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## Social Change and the Media

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NOTE: At the time of publication, author Marwan Kraidy was affiliated with the American University. Currently (April 2013), he is a faculty member at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

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## Social Change and the Media

### Abstract

The influence of the media on society has for a long time preoccupied researchers in the field of communication. Various normative, social scientific, and critical communication theories have addressed how media influence social change. Early media effects theories assumed a direct and unmitigated influence of media on individuals and society. Later research questioned the assumption of all-powerful media effects, launching what became known as the limited-effects tradition. From those early days of communication research, there has been a constant ebb and flow of theories and empirical research attempting to understand the real effect of media on social change.

### Disciplines

Communication

### Comments

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# **SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE MEDIA**

## **MARWAN M. KRAIDY**

The influence of the media on society has for a long time preoccupied researchers in the field of communication. Various normative, social scientific, and critical communication theories have addressed how media influence social change. Early media effects theories assumed a direct and unmitigated influence of media on individuals and society. Later research questioned the assumption of all-powerful media effects, launching what became known as the limited-effects tradition. From those early days of communication research, there has been a constant ebb and flow of theories and empirical research attempting to understand the real effect of media on social change.

Numerous theories have also attempted to understand the effect of the media on social change from a variety of perspectives and for different objectives. These include theories of media and democratization, theories of development communication and social learning, and theories in health communication, social marketing, and participatory communication. Also, a variety of areas of inquiry in mass communication dealt with social change. These include research on alternative and pirate media, public service and educational broadcasting, public opinion and political communication, and research on propaganda.

### **Development Communication**

In the 1950s and 1960s, the wave of decolonization in the developing world created a need for nation-building and social, political, and economic development. It is in that context that development communication emerged as a strategy to use the mass media to foster positive social change, which, in turn, was believed to enhance the socioeconomic development of a country. Among the pioneers in development communication were Daniel Lerner and Wilbur Schramm. Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958) and Schramm's *Mass Media and National Development* (1964) were founding texts of development communication, and they have had a defining influence on the paradigm since their publication. Their basic principle was that desirable social change could be produced by scientifically designed and executed communication campaigns.

Until the late 1970s, development communication theory, research, and practice was grounded in what Everett Rogers (1978) termed a "dominant paradigm." This dominant paradigm, according to Rogers, was a consequence of a specifically Western legacy. That legacy includes the Industrial Revolution in North America and Western Europe, colonialism in the developing world— from Latin America to the Middle East, and from Africa to East Asia— the quantitative tradition of American social science, and capitalism. These historical, geopolitical, economic, epistemological, and ideological factors molded the dominant paradigm on the role of the mass media in development and social change.

That perspective led to shortsighted theories and applications. For example, Rogers (1978) wrote that the dominant paradigm wrongly relied on the introduction of technology to solve the social problems of the developing world. In addition, the strong dependence on quantitative information inherited from American social science reduced standards of living to mere numbers, which often failed to reflect actual social situations in the developing world. More relevant to this discussion was the gradual realization by development researchers and

practitioners that the role of the mass media was indirect and more limited than it was previously assumed. Advocating a shift in the general orientation of development communication, Rogers (1978, p. 68) gave a new definition of development that he called "a widely participatory process of social change in a society, intended to bring about both social and material advancement ... for the majority of the people."

Two years after Rogers thus declared the passing of the dominant paradigm, Robert Hornik (1980) published an article in the *Journal of Communication* in which he reviewed and summarized evaluations of a cluster of development projects spanning several continents. This evaluation was done as part of a review of Agency for International Development communication policy, which Hornik undertook with several colleagues. Hornik articulated his article around three central questions. The first question was concerned with the role that communication plays in processes of development. The second question focused on the conditions that make a particular development communication project a success or a failure. Hornik's third question concerned knowledge about specific applications in development communication.

In addressing these questions, Hornik drew examples from development projects in El Salvador and Nicaragua (in Latin America), Tanzania and Senegal (in Africa), and India, China, and Korea (in Asia). The geographical diversity of these examples made Hornik's piece an excellent review of how development projects work or do not work in different sociocultural environments. At the end of his article, Hornik reached the following conclusions. First, he found communication to be a useful complement to development because communication functioned as a catalyst, organizer, maintainer, equalizer, and legitimator □ motivator for social change. Second, Hornik concluded that development communication is effective only as a complementary strategy to changes in resources and environments. Finally, Hornik states that the relationship between communication and development was more complex than previous research tended to assume. In conclusion, Hornik's wide-ranging review indicated that communication is necessary, but not sufficient, for meaningful development to take place.

## **Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theories are based on the simple but powerful assumption that people learn from observation. This assumption has been held for generations as conventional wisdom, and it has been applied in areas such as education and training. Applied to the mass media, this assumption becomes more problematic and more difficult to prove, since media scholars cannot reach a strong agreement on what behaviors people learn from the media, to what degree, and under what conditions. There are rare examples in which viewers, especially younger ones, imitate a scene from a television program or a movie in close detail. Copycat crime is one of the worrisome examples of imitation. Most people, however, will imitate images and behaviors they see on television screens in discriminate, selective, and, often, indirect ways.

In his book *Psychological Modeling: Conflicting Theories* (1971), social psychologist Albert Bandura has argued for an indirect and complex understanding of how people model their behavior on images that they obtain from society. Bandura's social learning theory maintains that humans acquire symbolic images of actions and behaviors, which they adapt and then use to inspire their own behavior. According to Bandura, social learning from the media is achieved in one or a combination of observational learning, inhibitory effects, and disinhibitory effects.

Observational learning is the most direct way in which social learning operates. It is based on the fact that by observing a behavior, people can learn how to perform it themselves. In vocational training, for example, apprenticeship developed as a more or less lengthy process of initiation primarily based on learning by observation. By observing the master at work, the apprentice was to learn the trade. Inhibitory effects operate on the assumption that if someone observes a person being sanctioned for behaving in a certain way, then the observer will learn not to behave in that way. In other words, inhibitory effects produce an avoidance of a behavior that the observer associates with sanctions. The opposite occurs with disinhibitory effects. If a person is rewarded for destructive behavior, it is probable that an observer would imitate the behavior. This is why some television critics have been especially disturbed by programming that glorifies violence and leaves it unpunished. Social learning theory has had a lasting effect on efforts to induce social change using the mass media because it recognized that social learning is not a rote process of direct imitation, but one in which several forces affect both observation and behavior.

### **Social Marketing Theory**

In 1971, the same year that Bandura published *Psychological Modeling*, Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman published an article in the *Journal of Marketing* in which they proposed and coined the term "social marketing theory." Reprinted in 1997 in the specialized journal *Social Marketing Quarterly*, the Kotler and Zaltman article is considered to be one of the leading pioneering publications in the field of social marketing. The authors advocated the application of consumer marketing techniques to social problems, and they laid the conceptual foundations for their approach.

Social marketing is based on one basic premise. Since marketing has been largely successful in making people choose to buy some products as opposed to competing products, then the same techniques should be effective in encouraging people to adopt certain behaviors that would lead to better physical and mental health, and eventually to wide-scale social change. As a hybrid theory that proposed to induce positive social change, social marketing borrowed concepts from psychology, sociology, communication, and preventive medicine. Similar to communication theory and research, social marketing theory is an interdisciplinary venture that requires collaborative research between scholars in several traditional disciplines.

Social marketing campaigns are simultaneously directed at two audiences. First, because social problems have behavioral causes, social marketing campaigns target the individuals and groups who would benefit from a behavior change. Second, since social problems have socioeconomic causes as well, social marketing campaigns are aimed at policymakers who have the power to make policy changes that would enhance the chances of success of social marketing campaigns.

Social marketing campaigns are organized around three principles. First, in order to be successful, a campaign has to have a consumer orientation. This means that the target group is treated as an active audience whose members participate in the process of social change. Second, the campaign should be premised on a social exchange of values and ideas between campaign organizers and the target group. This exchange is based on the important idea in social marketing that behavior is voluntary and not coerced. Third, campaigns should have a long-term plan that goes beyond immediate or short-term measures of success. This should include mechanisms of monitoring, feedback, and evaluation. Social marketing has been criticized for fostering a

consumer approach to social change, with its underlying capitalist premise. Still, social marketing has become a preferred approach to creating and sustaining positive social change.

### **Convergence, Critique, and Conclusion**

Development communication and social marketing theory share several assumptions and methodologies. In fact, they share the most basic of assumptions: that social change can be achieved by using carefully conceptualized and operationalized persuasion campaigns. Since the dominant channels of persuasion are radio, television, popular music, and the Internet, these mass media are highly significant and hold considerable potential for positive social change.

However, the motives of media campaigns for social change have been scrutinized by critics who believe that development communication is a neocolonialist paradigm that maintains a relationship of dependency between the rich industrialized countries and the developing world. Peter Golding (1974) was one of the early critics of the role of the media in national development. He criticized development communication as an ethnocentric theory that constructed and maintained Western European and North American social and economic standards as "goal-states from which calibrated indices of underdevelopment can be constructed" (p. 39). In the same vein, development was criticized for being a self-serving, even colonial, Western project that is designed to open markets in the developing world for commodities produced in the wealthy countries of North America and Western Europe. Both development communication and social marketing theory do have elements that are grounded in assumptions about the relationship of consumption to social change. Development communication, starting from Schramm's early work, has tended to focus more on economic issues than on social and cultural issues. Social marketing theory after all, is derived from concepts developed in marketing and advertising, two areas that focus on making individuals good consumers. As a result, social marketing theory runs the risk of regarding individuals as consumers to be persuaded to buy a commodity, rather than citizens to be informed about issues.

The line between regarding individuals as either consumers or citizens in campaigns focusing on promoting positive social change is understandably difficult to draw. Theories of media and social change have tremendous potential, but they also have serious limitations. Research has attempted to move beyond previous models of social change and has advocated more interactivity, transparency, and sensitivity to context in using media for social change. Even if the influence of the mass media is indirect and difficult to monitor, measure, and understand, the media are an important instrument to be used in continuous efforts to improve people's quality of life.

*See also:* DEMOCRACY AND THE MEDIA; PIRATE MEDIA; PROPAGANDA; PUBLIC BROADCASTING; PUBLIC HEALTH CAMPAIGNS; PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA; SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY AND MEDIA EFFECTS; SOCIAL GOALS AND THE MEDIA; SOCIETY AND THE MEDIA; TELEVISION, EDUCATIONAL

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