UNIVERSITY

ACADEMIC THESIS

MEDIA, CULTURE, POWER –

THEORIES OF MASS COMMUNICATION

ASSIGNMENT TYPE: ESSAY

Questions:

Part 1 – Media Text (Kingwell, Mark "The edge of reality", The Age Good Weekend,
30 September 2000, p.35). What approach or approaches inform the author?
With specific reference to the features and examples of the approaches
identified in unit materials, justify your answer.

Part 2 – Describe the liberal-democratic approach to mass communications media.
Critically compare it to the Frankfurt School approach.
Discuss the critical value of these approaches.

Name: Edmond Ng
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Part 1 of Assignment 1 (GSC2411)
What approach or approaches inform the author? With specific reference
to the features and examples of the approaches identified in unit materials,
justify your answer. (Refer Appendix 1 for media texts)

As can be seen from the text by Mark Kingwell (2000) on "The edge of reality" in *The Age Good Weekend*, 30 September (p.35), the general approach in the writings indicate a *materialist* approach, which is unlike the *idealist*. The *materialist* concept takes up the view of culture as the institutional arrangements which organise the material practices and capacities that produce meanings and wider social outcomes. The *idealist* concept, on the other hand, sees culture as having been conceived in popular social commentary which circulates the way of thinking as a realm of moral, spiritual and aesthetic values, independent of and above society (Williams 1981, pp.9-14; Greenfield 2001, p.5). The materialist approach can be seen in Kingwell's article through the constant mention of the world embracing all things – from shoes to PCs, from blobs to the infantilisation of the postmodern imagination, where a gauge of progress in human affairs is measured by the success they enjoy in life through material gains, reflecting "the conditions for the dominance of a determinate social class, whose social power derived from its property ownership" (Marx 1973, pp.67-80).

Success, measured by 'smoothness' of dominance and materialism, however, has its dangers, where "civil locutions are often exposed… as glib rather than polite, manipulative instead of friendly. Newspapers and

bookshelves are full of smooth additions to the fund of what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has labelled 'the already thought'. He means the pat phrases and familiar positions of everyday discourse " (Kingwell 2000, p.35). This statement indicates the pre-existence of meaning that is used in the media to extend an unconscious relation to reality through intertexuality, where "mass media … consist of various layers of meanings superimposed on one another, all of which contribute to the effect" (Adorno 1976, pp.239-259) through the surface content, overt message and its hidden meaning. With the "whole world" made "to pass through the filter of culture industry", "real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies, forcing "its victims to equate it directly with reality" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1977, pp.349-374).

The constructed 'reality' of civilisation may perhaps not be so bad since "smoothness may well be one of the great achievements of human life" (Kingwell 2000). However, "a long and profound association between the elimination of (natural) roughness and the creation of (artificial) civilisation" (Kingwell 2000, p.35) may result in a manipulative construction of preconceived ideas that can insinuate into the unconscious lose of true insight into reality, thus falling into the dangers of stereotypes, including the acceptance of dictatorship (Adorno 1976, pp.239-259). The portrayal of smoothness and lovability propose the idea that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness" (Marx 1973, p.67). Kingwell, in his article, indicates that material goods are no longer built for

functionality or practicality, but for the smoothness of the eyes. The example used by him of cars shrinking into ever-smaller spaces for their inviting roundness, shows that the truth about 'reality' is "just business … made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce", where "any doubt about the social utility of the finished products is removed" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1977, pp.349-374) and "only the word coined by commerce … touches them as familiar" (Kingwell 2000).

Kingwell (2000) cited Wallace's definition of popular culture as "the symbolic representation of what people already believe". This definition is not dissimilar with Frankfurt School of thought, in which Adorno (1976, p.239) states that the structure and meaning of popular culture "show an amazing parallelism, even when they appear to have little in common on the surface", as a result of "pre-established attitudinal pattern of the spectator before … [the audience] is confronted with any specific content and which largely determine the way in which any specific content is being perceived" (Adorno pp.239-259).

As can be seen from Kingwell's article, the constructed smoothness in the society is the result of media's penetration through the unconscious mind, as a result of the reinforcing of already-thought elements. He believes that "we [as audiences] have become slaves to our own smoothness". This school of thought indicates a clear materialist's understanding of *false consciousness* in a constructed society – the approach of which is clearly based on the theory of the Frankfurt School.

Part 2 of Assignment 1 (GSC2411)
Describe the liberal-democratic approach to mass communications media.
Critically compare it to the Frankfurt School approach. Discuss the critical
value of these approaches.

In this essay, I will focus on primarily three areas of the approaches by liberal-democratic and Frankfurt School. The areas that will be discussed are the interpretation of mass society, the effects of the mass media and the theorised 'culture' as seen in individuals.

The liberal-democratic approach works with the notion of mass society, and judges it positively as the result of a progressive evolution, unlike the idealists Arnoldian and Leavisite and the materialist Frankfurt School approaches, which see mass society as a threat either to democratic institutions or to elite cultural values (Swingewood 1977, pp.8-10). The liberal-democratic sees the mass media as helping to secure rights of citizenship by disseminating information and providing pluralism of views, an area essential to the development of democracy and the operation of a public sphere for open debate (Shils 1957 and 1962, cited by Bennett 1982). The press and the mass media constitute a public sphere in which an open political debate can provide the 'public opinion' to influence governments (Janowitz 1952, cited by Bennett 1982), where the notion of press freedom may be developed as a principle wave of democracy to ensure the equilibrium of opinions from the different groups of people in the society (Bennett 1982, pp.38-41).

Through public debates, the liberal-democratic sees a pluralist society spelling the 'end of ideology', a contrast from the view of Frankfurt School, which sees the integration of large and lower levels of society as the standardisation of the means of production, where the individuals are tolerated only so long as their complete identification with the generality of a constructed social structure is unquestioned (Adorno and Horkheimer 1977, pp.349-374).

The public debate on mass society outlook in America from the late 1930s through to the 1950s was primarily focused on the social organisation of whether the thesis of social atomisation can be substantiated, instead of the 'cultural' end of the mass society critique on the question of the cultural consequences of the development of media (Bennett 1982, pp.38-41). This was because the debate was conducted by sociologists, rather than by literary or cultural theorists, as in Britain (Bennett 1982, pp.38-41). In the other part of the world, from the turn of the century until the late 1930s, the media and the study of its effects were already credited with "considerable power to shape opinion and belief, to change habits of life and to mould behaviour actively more or less according to the will of those who could control the media and their contents" (Bauer and Bauer 1960, cited by McQuail 1994, pp.328), a subject of which spells great concern by the public. By the 1970s, the development of a new view of media was formed "as having their most significant effects by constructing meanings and offering these constructs in a systematic way to audiences … on the basis of some form of negotiation into personal meaning structures … shaped by

prior collective identifications". This new approach to media effects became termed as 'social constructivist' (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, cited by McQuail 1994, pp.328-333).

The effects in which the behavioral sciences are most concerned about are the effects of modern mass communication upon the attitudes and behaviour of its audiences (Klapper 1968, pp.81-89). In the article "Communication; Mass; Effects" in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Science*, Klapper (1968), in supporting the theory of liberal-democracy, states that mass communication as an agent of persuasion, does not restrict or conform audiences to view things differently from their preset opinions, but that they can selectively choose to retain or reject any suggested texts. This implies that apart from reinforcing the impulses that which already exist (Klapper 1968, p.89; Schramm *et al.* 1961, pp.165-166), the audiences are heterogeneous and possess the ability to decide on their own, the media messages that are received and interpreted (Bennett 1982, pp.38-39). In contrast with this belief, the Frankfurt School suggests that the "rigid institutionalisation transforms modern mass culture into a medium of undreamed of psychological control" (Adorno 1976, p.239).

From the Frankfurt School of thought on the subject of mass communication effects, the media is seen as consisting of various layers of meanings superimposed on one another, all of which contribute to the effect of polymorphic meanings drawn from televised material that contains surface content, overt message and hidden meaning (Adorno 1976, p.239-

240). The dangers contorted by these effects are the equation of media's output with reality and the inability to distinguish real life from the constructed society, which is implanted by the mass media (Adorno and Horkheimer 1977, pp.349-374).

In the larger perspective of media effects in shaping opinions, and in the way society has been constructed to conform to the obedience of a social hierarchy (Adorno and Horkheimer 1977, pp.349-374), the individual is seen in the culture industry by the Frankfurt School as being threatened by capitalism. Culture, as seen by the capitalists, speaks of 'what do people want?' as if to reflective individuals, but in truth, is to those people who are deliberately deprived of individuality (Adorno and Horkheimer 1977, pp.349-374). In capitalism, the industry is interested in people, merely as customers and employees, where individuals are constantly reminded and urged to conform to the rational organisation and to fit in like sensible people, the resistance of which is then seen as deviancy to governance (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, pp.349-374). This view of 'culture' or of the individual is totally in contrast with the liberal-democratic approach of 'possessive individualism'.

Possessive individualism sees the individual as a man human free from the wills of others and from relations with others, except in relations that the individual chooses to enter into voluntarily (Macpherson 1962; Carens 1993). The individual is the proprietor of his own person and capacities with the right to alienate his capacity to labour. Human society is a series of

relations between sole proprietors (Macpherson 1962; Carens 1993). Political society or the role of governments is a human contrivance for the protection of the individual's property in his person and goods, and for the maintenance of orderly relations of exchange (Macpherson 1962; Carens 1993).

The arguments proposed by the liberal-democratic and the Frankfurt School demonstrates the different approaches to mass communications. As can be seen from these arguments, there is no one true account or view of a correct theory. While the liberal-democratic see mass society as a progressive evolution, the Frankfurt School sees it as a threat to society. As the society becomes more affluent, individuals can now learn to interpret and decipher the meaning of media texts, but this does not mean that the thoughts of individuals are not in any way affected by the shaping of effects from the mass media, whether consciously or unconsciously. The individual, living in a constructed society while having the choice to decide whether to conform to the will of others, is inevitably faced with the need to be accepted as a normal citizen or as a deviant.

APPENDIX 1: Media Text for Part 1 of Assignment

Media Culture Power

Reading to analyse for Part 1 of Assignment

Kingwell, Mark. "The edge of reality", *The Age Good Weekend*, 30 September 2000, p.35.

As the world embraces all things smooth – from running shoes to PCs – are we risking losing touch with the raw truth?

The world of our everyday experience is full of smooth objects. The dominant aesthetic in everything from running shoes to monumental architecture is the flowing curve and slick surface, the inviting mound and bright hue. Increasingly, the world is crowded with blobs: blobby furniture, blobby cars, blobby buildings. Modernism's glass-and-steel boxes, the towering slabs of the International Style, have given way to nursery's warmer, inviting surfaces and textures.

We are witnessing, in our footstools and watches and personal computers, a sort of infantilisation of the postmodern imagination. Cutting-edge running shoes now resemble socks or sheathes that fit over the foot, eliminating all trace of their functionality. Cars shrink into ever-smaller spaces, their inviting roundness unlike the aerodynamic, fighter-plane slashes of an earlier era. They are built not for speed, but for lovability. Everywhere we turn there is something – an armchair, a table, a vase – that makes us want to coo and murmur, to pet and fondle.

Perhaps this is not so bad; smoothness may well be one of the great achievements of human life. The smooth face of the shaved body suggests a mastery of sharp-edged tools as much as an aesthetic of separating oneself from the crudeness of nature; the smooth language between civil neighbours evens out, or deflects, the struggles of an always lurking state of nature. There is a long and profound association between the elimination of (natural) roughness and the creation of (artificial) civilisation.

Everybody loves baby-smooth skin; most people appreciate a smoothly turned phrase. Smoothness signals comfort, ease, respite from the challenging. There are smooth objects in nature: nothing is so inviting to the touch as a rock rounded by time and the sea, so exquisitely fresh as the surface of a tree after its bark has been removed. But surely we manufacture more smoothness than we find.

It would not be an exaggeration to make smoothness a gauge of progress in human affairs, just as, for most people, it provides a measure of the success they enjoy in life. We speak of individuals, behaviour and ages as more or less polished. The smooth delivery of the cue on the ball, the smooth glide of the dancers – all these things seem right, in a way we feel in our guts but would be hard-pressed to justify in rational terms.

Yet there are dangers, too, in an aesthetic sense too perfectly realised. Civil locutions are often exposed, eventually, as glib rather than polite, manipulative instead of friendly. Newspapers and bookshelves are full of smooth additions to the fund of what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has labelled "the already-thought". He means the pat phrases and familiar position of everyday discourse, where everything said has the consistency of a fast-food bun, at once predigested and stale.

Philosopher Theodor Adorno, writing in the blistering denunciatory spirit of his later years, saw fluent, already masticated language as the active enemy of wisdom. "Only what they do not need first to understand, they consider understandable", Adorno writes in his elliptical little book, *Minima Moralia*. "Only the word coined by commerce, and really alienated, touches them as familiar".

Writer David Foster Wallace once usefully defined popular culture as "the symbolic representation of what people already believe". Think of the way mainstream films and television and music create more and more sleek tokens in the dominant economy of cliché, giving you that faintly irritated feeling that you have seen all this before – that your intelligence, at some basic level, is being insulted by comfort. Are children always plucky or

vile, presidents always stout-hearted or hopelessly corrupt? Why do so many cinematic prostitutes have hearts of gold when so few people in the general population do? Why do television characters utter sentiments that would arouse only consternation or bewilderment if they occurred in actual conversation?

Smoothness is simple; complexity is often rough. Is this enough to explain our quiescent ingestion of so much nonsense? We know the clichés that replace the reality of our experience are empty-headed and pernicious, yet that knowledge has little effect. Most of the time it just reinforces the slight elation we feel at the merest interruption in the smooth transfer of already-thought elements from the screen to us. We have become slaves to our own expectation, challenges a received wisdom. How enthusiastically we react when a sit-com shows a tiny spark of originality, when a pop album exhibits the slightest glimmer of cleverness.

Can the same be said of the tactile sleekness of Nike's Air Max or the Macintosh G4? Surely these consumer confections are far removed from the lurking, pop-culture dangers of easy fatuity and comforting superficiality. Are they? Smooth objects, seductive in their physical smoothness, are as misleading as any slick addition to the stock of the already-thought.

They act to obscure the conditions of their own assembly in sweatshops that are anything but clean or polished. Here, in the factories of what we call the developing world, machines of an outmoded industrial age produce the objects of our post-industrial desire. The products of these throwback workshops are then extracted, arriving in flagship theme-park stores with no visible trace of their dirty origins. There is no acknowledgment of the bright and smooth thing emerging from the dark and jagged; the diamond in the rough, the gold in the dross. Here in the hush of polished wood and brushed steel, it's all gems all the time, everywhere smoothness smoothly presented. When an object appears with the hallmark easy swiftness smoothly presented. When an object appears with the hallmark easy swiftness of the postmodern cool, we know instinctively to compare it not

with the dirt and confusion of the place it came from, but with the bright image from television or print that heralded its arrival.

The seductions of smoothness go beyond the placeless, spaceless, ethereal arrival of the shoe or laptop. They embrace the larger value of efficiency, or usefulness, which is most often expressed as even flow: of goods, data, capital, or individuals. Things function better, are more useful, when they submit to this flow, when they shed their hard, idiosyncratic edges and enter the appropriate streams and channels of transportation without too much trouble. The inner logic of smoothness is not just about reproducibility; it is also about the idea that anything and everything may be smoothly converted into a meta-language of useful disposal and thus effortlessly transferred from one place to another.

This easy flow cries out for more interruptions, more useless stoppages of goods and information. As architect Rem Koolhaas noticed two decades ago, it is traffic jams that reveal the delirious heart of a city, the unplanned chaos subverting rational imperatives of movement. By the same token, breaks in data flow remind us of the messy infrastructure of our communication, its preconceptions, biases and class differences. Paradoxical statements break the routine of exchanging already-thought ideas. And goods unexpectedly arrested are subject to an isolation altogether more illuminating, more unsettling, than the jewellery-box presentation of the store. Now we see exposed, maybe for the first time, in clogged streets and broken networks and odd claims and stranded objects, the dirty machinery of production. The struts and girders of inequality, the cantilevers of effort, are no longer covered by moulded-steel cladding or plastic coating. The guts of craft and luck and error, of exploitation and hype and deceit, are spilling out. They have their own peculiar beauty: not the easy beauty of smoothness, but the much more demanding beauty of truth.□

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