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Media as Social Institution

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Mass media have emerged as a social institution, assuming many of the functions formerly served by traditional social institutions such as the church, school, government, and family. However, in Western countries operating on the private-ownership model (most notably the United States), media systems were never intended to serve as a social institution. Instead, the primary objective of a privately owned media organization is to make a profit for the company. Thus, many films, television programs, and Web sites contain sexual and violent content designed to attract the largest imaginable audience. The messages contained in these programs can be confusing or disruptive to a public looking to the media for direction, purpose, and meaning. The public's reliance on the Western media for guidance and support can therefore be dangerous. Within this context, media literacy provides strategies that enable people to critically examine media messages and put media programming into meaningful perspective.

Keywords: *media; social institution; socialization; media literacy*

One of the first questions that students ask when they enroll in media literacy classes can be summarized as follows: "Why do we need to study media literacy? After all, are not films, television programs, Internet chat rooms, and video games simply entertainment?"

One way to address this question is by considering the emergence of mass media as a social institution, which has assumed many of the functions formerly served by traditional social institutions such as the church, school, government, and family.

A social institution is an organization that is critical to the socialization process; it provides a support system for individuals as they struggle to become members of a larger social network. To illustrate, day care and kindergarten teachers focus the majority of their attention on "classroom management" skills, instructing students about how to stand in line and raise their hands when they want to talk in class.

Institutions contribute to the stability of a society by maintaining an ongoing presence. In that sense, institutions are often tied to tradition. Social institutions such as the church maintain formalized practices and procedures. These rules

apply to governance of the institution, including issues of leadership, membership, and dismissal from the institution.

An institution is a relatively self-contained social system. Within the institution is found a large variety of social roles that are linked to authority relationships. An institution such as the family invites the lifelong involvement of the individual. Although the role of an individual may change within an institution during the course of his or her lifetime (e.g., from child to parent), the institution remains the same.

FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Membership in a group. Institutions offer individuals a sense of identity through membership in a group. To illustrate, college students who may have had only a passing acquaintance with one another in school often greet each other warmly when running into each other after graduation. This camaraderie stems from their common collegiate affiliation as former Buckeyes, Spartans, or Gorlocks.

Providing access to groups, people. Society can be highly stratified and closed, as people who move to a new city can testify. One way to overcome this isolation is to join a church group, club, or enroll in a college class.

Unifying diverse groups of people. Social institutions provide a shared experience for people who would otherwise not interact with one another. Indeed, one of the benefits of attending college is the opportunity to participate in class discussions with people of different races, ages, and countries of origin.

Establishing a sense of order. Amid the chaos of life, human beings share a desire for stability. In that regard, social institutions provide an essential sense of order in people's lives. For instance, each semester, college students map out a schedule that dictates their daily activities—including class time and homework. Indeed, by the end of each semester, each moment of their time is consumed by project deadlines and final exams.

Helping people contend with change. Every social institution maintains its own rituals designed to help individuals adjust to the inevitable changes in their lives. These rights of passage formally acknowledge the transition from one stage of life to another. For instance, most religions have ceremonies that acknowledge birth, adolescence, adulthood, and death. In like fashion, the graduation ceremony is a significant rite of passage in the social institution of education. In the course of the ceremony, students walk from one side of the stage to the other to receive their degree. This journey symbolizes the personal and

professional transition of a college education; by the time that he or she reaches the other side of the stage, the new graduate has moved to a new stage of life.

Defining success/failure. Every social institution maintains its own definitions of success and failure based on the value system of the institution. In the case of educational institutions, success is defined as graduating and learning something in the process.

Defining/Affirming values. Each social institution is defined by its own set of values. For instance, the world of education upholds the value of learning. Moreover, membership in a social institution affirms the individual's value system. Belonging to a group populated by people who subscribe to the same values provides a climate of acceptance that is reassuring for individuals.

Establishing rules of behavior. Every social institution maintains its own rules of behavior for its members. For instance, people who are married have a clear understanding of what is appropriate and inappropriate marital behavior. In like manner, students know what conduct is expected of them—in part, a result of the classroom management skills they have learned in day care and kindergarten.

Providing a sense of direction/purpose. Social institutions furnish individuals with a path that they can follow to achieve success and fulfillment (as defined by the particular institution). Thus, the church offers a means by which people can realize salvation. Schools also provide a course of study leading to the goal of learning (and graduation).

Furnishing role models. Every institution has its own set of role models—individuals who epitomize the values of the social institution. Members of a church group would look up to the church elders. In schools, teachers embody the values of learning and scholarship. And in the family, the parents and grandparents would be likely role models.

Educating. Social institutions educate their members—either about the parameters of the social institution itself or about the larger world, interpreted through the ideology of the social institution. Thus, religious schools focus attention on church dogma and discuss social problems such as drugs and alcohol through the filter of church doctrine.

Presenting information on past, present, and future. Social institutions furnish information about the past, present, and future. To illustrate, each religion tells stories explaining where we came from, our current moral state, and where we are headed. History, sociology, and science classes focus attention on the

past, present, and future. And family trees trace the lineage of individuals, supplying valuable information about an individual's personal history.

Offering a safe haven to exchange ideas (within limits). Social institutions furnish an arena in which to discuss ideas—particularly principles of the social institution. Bible study classes or Sunday schools offer an opportunity to debate religious doctrine. However, it must be noted that these discussions advocate refinements rather than radical changes in the system. Thus, although these groups may disagree about the interpretation of particular dogma, they will never argue for the dissolution of the social institution itself.

Offering a buffer from society. As mentioned earlier, social institutions play a significant role in the socialization process, supporting individuals as they move into larger society. But at the same time, membership in a social institution can actually insulate individuals from the demands and rigors of society. As an example, militia groups in the United States provide status and meaning for people who otherwise operate on the fringes of society. On weekends, at least, these people wear uniforms, march around, and address each other in titles such as "Colonel."

Controlling deviant behavior. Institutions generally permit a range of behaviors by their members. However, to remain as a member of the institution, individuals must adhere to its fundamental principles and guidelines. The following scenario illustrates this function. A young adult brings his or her "significant other" home to meet the family. Although the couple share living quarters where they reside, the parents make it clear that "if you want to stay in our house, you have to follow our rules." In other words, separate bedrooms.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MASS SOCIETY

According to historian Daniel Bell (as cited in Mendelsohn, 1996), the major influences of mass culture—globalization, urbanization, industrialization, modernization, communication, and democratization—have contributed to the alienation of individuals:

> The revolutions in transport and communications have brought men [*sic*] into closer contact with each other and bound them in new ways; the division of labor has made them more interdependent; tremors in one part of the society affect others. Despite this greater interdependence, however, individuals have grown more estranged from one another. The old primary group ties of family and parochial faiths are questioned; few unifying values have taken their place. Most important, the critical standards of an educated elite no longer shape opinion or taste. As a result, mores and morals are in constant flux; relations between individuals are tangential or compartmentalized rather than organic. At the same time, greater

mobility, spatial and social, intensifies concern over status. Instead of a fixed or known status symbolized by dress of titles, each person has to prove himself in a succession of new situations.

Because of all this, the individual loses a coherent sense of self. His anxieties increase. (pp. 35-36)

Bell's critique of mass culture was written in 1956. Since that time, these characteristics of mass culture have become even more pronounced, straining the capacity of traditional social institutions to function effectively. To illustrate,

- In the United States, married-couple households have slipped from nearly 80% in the 1950s to just 50.7% in 2003. Of female high school seniors, 54% say they believe that having a child outside of marriage is a worthwhile lifestyle. Since 1960, there has been an 850% increase in the number of unmarried couples living with kids (Conlin & Hempel, 2003, p. 106).
- The proportion of adults in the United States with no religious preference doubled from 7% in 1991 to an unprecedented 14% in 1998 (Cristol, 2002, p. 14).
- As of 2001, 15% of people in the United States age 18 to 24 have not completed high school and are currently not enrolled (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004).

However, sociologist Emile Durkheim (as cited in Mendelsohn, 1966) made two observations about social institutions that have a significant bearing on this discussion:

As society grows more complex, specialized institutions serving specialized social needs develop and proliferate to maintain social stability; and

New institutional forms displace old ones only when the old ones no longer manage to serve their original purposes effectively. (p. 140)

Within this context, it can be argued that the mass media have emerged as a social institution, fulfilling many of the functions that are no longer being served by traditional social institutions such as the family, church, and school.

Space constraints prohibit a full consideration of the ways in which the media fulfill the functions of a social institution discussed above. However, much has been written about the impact of the media on the socialization process. Increasingly, people look to the media for direction with respect to values and rules of behavior. Indeed, media programs such as the James Bond films can be regarded as guidebooks, furnishing directions on the proper ways to behave (and the rewards that go with this kind of behavior). In that sense, media programs convey messages about success, as well as the best ways to get there. And despite sports commentator Charles Barkley's protestations, media figures have emerged as societal role models, epitomizing standards of success that their fans strive to emulate.

The media supply people with membership in groups, defined by the programs they watch, chat rooms they join, and (thanks to media), products they buy. A person who watches MTV and WB teen programming forms a virtual

community—or market—that is readily exploited by advertisers. In that sense, the media unify diverse groups of people.

The media provide a sense of order and stability in the lives of individuals. People arrange their daily routines around media activities, such as reading the morning newspaper, watching their favorite television programs, and checking their e-mail. As a result, the media have an enormous affect on the lifestyle of a culture—dictating daily activities, language, and fashion.

Increasingly, individuals rely on media programs as they contend with changes in their lives. In times of tragedy, such as the events of 9/11, people turn to the media for information and comfort. At the same time, they look to media programming (e.g., *Dr. Phil* and *Oprah*) to prepare them to meet new personal challenges in their lives. In this regard, the media have co-opted many traditional rituals and rights of passage: Thanksgiving is now a time to gather around the television to watch football, part of the Christmas tradition is watching the film *It's a Wonderful Life*, and the media have even created new rituals such as the Super Bowl to mark the end of the football season.

Media programming also fulfills a major educational function. The Internet is now an instantaneous source of information. Documentaries and news programming inform audiences about the past, present, and future. In addition, media programming, such as that of *People* magazine and E-Network, provides a wealth of information about itself—box office information, reports on new programs, and gossip about its stars.

But although the media furnish a safe place for people to discuss media, these discussions operate within limits. To illustrate, in the United States, media critics stop short of suggesting radical changes such as conversion from a private ownership system to a state-run media ownership model.

In addition, the media provide indirect access to subcultures within a country, as well as indirect contact with other countries. But at the same time, the media also act as a buffer from society. Television programs, films, and magazines serve as a major form of escape and distraction from the pressures of everyday life.

Countries in which the media are state owned (e.g., Vietnam and China) recognize the power of the media as a social institution. These governments use the media to support the political agenda of the government. "Official" state media content is very prescriptive, telling its audience what to think and how to act. In addition, in many of these countries, regulations prohibit content in media presentations that undermines the countries' religious and moral beliefs. In Iran, for instance, censors require that filmmakers make changes in dialogue and action that meet the moral standards of the country.

However, in Western countries that operate on the private ownership model (most notably the United States), the media systems were never *intended* to serve as a social institution. Instead, the primary objective of a privately owned media organization is to make a profit for the company. As a result, many films, television programs, and Web sites contain sexual and violent content designed

to attract the largest imaginable audience. The messages contained in these pro-grams can be confusing or disruptive to individuals looking to the media for direction, purpose, and meaning.

The other major difference between Western media and traditional social institutions is that these media have no means of controlling deviant behavior. Audiences are encouraged to consume the media wherever and whenever possi-ble. Indeed, many media presentations depict a world without consequences, which serves to promote aberrant behavior.

CONCLUSION

With this discussion of media as social institution, we return to our initial question, Why study media literacy? One answer is that audiences have come to expect the media to serve the functions of traditional social institutions—functions that they were never designed to fulfill, looking for answers when the media presentation is simply focused on attracting a large audience by any means possible. The public's reliance on the Western media for guidance and support can therefore be problematic unless media messages are examined criti-cally and put into meaningful perspective—which is the purview of media literacy.

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