



Theoretical Perspectives on Media and Technology

Bởi:

OpenStaxCollege

It is difficult to conceive of any one theory or theoretical perspective that can explain the variety of ways that people interact with technology and the media. Technology runs the gamut from the match you strike to light a candle all the way up to sophisticated nuclear power plants that might power the factory where that candle, was made. Media could refer to the television you watch, the ads wrapping the bus you take to work or school, or the magazines you flip through in a waiting room, not to mention all the forms of new media, including Twitter, Facebook, blogs, YouTube, and the like. Are media and technology critical to the forward march of humanity? Are they pernicious capitalist tools that lead to the exploitation of workers worldwide? Are they the magic bullet the world has been waiting for to level the playing field and raise the world's poor out of extreme poverty? Choose any opinion and you will find studies and scholars that agree with you—and those who disagree.

Functionalism

Because functionalism focuses on how media and technology contribute to the smooth functioning of society, a good place to begin understanding this perspective is to write a list of functions you perceive media and technology to perform. Your list might include the ability to find information on the internet, television's entertainment value, or how advertising and product placement contribute to social norms.

Commercial Function



TV commercials can carry significant cultural currency. For some, the ads during the Super Bowl are more water cooler-worthy than the game itself. (Photo courtesy of Dennis Yang/flickr)

As you might guess, with nearly every U.S. household possessing a television, and the 250 billion hours of television watched annually by Americans, companies that wish to connect with consumers find television an irresistible platform to promote their goods and services (Nielsen 2012). Television advertising is a highly functional way to meet a market demographic where it lives. Sponsors can use the sophisticated data gathered by network and cable television companies regarding their viewers and target their advertising accordingly. Whether you are watching cartoons on Nick Jr. or a cooking show on Telemundo, chances are advertisers have a plan to reach you.

And it certainly doesn't stop with television. Commercial advertising precedes movies in theaters and shows up on and inside of public transportation, as well as on the sides of building and roadways. Major corporations such as Coca-Cola bring their advertising into public schools, sponsoring sports fields or tournaments, as well as filling the halls and cafeterias of those schools with vending machines hawking their goods. With the rising concerns about childhood obesity and attendant diseases, the era of soda machines in schools may be numbered. But not to worry. Coca-Cola's filtered tap water, Dasani, and its juice products will remain standards in many schools.

Entertainment Function

An obvious manifest function of media is its entertainment value. Most people, when asked why they watch television or go to the movies, would answer that they enjoy it. And the numbers certainly illustrate that. While 2012 Nielsen research shows a slight reduction of U.S. homes with televisions, the reach of television is still vast. And the amount of time spent watching is equally large. Clearly, enjoyment is paramount. On the technology side, as well, there is a clear entertainment factor to the use of new innovations. From online gaming to chatting with friends on Facebook, technology offers new and more exciting ways for people to entertain themselves.

Social Norm Functions

Even while the media is selling us goods and entertaining us, it also serves to socialize us, helping us pass along norms, values, and beliefs to the next generation. In fact, we are socialized and resocialized by media throughout our life course. All forms of media teach us what is good and desirable, how we should speak, how we should behave, and how we should react to events. Media also provide us with cultural touchstones during events of national significance. How many of your older relatives can recall watching the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* on television? How many of those reading this textbook followed the events of September 11 or Hurricane Katrina on the television or internet?

But debate exists over the extent and impact of media socialization. One recent study (Krahe et al. 2011) demonstrated that violent media content does have a desensitizing affect and is correlated with aggressive thoughts. Another group of scholars (Gentile, Mathieson, and Crick 2011) found that among children exposure to media violence led to an increase in both physical and relational aggression. Yet, a meta-analysis study covering four decades of research (Savage 2003) could not establish a definitive link between viewing violence and committing criminal violence.

It is clear from watching people emulate the styles of dress and talk that appear in media that media has a socializing influence. What is not clear, despite nearly 50 years of empirical research, is how much socializing influence the media has when compared to other agents of socialization, which include any social institution that passes along norms, values, and beliefs (such as peers, family, religious institutions, and the like).

Life-Changing Functions

Like media, many forms of technology do indeed entertain us, provide a venue for commercialization, and socialize us. For example, some studies suggest the rising obesity rate is correlated with the decrease in physical activity caused by an increase in use of some forms of technology, a latent function of the prevalence of media in society

(Kautiainen et al. 2011). Without a doubt, a manifest function of technology is to change our lives, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Think of how the digital age has improved the ways we communicate. Have you ever used Skype or another webcast to talk to a friend or family member far away? Or maybe you have organized a fund drive, raising thousands of dollars, all from your desk chair.

Of course, the downside to this ongoing information flow is the near impossibility of disconnecting from technology, leading to an expectation of constant convenient access to information and people. Such a fast-paced dynamic is not always to our benefit. Some sociologists assert that this level of media exposure leads to narcotizing dysfunction, a term that describes when people are too overwhelmed with media input to really care about the issue, so their involvement becomes defined by awareness instead of by action about the issue at hand (Lazerfeld and Merton 1948).

Conflict Perspective

In contrast to theories in the functional perspective, the conflict perspective focuses on the creation and reproduction of inequality—social processes that tend to disrupt society rather than contribute to its smooth operation. When taking a conflict perspective, one major focus is the differential access to media and technology embodied in the digital divide. Conflict theorists also look at who controls the media, and how media promotes the norms of upper-middle-class white Americans while minimizing the presence of the lower class, especially people of color.

Control of Media and Technology

Powerful individuals and social institutions have a great deal of influence over which forms of technology are released, when and where they are released, and what kind of media is available for our consumption, a form of gatekeeping. Shoemaker and Voss (2009) define gatekeeping as the sorting process by which thousands of possible messages are shaped into a mass media-appropriate form and reduced to a manageable amount. In other words, the people in charge of the media decide what the public is exposed to, which, as C. Wright Mills (1956) famously noted, is the heart of media's power. Take a moment to think of the way that “new media” evolves and replaces traditional forms of hegemonic media. With a hegemonic media, culturally diverse society can be dominated by one race, gender, or class through the manipulation of the media imposing its worldview as a societal norm. New media renders the gatekeeper role less of a factor in information distribution. Popular sites such as YouTube and Facebook engage in a form of self-policing. Users are encouraged to report inappropriate behavior that moderators will then address.

In addition, some conflict theorists suggest that the way American media is generated results in an unbalanced political arena. Those with the most money can buy the

most media exposure, run smear campaigns against their competitors, and maximize their visual presence. Almost a year before the 2012 U.S. presidential election, the candidates—Barack Obama for the Democrats and numerous Republican contenders—have raised more than \$186 million (Carmi et al. 2012). What do you think a conflict perspective theorist would suggest about the potential for the non-rich to be heard in politics?

Technological Social Control and Digital Surveillance

Social scientists take the idea of the surveillance society so seriously that there is an entire journal devoted to its study, *Surveillance and Society*. The panoptic surveillance envisioned by Jeremy Bentham and later analyzed by Michel Foucault (1975) is increasingly realized in the form of technology used to monitor our every move. This surveillance was imagined as a form of constant monitoring in which the observation posts are decentralized and the observed is never communicated with directly. Today, digital security cameras capture our movements, observers can track us through our cell phones, and police forces around the world use facial-recognition software.

Feminist Perspective



What types of women are we exposed to in the media? Some would argue that the range of female images is misleadingly narrow. (Photo courtesy of Cliff1066/flickr)

Take a look at popular television shows, advertising campaigns, and online game sites. In most, women are portrayed in a particular set of parameters and tend to have a uniform look that society recognizes as attractive. Most are thin, white or light-skinned, beautiful, and young. Why does this matter? Feminist perspective theorists believe

it's crucial in creating and reinforcing stereotypes. For example, Fox and Bailenson (2009) found that online female avatars (the characters you play in online games like World of Warcraft or Second Life) conforming to gender stereotypes enhances negative attitudes toward women, and Brasted (2010) found that media (advertising in particular) promotes gender stereotypes.

The gender gap in tech-related fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) is no secret. A 2011 U.S. Department of Commerce Report suggested that gender stereotyping is one reason for this gap, acknowledging the bias toward men as keepers of technological knowledge (US Department of Commerce 2011). But gender stereotypes go far beyond the use of technology. Press coverage in the media reinforces stereotypes that subordinate women, giving airtime to looks over skills, and disparaging women who defy accepted norms.

Recent research in new media has offered a mixed picture of its potential to equalize the status of men and women in the arenas of technology and public discourse. A European agency, the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women (2010), issued an opinion report suggesting that while there is the potential for new media forms to perpetuate gender stereotypes and the gender gap in technology and media access, at the same time new media could offer alternative forums for feminist groups and the exchange of feminist ideas. Still, the committee warned against the relatively unregulated environment of new media and the potential for antifeminist activities, from pornography to human trafficking, to flourish there.

Increasingly prominent in the discussion of new media and feminism is cyberfeminism, the application to, and promotion of, feminism online. Research on cyberfeminism runs the gamut from the liberating use of blogs by women living in Iraq during the second Gulf War (Peirce 2011) to an investigation of the Suicide Girls web site (Magnet 2007).

Symbolic Interactionism

Technology itself may act as a symbol for many. The kind of computer you own, the kind of car you drive, whether or not you can afford the latest Apple product—these serve as a social indicator of wealth and status. Neo-Luddites are people who see technology as symbolizing the coldness and alienation of modern life. But for technophiles, technology symbolizes the potential for a brighter future. For those adopting an ideological middle ground, technology might symbolize status (in the form of a massive flat-screen television) or failure (in owning a basic old mobile phone with no bells or whistles).

Social Construction of Reality

Meanwhile, media create and spread symbols that become the basis for our shared understanding of society. Theorists working in the interactionist perspective focus on this social construction of reality, an ongoing process in which people subjectively create and understand reality. Media constructs our reality in a number of ways. For some, the people they watch on a screen can become a primary group, meaning the small informal groups of people who are closest to them. For many others, media becomes a reference group: a group that influences an individual and to which an individual compares himself, and by which we judge our successes and failures. We might do very well without an Android smartphone, until we see characters using it on our favorite television show or our classmates whipping one out between classes.

While media may indeed be the medium to spread the message of the rich white males, Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson (1992) point out that some forms of media discourse allow the appearance of competing constructions of reality. For example, advertisers find new and creative ways to sell us products we don't need and probably wouldn't want without their prompting, but some networking sites such as Freecycle offer a commercial-free way of requesting and trading items that would otherwise be discarded. Additionally, the web is full of blogs chronicling lives lived "off the grid," or without participation in the commercial economy.

Social Networking and Social Construction

While Twitter and Facebook encourage us to check in and provide details of our day through online social networks, corporations can just as easily promote their products on these sites. Even supposedly crowd-sourced sites like Yelp (which aggregates local reviews) are not immune to corporate shenanigans. That is, we think we are reading objective observations when in reality we may be buying into one more form of advertising.

Facebook, which started as a free social network for college students, is increasingly a monetized business, selling you goods and services in subtle ways. But chances are you don't think of Facebook as one big online advertisement. What started out as a symbol of coolness and insider status, unavailable and inaccessible to parents and corporate shells, now promotes consumerism in the form of games and fandom. For example, think of all the money spent to upgrade popular Facebook games like Farmville. And notice that whenever you become a "fan," you likely receive product updates and special deals that promote online and real-world consumerism. It is unlikely that millions of people want to be "friends" with Pampers. But if it means a weekly coupon, they will, in essence, rent out space on their Facebook page for Pampers to appear. Thus, we develop both new ways to spend money and brand loyalties that will last even after Facebook is considered outdated and obsolete.

Summary

There are myriad theories about how society, technology, and media will progress. Functionalism sees the contribution that technology and media provide to the stability of society, from facilitating leisure time to increasing productivity. Conflict theorists are more concerned with how technology reinforces inequalities among communities, both within and among countries. They also look at how media typically give voice to the most powerful, and how new media might offer tools to help those who are disenfranchised. Symbolic interactionists see the symbolic uses of technology as signs of everything from a sterile futuristic world to a successful professional life.

Section Quiz

A parent secretly monitoring the babysitter through the use of GPS, site blocker, and nanny cam is a good example of:

1. the social construction of reality
2. technophilia
3. a neo-Luddite
4. panoptic surveillance

Answer

D

The use of Facebook to create an online persona by only posting images that match your ideal self exemplifies the _____ that can occur in forms of new media.

1. social construction of reality
2. cyberfeminism
3. market segmentation
4. referencing

Answer

A

_____ tend to be more pro-technology, while _____ view technology as a symbol of the coldness of modern life.

1. Luddites; technophiles
2. technophiles; Luddites
3. cyberfeminists; technophiles
4. liberal feminists; conflict theorists

Answer

B

When it comes to media and technology, a functionalist would focus on:

1. the symbols created and reproduced by the media
2. the association of technology and technological skill with men
3. the way that various forms of media socialize users
4. the digital divide between the technological haves and have-nots

Answer

C

When all media sources report a simplified version of the environmental impact of hydraulic fracturing, with no effort to convey the hard science and complicated statistical data behind the story, _____ is probably occurring.

1. gatekeeping
2. the digital divide
3. technophilia
4. market segmentation

Answer

A

Short Answer

Contrast a functionalist viewpoint of digital surveillance with a conflict perspective viewpoint.

In what ways has the internet affected how you view reality? Explain using a symbolic interactionist perspective.

Describe how a cyberfeminist might address the fact that powerful female politicians are often demonized in traditional media.

The issue of airplane-pilot exhaustion is an issue of growing media concern. Select a theoretical perspective and describe how it would explain this.

Would you characterize yourself as a technophile or a Luddite? Explain, using examples.

Further Research

To learn more about cyberfeminism, check out the interdisciplinary artist collective, subRosa: <http://cyberfeminism.net/>

To explore the implications of panoptic surveillance, review some surveillance studies at the free, open source Surveillance and Society site: <http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/>

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