

UNIVERSITY
ACADEMIC THESIS

INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNICATION STUDIES

ASSIGNMENT: MAJOR ESSAY

Topic 2:

Discuss tensions between the actual and potential uses of communications technologies – such as radio, TV and the Internet – for serving the ‘public interest’.

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Date: 18 September 2001

Technologies have often been seen as a progressive manifestation of modernity for improving the lives of the human race. Anthony Smith suggests that technologies usually 'turn up' to 'help people' out of their difficulties and do not take over their lives (Smith 1984, 91; Betteridge 1997, 598). This statement of belief is however questionable. Are technologies really invented to 'help people' and serve the 'public interest'? Do technologies not 'take over' our lives when the media is commercialised for the maximisation of profit and for influencing political power (Bessant and Watts 1999, 352-353; Williams 1990, 9-31)?

The roles of the media in serving the 'public interest' as opposed to private gain has been a topic for debates since the introduction of communication technologies such as the television, telecommunications and the internet (Welch 1999, 98-100). In this paper, I will explore and deliberate on the meaning of 'public interest' and the 'masses' that is associated with it. Examples of current practices in the area of the television will be used to illustrate the tensions between the actual and potential uses of the broadcast media for serving the 'public interest'.

The concept of 'public interest' was first introduced in the context of broadcasting by President Herbert Hoover, whose purpose was to legitimise the corporate broadcast order, while at the same time retaining governmental control over airwaves. This had since been embedded in the founding legislation of the American broadcasting system in making decisions on who would have access to the airwaves based on 'public

interest, convenience, and necessity' (Streeter 1996, 96-97; Welch 1999, 104).

The concept of 'public interest' however does not explain who is the 'public' or how their 'interest' can be determined. It assumes the people of the society homogenously consisting of a singular mass culture without class differences and with equal opportunities. The vagueness of the concept of 'public interest' and the idea that broadcasting should serve it, calls for public debate (Welch 1999, 103). According to William S. Paley, Chairman of Columbia Broadcasting Systems (CBS), in order for the society to understand the 'public interest', it would need to take the form of 'educating' the public politically, so that people will assimilate into the same belief of what is the 'public interest' (Welch 1999, 104) within a constructed mass culture.

The idea of mass culture speaks of the general public as the 'masses', which was explained by Raymond Williams (1990) to be the concept of the majority public. The majority public consists of the individuals who are seen to be '*the man in the street*', a collective image, which we understand as the people of the society, who are different from us. That means that 'masses' are other people – not us. In truth, however, there are no 'masses'; there are only 'ways of seeing people as masses' (Williams 1997, 18-20), hence, to serve the 'public interest', it means that the media caters, not to individual's interest, but to socially constructed audiences that knowingly or unknowingly, believe the constructed interest by the social actors is their

own interest. The reality, however, is that the primary objective of the social actors is not to inform, entertain and provide the necessary news, but to capitalise on the business returns from the commercialisation of media.

The media can play either a positive or negative role in the development of a national culture, or in cultivating the 'masses' that constitute the public. Take the example of the television. In Australia, its positive role has been in the articulation of policy statements on Australian content in television broadcasting, to 'represent Australia to Australians' by achieving an 'Australian look', as measured by the criteria for media content, language, visual depiction and casting (Flew 1995, 76). In requiring Australian commercial broadcasters to broadcast Australia content across a range of areas, television as a communication technology, has the capacity to promote local culture and a distinctive national identity.

Television as a medium that provides information and experiences from around the world to the masses can also play a positive role in serving the public interest. An example of this is the recent news coverage by the broadcast media on the terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon. The media broadcast the unfortunate event worldwide to every home that has a television, casting the world in an emotional tide that sees countless responses by people of different nationalities. Carter and Rutenberg (2001) in their article, "Viewers Again Return to Traditional Networks" in *The New York Times* on 15th September 2001, said that the CBS, NBC and ABC television networks consecutively covered the event for ninety hours

without commercials, costing an estimated US\$30 million a day in advertising revenue. The ‘initial ratings for the first four days indicated an average of thirty to fifty million viewers a day have watched network coverage in prime time’, and that has ‘been unexpected, given the decline in the influence of the networks, especially their news divisions, which are mere shadows of the powerful worldwide presences they once were’ (Carter and Rutenberg 2001). In this situation, the event coverage is a unique occurrence, and therefore, serves the interest of the public in informing to the world of the devastating state of affairs by exercising the original belief of what the media stands for – ‘to educate, inform and entertain’ (Welch 1999, 105; Williams 1990, 11). Tom Goldstein, the Dean of the Columbia University School of Journalism commented that ‘in times like this, they (the media) still play the essential role’. These comments mean that under normal circumstances, the media’s priority is to serve the profit seeking business of the commercial cable and television networks, whose primary purpose is to capitalise its monetary returns or to gain control by constructing an alternate reality of what is the public interest (Cunningham and Miller 1994, 31; Eldridge and Eldridge 1994, 108; Murdoch 1989, 8; Rutenberg 2001).

While it is true that there are positive benefits from the broadcast media in informing the society of events in the different parts of the world and in accruing local cultures and traditions by these developments, it is ultimately dependent on the convictions of the social actors and the wisdom of each government to utilise them in the correct direction. Take the example of

participatory democracy. Macpherson (1977), enthused with the potential of participatory politics and technology, describes a new participatory form of democracy in which an informed and participating citizen in a society can greatly reduce economic and social inequality through using media feedback (Schultz 1994, 106). This speaks of the use of television and the telephone by political leaders, who through the mass media televise a 'talk back' component, where any citizen with a phone and a television can contribute to a political discussion. The illusion of participation using this method can harness the full potential of creating a powerful and compelling participatory democracy, the result of which cannot be underestimated.

'The promise of democratic interactivity has been greater than its reality in almost every country. The combination of a search for profit, deregulation and reluctant governments has left the development of the technology, and its potentially immense implications for citizen feedback, in the hands of the market... When left solely to commercial developers, the potential inherent in new technology will be realised in ways, which maximise profit, rather than maximising democratic involvement' (Schultz 1994, 109).

The maximisation of profit in the area of entertainment has also seen desecrating standards in the broadcasting industry. Values carried in American programs include casual sexual situations, religious differences, violence and gangsterism, alcohol, drug usage and even pornography (Karthigesu 1994, 93-95). Early-evening programs like "Friends" regularly use references to masturbation and bodily functions, which previously would have been prohibited by the broadcasters or the censorship

authorities. Scenes such as a female student performing oral sex on a male student in an episode of "Boston Public" are now even passed as acceptable on television (Rutenberg 2001). In his article, "As Cable Applies Pressure, Network TV Spout Expletives" in *The New York Times* on 2nd September 2001, Jim Rutenberg commented that 'network censors are becoming more lenient'. During the last television season, ABC television network allowed an entire episode of "The Job", which 'revolved around the joyous visits of main characters and police officers to a massage parlour that offered a particular sort of sexual favour' (Rutenberg 2001).

The executives of CBS television network say that broadcast content 'writers today are submitting scripts for programs that include every crude word imaginable, including one considered to be on the furthest reaches of decorum' (Rutenberg 2001). The liberalisation between censors and producers has become a ritual in broadcast television, and standards have gradually been eased over the decades. Broadcast television today is under siege by smaller cable competitors that are winning audiences while pushing adult content. In catching up with the demands of the viewers, broadcasters have become more permissive in defining scripts that are of "good tastes". The networks are trying to satisfy advertisers who are tight with their money in time of difficult economy and are grasping for younger audiences whose spoken words may defy language acceptability (Rutenberg 2001).

With the liberalisation of censorship, it is programs such as the types mentioned above that appeal to the largest audiences and media owners choose these programs to capitalise in maximising their profits. These programs, however, do not serve the ‘public interest’, as they do not serve to educate the society, but rather ‘entertain’ only a particular segment of audiences, despite the fact that it still operates under the decency standards enforced by the Federal Communications Commission (Rutenberg 2001).

In the real world, the mass media operates as a business in a mass market where most people are consumers. As consumers, we purchase access to the media or hire the media. In each of these cases, there is a market of consumers and a business system of suppliers and producers. Most commercial media is heavily dependent on advertising. If you ask what media sells, the answer is, it sells audiences to advertisers. TV sells air time to advertisers as well. Their ability to sell air time depends on the companies’ ability to demonstrate the size and nature of their audiences. Such factors determine the level of advertising fees the companies can charge advertisers (Bessant and Watts 1999, 353), and it is this commercial value that commands what is the content of televised programs today.

What this means is that the service to ‘public interest’ is not the primary goal in the use of communications technologies. In the media business, the primary goal is profitability, and if left to serve only this goal, will harm the masses in the society. Bernard B. Smith, a New York lawyer in the radio industry, wrote an article in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1950 which stated that

‘if television is to serve not simply as a source of casual entertainment, but also as an instrument of public information and enlightenment, we must adopt a national policy for guiding its development – and speedily’ (Smith 1950, 34; Welch 1999, 108).

The media as a tool for mass communication can play the dual roles to serve the public interest as well as to serve the capitalists and the social actors. In times of declining economy, television networks' priority is to fulfill their primary function to serve the media owners and the social actors.

Television, as a broadcasting media is after all, ‘a component of business operating under the control of the capitalist class, and ultimately dedicated to protecting the interest of that class’ (Cunningham and Miller 1994, 31). TV works to peddle the ideas of the media owners and institutions of the ruling class. Entertainment programs on TV are targeted at commercially oriented, profit-seeking broadcasters and are used to dominate oppositional modes of social, economic and political organisation (Cunningham and Miller 1994, 31).

The tensions between the public service and the profit seeking functions of the media leave much to be desired in balancing the dual roles. In most cases, the equation of the public interest with commercial self-interest has been ruthlessly made (Schultz 1994, 112). If television is to serve as an instrument for public information, education and as a source of

entertainment, it will be imperative that a national policy for guiding its development must be regulated in the interest of the public and not to the capricious controlling power or the media owners (Smith 1950, 34; Welch 1999, 108).

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