

# FEAR: THE EMOTIONAL OUTCOME OF MASS MEDIA IN AMERICA

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The mass media in America serves many functions that have had an array of effects on those exposed. Throughout time, technological innovations have given rise to the mass communications and media, leading to an escalation of its effects on the world's people. The most important effect has been a psychological shift to a constant state of fear due to media exposure. Fear of black men, fear of airplane crashes, fears of violence amongst children, and fears of cultural domination have all been caused by mass communications and the media in America.

Mass communication is "the use of print or electronic media, such as newspapers, magazines, film, radio, or television, to communicate to large numbers of people who are located in various places" (Berger, 1995:12). These communications serve a variety of functions. One such function is the surveillance function. Mass communications suggest an element of anxiety that pushes people to be attentive to what is going on around them (Berger, 1995). The oddity in this function is that the anxiety that people feel that pushes them to be attentive to their surroundings is a direct cause of mass communications. In a study where people were paid not to watch television, when the people stopped, they began socializing and getting out more. Once they began watching television again, they rarely socialized and went out much less (Servan-Schreiber, 1974). Since people socialize less when they watch television, they become disassociated from their surroundings and begin to feel that the outside world is dangerous and they fear it. However, mass communications gives them an awareness of their surroundings that calms their worries, so people actually rely on the surveillance function of mass communication (Berger, 1995).

Tony Schwartz's theory, presented by Berger (1995), believes that the media makes use of some of the information already known by the person or people being communicated to, which means that the media is used to "press people's buttons", not for the transfer of information. This theory shows that the media, commercials in particular, play a role in "shaping our attitudinal structure" (Berger, 1995). This is part of the persuasion function of media. Sometimes the persuasion function serves for instigation of immediate action by audience members, such as donating or volunteering (Hovland, 1953). Persuasion, as a way to assimilate people into behaving a certain way, has been studied under many variables. Persuasion has been found to be most successful when there is a monopoly in propaganda. The Nazi's in Germany were successful in their persuasive efforts because there were no competing sources and opinions. The United States also used the persuasion function of media during World War II, when they used the radio to promote and maintain identification with the war effort. Morale was built up among citizens

because there was no counter-propaganda. Persuasion is still used in the media today to maintain and reaffirm the status quo. Other studies on the persuasion function of media show that the more "personal" the media is, the better at persuading it is, such as the "fireside chats" by Roosevelt during the Great Depression, which were used to calm people's worries. Also associated with Roosevelt's "fireside chats" is how persuasion works through not attacking an existing opinion, but rather building up the opposing new one (Schramm, 1954).

Throughout history, the media has served these and other functions while shifting from one form to another. Media and mass communication began with the innovation of turning speech into writing some 30,000 years ago (Stross, 1976). Not until the 1450s was this innovation combined with another innovation, the printing press, to produce Johannes Gutenberg's bibles that began the tide of mass communication (Gordon, 1975). In the 1700s, the printing press was used to print newspapers that spread ideas throughout the United States. Then, in 1844, the first telegraph line was opened, which meant that communications in forms of dots and dashes could travel anywhere by way of wire, a much faster means of communication. The telegraph was later modified upon, allowing the transmittance of human speech, and it became known as the telephone (Barnouw, 1956). Finally, in 1896, a young Irish-Italian found that human speech could travel through radio waves, where wire was not needed. Another form of communication is the photograph, which was invented in 1839. Later on, in 1880, photographer Eadweard Muybridge created the first moving pictures, known today as movies (Barnouw, 1956). In the late 1930s, television transmission was invented, which allowed moving pictures as well as human speech to be transmitted by wire to television sets (Gordon, 1975). The television was an innovation off of its broadcasting ancestors, the radio, the telephone, and the telegraph, combined with the idea of moving pictures.

These technologies of mass media have proliferated within the American cultural system and have diffused into other cultural systems while having many social effects on them. One effect has been termed "infopollution" by Servan-Schreiber (1974:197), who states that the "overwhelming amounts of available information are having a polluting effect on humans similar to the effect of industry on the environment." This is because pollution is the production of something in such quantities that it cannot be used or absorbed by nature. Information is given both too frequently and at too high of a quantity through media (Servan-Schreiber, 1974). The typical American, who watches about four hours of television a day, is exposed to an extensive amount of information on all subjects in both image and speech form (Berger, 1995). Another

problem with mass media is that newspapers print the lies of governments, businesses, political parties and labor unions (Serven-Schreiber, 1974). An effect of this is that people do not know what to believe, or believe things that aren't even true. Another social outcome of mass media, especially television, is the decrease in people socializing and going out (Summers, 1966). People have also discontinued participation in events, and instead just watch them (Starker, 1989). Related to this is a study that was done in France, in which the results showed that people talk less due to the increase in media in the daily lives of individuals there (Serven-Schreiber, 1974).

Statistics show how much media is a part of the everyday-lives of most people in America and how it has increased over time. In the United States in 1989, there were 1500 daily newspapers, 7,600 weekly newspapers, 60,000 magazines and journals, 40,000 books yearly, and 40 million radio shows. In 1690, there was only one newspaper in the United States, and in 1905 only one movie, known then as a "nickelodeon". In 1989, however, there were 150 million T.V. sets in use in the United States (Starker, 1989). A study done in the early 1970s showed that the average American watched 1300 hours of T.V. a year, about 3.5 hours a day (Serven-Schreiber, 1974). This figure has remained steady since then, but that was due to the increase in computer usage and the development of the internet. In 1999, the television was on in the average American house over 7 hours a day, which is actually less than Japan and Mexico. The average house also had 2.9 TVs, 1.8 VCRs, 3.1 radios, 2.6 tape players, 2.1 C.D. players, 1.4 video game systems, and 1 computer (Gitlin, 2001). This means that within just one century, all of these technological innovations have spread throughout American society and have diffused into the world, leading to an immense cultural change.

Modernization has led to one very important psychological shift in American society. This shift is a great increase in fear since the appearance of media. Today the fear can be seen in the voices who call the television the "boob tube" and call those who watch it a "couch potato", while in the past, comic books were labeled "junk" and some even went so far as to burn them. The fear that is present now due to media has a deep history. For instance, Socrates was condemned to death for his innovative use of speech. When journalism arose, critics stated that it was bad because it just contained the history of the troubles of the world for a day, which then leads to a decrease in mental health of urban peoples (Starker, 1989). In 1844, moralists began to attack the erotic books that they feared by writing their own books that made people fear, such as *Important Facts for Young Men* and *The Secret Habits of the Female Sex: Letters Addressed to a Mother on the Evils of Solitude* (Tebbel, 1974). Comic strips are another feared form of media, which have been called "marijuana of the nursery, the horror of the house, the curse of the kids, and a threat to the future" (Starker, 1989:80). Movies were also a fear of traditionalists in the 1920s, when women began wearing make-up and short skirts seen in the movies while young people in general began public drinking and smoking, engaging in conversations about sex, and participating in vulgar dancing. The traditionalists feared that movies were causing this "negative" behavior, and that would lead to the eventual destruction of "positive" society (Starker, 1989).

Many other fears are still prevalent in American society that are a direct cause of media communications. Critics of media fear that the media gives us a false picture of reality. They feel that the media gives us unrealistic ideas about life possibilities and it is this picture of reality that justifies the status quo (Berger, 1995). Another issue with reality is that television shows are not real, but people treat them like they are (Gitlin, 2001). Starker (1989:104) stated about movies that "the power of their attraction was equated with a surrender of the will, which transformed human beings into passive repositories for all manner of

suggestion." Hyman (1961) says that the danger in mass culture is the existence of a captive audience with no escape. Traces of images from television shows, commercials, and movies remain in our memories, which are why they become, in a sense, reality (Gitlin, 2001). Phillip Conrad Kottak terms this phenomenon the cultivating effect, which means that the more time people spend watching television, the more they perceive the world as being similar to that of television. A cross-cultural study by Kottak in Brazil shows that this is true outside of the boundaries of American society, except in Brazil the specific TV content does the "cultivating", not TV as a medium like in American society. Critics of mass media also fear that media has caused diminished control over many people's personal and family lives because of the media's intrusiveness. They fear that children and adults will have no control over their lives because of the passivity that media causes. This is a very bad in a society that is oriented towards action and accomplishment, as well as thinking innovatively (Starker, 1989). Another issue with the media is that it feeds in lies from governments and businesses that people believe and think are a part of reality (Klapper, 1960)

Another great fear that deals with the issue of reality is the fear that the media causes violence, especially in children. It is thought that exposure to the media at such high rates leads children to believe that crime and violence are normal and common behaviors (Klapper, 1960). It also directs children to imitative behavior (Summers, 1966). For example, in the 1950s, when a young boy received a poor report card, he told his father that they could give the teacher a poisoned box of chocolates like he saw on TV. Fear of imitative behavior amongst children has caused many to think that we should protect children from the television programs as if we were protecting them from physical danger (Klapper, 1960). In 1980, at the end of a ten-year study, the results showed that television does lead to aggression in children, especially in the United States where violence is so prevalent in broadcasts. Compared to Great Britain, the television programs in the United States are three times more violent, which means that children in the U.S. are exposed to three times as much violence each and every day (Roach, 1993).

Violence in the media is the source of fear for a number of reasons. One of the reasons is that the media serves as a means to reduce tension, but since the source of those tensions is put aside, audience members tend to avoid real problems or attempt to fix them through fantastic or violent means (Klapper, 1960). The violence that the media causes in this is what creates fear in others.

To some extent, the government is responsible for some of the fears of the American people. For example, during the time of Ronald Reagan's presidency, the government sponsored TV commercials that used sophisticated gadgetry to win support for the "Star Wars" plan in the nuclear arms race. The idea that "Star Wars" was even needed evoked fear in people. This is part of the military-industrial-communication complex, in which the three are tied into one another. For instance, G.E., a major defense producer, bought RCA and NBC, two vast media communications outlets. The military-industrial-communication complex is why the communications and media support war, which is why fear is induced (Roach, 1993).

Another fear of the general American public that the media has produced is the fear of differences between people. This is because the media uses stereotypes that are racial, ethnic, religious, based on sexual orientation, and based on occupational groups. This gives viewers and listeners of broadcasts a distorted representation of other people because all members of a group of people are not like just a few individuals within the group (Berger, 1995). These stereotypes are due to a psychological function of society that displaces aggression and various frustrations on a target group of people that is usually different from one's own.

After World War I when Germany was having problems, the Nazi's used the Jews as a scapegoat for them (Schramm, 1954). Today Americans tend to fear black men because of "the excessive attention paid to dangers that a small percentage of African-American men create for other people, and by a relative lack of attention to dangers that a majority of black men face themselves" (Glassner, 1999:109).

Although the American media today doesn't appear to be serving many great functions in the United States, "media imperialism" is still taking place, where the media from Western nations, especially the United States, are becoming the main broadcasts for other nations (Berger, 1995). This is not only a form of diffusion of technological elements from one culture to another; it is also the acculturation of other cultures by Western contacts. This idea has been the founding of fears that diversity and identity will cease to exist in the future due to a cultural take-over. Connected to this idea and the idea of stereotypes in the media is the media's practice of ethnocentrism. For example, in the media in the United States, the Americans are always the "good" guys. The Russians, who were greatly affected by ethnocentrism in American media, feel that media should depict only reality, without expression of one's opinion of it (Berger, 1995).

Today, the media uses everyday situations and twists them into a story that will shock you and almost pull you into knowing all of the details, as skewed as they might be. Plane crashes are one type of situation that the media takes advantage of. Headlines in previous years have read "Air Safety—Under a Cloud" (Time) and "High Anxiety in the Skies" (USA Today). Unfortunately, for the public, these headlines are overly exaggerated. Since the beginning of commercial aviation in 1914, only 13,000 people have died. That is 3 times less than the amount of people who die in car crashes in the United States in a single year. To state it a different way, a person's chance of dying from a plane crash is the same chance of them winning the jackpot in the state lottery. These false headlines have led to fears in adults and children, who now feel, due to these stories, that airplanes are an unsafe mode of transportation and that cars are much safer (Glassner, 1999).

Another fear that is common due to recent media exposure is that of homicidal strangers. How often do you turn on your television to find murders and assaults being listed and described on the news? Better yet, how often does this not happen? In the late 1990s, fears rose about crime and homicidal outbursts in schools although both have declined. In the 1996 academic year, only 19 children died out of the 54 million that attend school in the United States. Although those were the facts, news on television and in the newspaper and magazine headlines continued to reflect the belief that murders, especially in schools, were on the rise. Time and U.S. News & World Report both had headlines that referred to "Teenage Time Bombs", while negative behavior in young children was "becoming increasingly more commonplace in America" according to CNN (Glassner, 1999:xiv). Crime in general has also been feared due to false journalism. Although Time magazine stated that there was an "epidemic of workplace violence", the truth was that only 1,000 people out of 121 million are murdered on the job each year (Glassner, 1999:27). This is only 1 in 114,000, and this does not include the factoring in of occupational dangers. Police officers, security guards, and taxi drivers are at a much higher risk than other workers, which is indicated by their higher death rate. However, the media does not show these facts, they show only the ones that will stir people up and leave them wanting to know more (Glassner, 1999). This is due to a policy in place since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in which the dominant news value is conflict (Roach, 1993). This value of conflict is reflected in the news that commonly depicts instances of war, murders, and other violence.

Fear by media does not always have its effects on adults, though; children have also increased in levels of fear since the birth of media. Studies of children have shown that violence in the media causes nightmares in young children, who in their sleep recall violent images shown through broadcasting. Researchers have also found that children have anxiety about growing up because television emphasizes adults in conflict. They feel that an early awareness about the complexities of life give children some anxiety about their own adult life, such as going to school, leaving home, finding a job, going to work, and marriage (Klapper, 1960).

Analysis and research on fear has been done by several people, who have discovered why the media does not work as a means of social control and why an emotional appeal does not reinforce new beliefs. It has been found that earlier "pessimistic" communications will produce an "emotional inoculation", feeling less worried if the "pessimistic" view became official. This means that "the use of strong fear appeals will interfere with the over-all effectiveness of a persuasive communication if such appeals evoke a high degree of emotional tension without adequately providing for reassurance" (Hovland, 1953:271). One study that was done illustrated these findings. In the study, three groups of high school students were given a lecture on dental hygiene. The greater the fear used by the lecturer, the more emotional tension there was in the group. It was found that the greater the fear appeal, the less likely the individuals in the group were to conform to recommendations offered by the lecturer. This is because they were not relieved by the lecturer's reassurances due to the high fear appeal, which caused them to become motivated to ignore the threat and treat it as if it didn't exist. Basically, what these studies show is that high degrees of emotional appeal and fear appeals do not work well in shifting the ideologies and opinions of a group of people. It would be much more effective if fear was used in little or no quantities (Hovland, 1953).

Though much research, it is known that the mass media has frightened and threatened many. We also know how and why mass media continues to induce fear among listeners and watchers of its broadcasts (Starker, 1989). However, it has been found that the media is ineffective in its fear-causing tactics, because the greater the fear appeal, the less likely one is to conform to what the communications are saying to do. With hope, American society will shift out of the vicious cycle of fear that it is in and develop into a society that does not harshly affect the participators in it by bringing them into a negative consciousness.

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