taken. As a result, the viewer is *drugged* into inactivity as if under the influence of narcotic. The interested and informed citizen can congratulate himself on his lofty state of interest and information, and neglect to see that he has abstained from decision and action. He comes to mistake knowing about problems of the day with doing something about them. This is dysfunctional on the assumption that it is not in the interest of modern complex society to have large masses of the population politically, apathetic and inert. This is detrimental to the social system. It hinders rather than

fosters development and needed change.

4. The media overwhelm individual tastes and lead to *cultural homogenization*. The suggestion is that the mass media inevitably lead to a mass society full of people who have lost their individuality, their private tastes, and their local and regional cultures.
5. The mass media debase sexuality. They distort society's view of women and use sexuality to sell products. Feminist critics of mass communication make the important argument that mass media texts tend to debase women and sexuality. Generally speaking, women are underrepresented in mass media texts, the roles they do have are often demeaning, and they are often portrayed as victims of crimes and/or abuse or as sexual objects. Because the media do play a role in the formation of people's identities, negative representations of women in the media can have negative effects on women and on society in general. Young women who model their identities to varying degrees on women they see in the media (in books, newspapers, magazines, films, and television shows), are given stereotyped and inappropriate views of what they can expect in life and what their roles will be. Young males also learn absurd ideas about what women are like and how to relate to them.
6. The mass media present a *false picture of reality* because they focus upon a narrow range of themes and topics (ones that involve sex and violence, for the most part). Many sociologists and other kinds of researchers have investigated the content of media texts and have collected evidence that the media are, in fact, obsessed with certain subjects ones that help them attract audiences.

From the political perspective, some media theorists argue that the media are, in essence, manipulative. People who

consume the media gain unrealistic ideas about their life possibilities and are given a picture of reality that justifies the status quo and this, from an ideological perspective, is of use to those who are members of the ruling class and want to maintain their power and control.

7. The mass media *create stereotypes* and give people false views of others and themselves. Because many mass media texts are relatively brief, they often have no time to develop realistic and complex characteristics. Instead they use stereotypes (generally defined as group-held pictures or images of categories of people) to give audiences a sense of why various characters do things that is, a theory of motivation. Stereotypes of various racial, ethnic, religious, sexual orientation, and occupational groups are common. Stereotypes sometimes have a grain of truth in them, but generally they are distorted representations. Clearly, all members of a group are not like some individuals or some members of that group. Usually, stereotyped images are negative and harmful, but stereotypes are sometimes based on positive traits.
8. The mass media *enhance ethnocentrism*, the feeling that one's own group (e.g ethnic, group or nation) is the only one that does things the "right" way. For example, U.S. media tend to send out the message that Americans are good guys; they are at the centre of the universe, and American needs and desires are paramount. This view can lead to extreme nationalism and to intolerance for other ways of living and the values of other cultures.

### Conclusion

Does a fish know it is wet? No, because the fish's existence is so dominated by water that only when water is absent is the fish aware of its condition.

So it is with people and mass media. The media so fully saturate our everyday lives that we are often unconscious of their presence, not to mention their influence. The mass media inform us, entertain us, delight us, annoy us. They move our emotions, challenge our intellects, insult our intelligence. Media often reduce us to mere commodities for sale to the highest bidder. Media help define us. They shape our realities; they construct agendas, telling us what is important enough to attend to. Indeed, Baran (2002) asserts that the media are the central cultural force in our society.

Mass communication can be conceptualized as a cultural forum and the mass media are our cultural story tellers. Mass media stories shape the ways we think, feel and act. Storytellers have a remarkable opportunity to fashion our culture. They also have a responsibility to do so in as professional and ethical a way as possible. We are living in what Marshall McLuhan calls the "global village". Modern mass communication media make it possible for millions of people throughout the world to be in touch with nearly any place on the globe. We take in many media messages without being aware of the messages or their effect on us. Therefore, we should try to increase our awareness of such messages and the ways in which they influence us.

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