All Media Are Social: Sociological Perspectives on Mass Media
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All Media Are Social presents an overview of media sociology in a context that will be recognizable among those familiar with a political economy-based critical theory approach to media or a cultural studies perspective of it. In the process it presents a mixture of overview and detailed description that, while exploring some interesting and valuable ideas, suffers from weaknesses in conceptual execution, especially in lack of tie-backs to media theory and places where context and completeness are lacking in discussions around the authors’ selected topics.

The text is organized into four sections across eleven chapters, beginning with a two-chapter overview that defines terms and sets the theoretical context. The starting point for the discussion is that media are essential to processes of socialization, identity construction, and supply of information necessary for society to function effectively, not least for the purposes of democracy. Sociologists, the authors point out, have a special interest in power relations in a society, as exercised both through institutions (such as the media system) but also through culture, especially social norms and ideology. The two are intertwined, of course, because media presentations constitute a major part of a society’s culture. Chapter 2 does a good job of explaining the ideas of Theodor Adorno and Jurgen Habermas, but the text never really returns to them for analysis other than a few brief mentions in later chapters.
This two-chapter overview is followed by a four-chapter section about media production, with one chapter each devoted to business models, media concentration, government regulation of media, and the evolution of journalism to its current state. Next is a three-chapter segment on media content, with a chapter each focused on the politicization of cable news, issues of how gender and sexuality are presented, and issues of how race and class are presented. A final section of two chapters focuses on media audiences, one considering media effects in general and the other specifically from an active audience perspective.

Taken together, the result is an examination of media creation, media representation, and media reception, which is a reasonable and productive way to divide an examination of media impacts on society. These topics also constitute three of the four sides of Griswold’s ‘cultural diamond’ (p. 13) that the authors use as an organizing framework. Insightful analyses are offered on a number of specific ideas and constructs in each of these arenas, but on a fairly narrow band of topics. For example, politicization of the news-surveillance system and representations of identity – discussed in Chapters 7 to 9 – unquestionably are important elements of media’s social impact, and the text contains some good, evidence-based discussion of these topics. The subsection with those chapters, however, is titled ‘Media Content’ – a topic that goes far beyond just the matters that are discussed. This lack of a broad perspective is the main weakness of the work, here and elsewhere.

Chapter 3 separates the discussion of business models into the three major ones of subscription (fee) based, advertising-supported, and public funded. It presents numerous up-to-date statistics and examples e.g., demonstrating the growth of streaming media and related ‘cord cutting’ along with the dramatic growth of targeted digital advertising on social media platforms. Some discussion of the social implications of these models is included, such as what can happen to content when providers are more interested in serving advertisers than in serving the information needs of their audiences. Aside from a brief mention of Adorno’s hypothesis about how commercial media degrades cultural production, though, the chapter lacks any real discussion about the deeper implications of a media system based so significantly on commercial imperatives.

Chapter 4 similarly has a decent discussion of the contemporary state of media concentration based on three primary strategies of specialization, vertical integration and horizontal integration. The chapter then takes a deep dive into Klinenberg’s ‘homogenization hypothesis’, which says that concentration undermines media diversity, only to seek to refute the hypothesis a few pages later by examining media concentration through the Herfindahl-Hirschmann Index for measuring industry concentration (often in anti-trust contexts). A more important consideration than concentration, the authors argue, is the different ways in which
media diversity is expressed, notably in format (type of programming), demographic portrayals (especially of race, gender, and sexuality), and ideology (different political, social, and religious views). Chapter 4 surmises that oft-noted limitations on diversity – especially of demographic identities and of ideology – should not be attributed to media concentration but rather to a general ideology of corporate ownership. This contention is supported with a review of Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model and its ‘filters’ shaping commercial media content.

Chapter 5 examines the variety of ways in which government puts a thumb on the scale of media operations, notably the U.S. Federal Communications Commission regulations regarding broadcast licensing, the digital divide, net neutrality, ownership, and content (e.g., limits on obscene and indecent content). A digression at the end covers efforts by political officials to shape their images and messages, with examples ranging from Woodrow Wilson to Donald Trump. But again, while good discussions and pertinent examples of specific media regulations and their impacts are presented, the lack of an overarching discussion of social implications for media regulation by the state is lacking. These implications go well beyond what the FCC does or doesn’t do. Leading theories of how the media and political systems interact, such as Siebert, Peterson and Schramm’s (1956) *Four theories of the Press*, are never incorporated into the analysis.

The discussion of journalism’s evolution and current situation in Chapter 6 likewise presents some detailed information about how the media system affects the journalistic product, especially processes and norms such as news judgment (gatekeeping), objectivity, independence and verification. This is contextualized within Bourdieu’s ‘field theory’, which proposes how the actions of social institutions – such as journalism – are constrained and directed by a combination of their external structure (such as markets), internal norms, and degree of agency or autonomy available to members of the institution (or field) within the constraints of structure and norms. Discussion of social implications for the journalism that results from this series of forces, however, is missing. The book’s first chapter points out specifically that implications of media as a social institution are closely linked to the democratic function. No function of the media is more closely associated with democracy than journalism. Yet an entire chapter about the shape (and re-shaping) of journalism fails to bring ideas of power and democracy into the discussion aside from a couple of passing mentions to 1990s’ era public journalism.

The book’s second section, labeled in the table of contents as ‘Content’, is essentially a series of case studies about media representation. The first of these, Chapter 7, concerns the politicization of cable news, while the other two are about representations of gender and sexuality (Chapter 8) and representations of race
and class (Chapter 9). As in the previous section about media production, significant ideas about each of the topics are presented and buttressed with up-to-date examples and some discussion of social implications centered on hegemonic privilege. As the authors put it, it is ‘not surprising that those who are more privileged in society are also privileged in media representation’ (p. 123). But aside from this general conclusion, the ‘big picture’ of what this implies for the social system again remains lacking.

Chapter 7, for example, offers a rebuttal to the canard of liberal bias in the media, and then explores the development of the conservative ‘outrage machine’ and echo chamber centered on Fox News and other right-wing media. Social implications of these developments for trust in media and other ‘transpartisan’ institutions such as higher education also are discussed. Likewise, Chapters 8 and 9 cover how gender, sexuality, race, and class are represented – or not – in media. Both chapters discuss criteria for representation, such as numbers of representative individuals who appear, centrality of their appearances, and quality of portrayal (e.g., presentation of women in sexualized or subordinate roles).

Important social implications, of course, do attend media portrayals that typecast or stereotype their subjects, such as racializing poverty or sexually objectifying women. But these places in particular are where linkages to media theories that would support the authors’ examples could have been included to enrich the discussions. For example, as the authors write in discussing race and class: ‘Exposure to these kinds of [negative] representations is bound to have some influence on people’s perception of reality’ (p. 134). A good point, but one that could be made even more powerfully by contextualizing it with ideas from Berger and Luckmann (1967) on social constructions of reality or Hall (1982) on the impact of presentations that marginalize or denigrate their subjects. In short, the three chapters covering media representations have some interesting and valuable discrete ideas, but could benefit from a more comprehensive look at theory-based implications of media representations and their more macro-level impacts on society and culture.

Limitations similar to the ones discussed so far about media production and media content also apply to the final two chapters on media reception (or, as the table of contents calls it, Audiences). This is where the book has the most significant overlap with concepts from media theory, and where the missing connections are most glaring.

Chapter 10, for instance, explicitly mentions important effects theories such as cultivation, uses and gratifications, and agenda setting. The section on cultivation (pp. 149–151) does mention George Gerbner, who promulgated the theory, while
the discussion of uses and gratifications mentions its most significant theorists Katz and Blumler (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1974). Agenda setting and framing (p. 152) mentions some of the work of Shanto Iyengar, who is prominent in its study. No mention is made, however, of McCombs and Shaw, whose 1972 article coined the term ‘agenda setting’ and established its fundamental concepts. Discussing that theory without bringing McCombs and Shaw into it is like discussing nuclear physics without mentioning Einstein or Fermi.

Chapter 11 focuses its efforts on ‘culture jamming’ and meme production, hardly the most significant expressions of active audience theory, and also includes a discussion of net neutrality, which is entirely a policy matter rather than an audience-response theory. The chapter does raise the important idea of cultural imperialism (p. 170), but without ever bringing in the ideas of its leading theorist, Schiller (1976).

Noting the failure to cite certain scholars may seem like nit-picking, and pointing it out is not meant as criticism of the sourcing and citation in the book in general. Indeed, some of the ideas presented in this book are justified with theories and concepts such as Bourdieu that aren’t cited as widely as, say, McCombs and Shaw (1972), but nonetheless are appropriate for a discussion of media sociology. But when one of the two overview chapters is about media theory, establishing that the text will be reviewing sociology with an eye toward such theory, then a failure to explore key theories in their fullest context is additional evidence of the previously noted shortcomings around how a ‘big picture’ is lacking. As a further example, the media ecology theories of McLuhan (1964) and Postman (1970) – among the most ‘sociological’ in defining how media shape social interaction – are essentially ignored. (McLuhan is mentioned briefly in Chapter 2 and Chapter 11.)

The book is strong in some of its discussion of specific means by which media affect society, such as media polarization in Chapter 7 or the application of Bourdieu to journalism in Chapter 6. But the authors title their work All Media Are Social: Sociological Perspectives on Mass Media, and say they intend for it to be a ‘big tent’ look at the topic (p. 7). This specifies a broader review than is ultimately delivered. Despite the high quality of examination with many of the individual topics, the overall presentation – akin to a jigsaw puzzle that’s missing many of its pieces – has gaps that are notable.
References


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