UNDERSTANDING MEDIA EFFECT: A STUDY OF HOW STUDIES IN PERCEPTION NAILED THE COFFIN ON MAGIC BULLET THEORY

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Abstract
The paper focuses on the magic bullet theory with particular emphasis on the discourse on how studies in perception nailed the coffin on the theory. The powerful effects theory emphasizes on persuasion as the main effect of the mass communication situation. One predominant theory under the all-powerful effect studies is the magic bullet theory which hinges on the assumption that the media are all-powerful that explains that the flow of information from the mass media is always direct and immediate thereby making individuals cognitively passive and helpless in the face of a strong communication. This paper, therefore argues that contrary to the all-powerful hypothesis, media audiences are really active and filter media messages they receive from different media sources. This paper equally identifies relevant theories that contradict the all-powerful such as the individual difference theory, perception studies, social categories theory, two-step flow hypothesis and consonance/dissonance theory. The findings of the discourse are that actually media audiences are indeed, active and react differently to media message. The media only provide subjects for discussion while the audience interprets differently based on demographics.

Keywords: Media effects, Powerful effect, Magic bullet theory, Media audience, Perception study, Individual difference etc.

Introduction
The rise of effect studies gave birth to different approaches to media study by identifying four prominent eras in the development of media effects and theories of mass communication. According to Baran (2006,p.415), the eras include (a) normative theories (b) mass society theory (c) social-scientific theory (d) era of cultural theory. The era of powerful effects and limited effects formed the fulcrum of this study. Magic bullet theory assumed the media had more influence over audience behavior than was later proved. The magic bullet theory, otherwise known as the "hypodermic needle theory" implied mass media had a direct, immediate and powerful effect on its audiences. The mass media in the 1940s and 1950s were perceived as a powerful influence on behavior change.

According to Baran and Davis (2006,p.12), the theory suggests that the mass media could influence a very large group of people directly and uniformly by ‘shooting’ or ‘injecting’ them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response. Both images used to express this theory (a bullet and a needle) suggest a powerful and direct flow of information from the sender to the receiver. The bullet theory graphically suggests that the message is a bullet, fired from the "media gun" into the viewer's "head". With similarly emotive imagery, the hypodermic needle model suggests that media messages are injected straight into a passive audience which is immediately influenced by the message. They express the view that the media is a dangerous means of communicating an idea because the receiver or audience is powerless to resist the impact of the message. There is no escape from the effect of the message in these models.

Understanding Media Effects
The possibility of media effects is often seen to challenge individual respect and autonomy, as if a pro-effects view presumes the public to be a gullible mass, cultural dopes, vulnerable to an ideological hypodermic needle, and as if television was being proposed as the sole cause of a range of social behaviours. Such a stereotyped view of research tends to pose an equally stereotyped alternative view.
The Effect Debate
No matter the issue involved; televised violence, absence of minority characters in movies, the topic of the effects of mass communication are and have always been hotly debated. To the early theorists, the media have all powerful effect as held by the mass society theory. According to McQuail (2005,p.5), the theory stresses the important as well as negative roles of the media by shaping audiences’ perception of the social and manipulation of actions in subtle but highly effective ways. It emphasizes the interdependence of institutions that exercise power and thus the integration of the media into the sources of social power and authority. Certain media theories are studied under mass society theory. The result is that this theory stresses that media are a malignant, cancerous force within society and must be purged or totally restructured.

In the discourse on the effect debate, Baran (2009, p.212) remarks that as long as debate on effects of media are individual-based, we risk remaining blind to what many believe is media’s more powerful influence (both positive and negative) on the way we live.

The debate on all powerful effect emphasizes on persuasion as the main effect of the mass communication situation. Powerful effects theory derived its source from idea of the first generation scholars in mass communication that saw the mass media as having a profound, direct effect on people. This theory gained massive support after the war as a result of series of studies conducted between 1929 and 1932 that examined the impact of movies on children. Walter Lippmann in his book ‘Public Opinion’ published in 1922 argues that we see the world not as it really is but as ‘pictures in our heads.’ Such ‘pictures’ according to Lippmann ‘are shaped by the mass media.’

On the other hand, contrary to the powerful effect theory that argues that the media exert tremendous influence, the limited-effect theory holds the idea that the media have minimal or limited effects. The underlying fact here is that this perspective holds that the media rarely directly influence individuals and even if the effects do occur, they will be modest and isolated. For Folkerts and Lacy (2004,p.765), the media have limited effects on individuals. However, interpersonal impact is more important in influencing attitude and creating changes. Baran (2009,pp. 409-11) recognizes these areas of limited effect paradigm viz:

- Media content has limited impact on audiences because it is only make-believe; people know it isn’t real.
- Media content has limited impact on audiences because it is only play or just entertainment.
- If media have any effects at all, they are not the media’s fault; media simply hold a mirror to society and reflects the status quo, showing us and our world as they already are.
- If media have any effect at all, it is only to reinforce preexisting values and beliefs. Family, church, school and other socializing agents have must more influence.
- If media have any effects at all, they are only on the unimportant things in our lives such as fads and fashions.

Interestingly, the growth and development of empirical social science techniques enabled researchers to have something with which to study media effects. The studies they conducted gave credence to beliefs that the media were really very powerful in influencing passive, trusting and vulnerable consumers. However, there have been some changes in the view of scholars on media effects. For over several decades, research evidence indicates that the relationships between the media and their users are not that simple or direct. This is inspite of a lingering belief today in the powerful, uniform, direct effects of the media (Konkwo 2007,p.160). In conclusion, the effect-debate study has remained a continuous one. This is because of the nature of human beings and different perspective based on prevailing situation and society.

The Magic Bullet Theory: A Definition
Different communication and political scholars have defined the magic bullet theory. Baran and Davis (2006.p.24) define magic bullet theory, otherwise known as hypodermic needle or stimulus-response theory as the theory that explains that the flow of information from the mass media source to the receiver is always direct and immediate thereby making individuals cognitively passive and helpless in the face of a strong communication stimulus. Under this theory, the media are perceived as all powerful and believe that it exerts tremendous influences on the reception of media messages. The media also hold the idea that they penetrate people’s minds and instantly create effects.

Folkerts and Lacy (2004, p.234) observe that propaganda efforts of World War II suggested that media were all-powerful. Propagandists believed that you can simply hit individuals with information, as though it was
a bullet and it would have powerful and immediate effects. The result is that in magic bullet theory, the rational is a mere façade, incapable of resisting powerful messages. People have no ability to screen out or criticize these messages. The messages penetrate to their subconscious minds and transform how they think and feel (Baran and Davis, 2006, p.34).

Konkwo (2007, p.169) explains that empirical studies associated with the powerful effect paradigm suggested that propaganda and advertising campaigns in newspapers were very effective in shaping the attitudes, beliefs and consumer behavior of their audiences. The messages only needed to be loaded, directed to the audience and fired like a bullet. If they hit their target, then the expected response would be obtained. This was the notion of the ‘bullet theory’ of media effects.

A usual target of powerful effects critics is television. This medium of mass communication has been roundly accused of singlehandedly inciting riots, promoting crime and violence, encouraging illicit sex, promoting alcohol and drug abuse etc. However, it has to be noted that whereas television may have some influence on some people some of the time, it (including other media) does not affect all people in like manner all of the time. While a particular TV or radio programme appeals to a person, it may be distasteful to another. The vagaries of the complex social stratification in a multi-ethnic and multi-lingua Nigeria makes this situation even more glaring.

A glaring example of the application of magic bullet theory was the birth of Nigeria’s former Head of State, Gen. Sani Abacha. Immediately people picked the news from the media, they instantaneously took to the streets jubilating or rejoicing (Popoola, 2012, p.223).

Criticisms of the Magic Bullet Theory
The magic bullet theory is considered too cumbersome to test and offers inaccurate results. Modern researchers wanted more empirical explanations for the relationship between media and audience. Since media obviously did not turn the audience into unthinking drones, those studying the field sought a more definable reaction.

The magic bullet theory is based on assumption of human nature and it was not based on any empirical findings from research. Few media scholars do not accept this model because it’s based on assumption rather than any scientific evidence. In 1938, Lazarsfeld and Herta Herzog testified the hypodermic needle theory in a radio broadcast “The War of the Worlds” (a famous comic program) by inserting a news bulletin which made a widespread reaction and panic among the American Mass audience. Through this investigation he found the media messages may affect or may not affect audience. Again, “People’s Choice” was a study conducted by Lazarsfeld in 1940 about Franklin D. Roosevelt election campaign and the effects of media messages. Through this study Lazarsfeld disproved the Magic Bullet theory and added audience are more influential in interpersonal than a media messages.

The Hypodermic Needle Theory otherwise known as the ‘Magic Bullet’ theory originated in the 1920’s and was the first major theory concerning the effects of the mass media in society. ‘Magic Bullet’ theorists believed that the media could shape public towards a defined point of view. In this way messages are “injected” into all members of the audience causing a uniform thinking among them. A prominent theorist of the Magic Bullet or Hypodermic Needle theory was Harold Lasswell who said that the new mass media could directly influence and sway public opinion. The under-discussed gives a picture of a critical look at the theory (Folkerts and Lacy 2004).

The theory was deterministic and this did not allow for freedom of choice. The audiences were ‘injected’ with a one way propaganda. From this light, one can confidently say that the theory undermines the right of individuals to freely choose what media material they consume. The theory is also noted for its passitivity and evidenced by the fact that audience were not allowed to contribute. This undermines the core aim of media studies which is the audience. From the latter, one can argue that the audience could not use their experience, intelligence and opinion to analyze messages. It will be very difficult to operate this theory in this new world where the audiences have become sophisticated.

Furthermore, the Magic Bullet or Hypodermic Needle theory was not based on empirical findings. It rather employed assumptions of the time about human nature. People were assumed to be uniformly controlled by
their biological instincts and that they react more or less uniformly to whatever ‘stimuli’ came along (Baran and Davis, 2006). Contrary to its shortcomings, the theory had the following outlined points to give it a positive look:

- It was seen as an asset in mobilizing people especially through radio
- It also paved the way for researches to be conducted on its merits and pitfalls.

The media effects are the consequences or results that humans experience to varieties of media content (media content—what a media product is made up of) and it is important to note that much research are particularly driven towards the negative effects. They come in the form of psychological, behaviour, physiological and cognitive effects and all of these can be positive or negative:

1) **Positive Effects:**
- Exposure to educative media content is of great importance. For example the education we receive on talk-shows and distance learning.
- Exposure to informative media content such as news and
- Exposure to entertaining media content that serves as an escape from the stress of everyday life.

2) **Negative Effects:**
- Exposure to violence and sex on some media content
- Exposure to hate journalism and
- Exposure to false or sensational information

It is important to note that the positive and negative effects cut across the content, timing, direct/indirect and the explanatory mechanism dimensions. Finally, the assumptions at the basis of the Hypodermic Needle Theory are nowadays obsolete. The theory has been widely overcome by the Two Step Flow Model and Roger’s Innovation Curve (Multi Step Flow Model) as well as many latter mass communication theories.

**Strengths of Magic Bullet Theory**

Although media scholars have argued against the magic bullet theory assumption on powerful effects of the media, it however, has strengths. First, it provided the platform for subsequent improvements in the study of media effects. Prior to the all-powerful effect studies, the prevalent media theories were associated with the political environment operating in a given environment. For instance, the normative theories of the press spell out the place of the mass media in a political system prevalent in a given society. However, the introduction of media study on all-powerful media effect provided the first paradigm shift in understanding media effect outside the realm of political environment.

**Paradigm Shift in the Media Effects: From All-Powerful Effects to Limited Effects**

A paradigm is an organized theoretical perspective that involves the various stages of theory formulation where hypotheses are put forth, tested and proven or rejected. Kuhn cited in Baran (2009) sees a paradigm shift as a fundamental, even radical rethinking of what we believe to be true. It means a transformation from one organizing theoretical perspective to another.

McQuail (2005, p.77) identifies two paradigms in relation to the study of media effects: the dominant paradigm and alternative paradigm. The dominant paradigm therefore combines a view of powerful mass media (all-powerful media effect) in a mass society with the typical research practices of the merging social sciences especially social surveys, socio-psychological experiments and statistical analysis. Major theories under the dominant paradigm may include magic bullet theory and Lasswell’s propaganda theory. On the other hand, the alternative paradigm (limited media effects) is based on a more complete view of communication as sharing and ritual rather than as just ‘transmission.’ Major theories under the limited effects may include two-step flow theory, attitude-change theory, individual differences theory, cognitive consistency/dissonance theory, selective perceptions etc.

**How Studies in Perception Nailed the Coffin on Magic Bullet Theory**

The rise of perception studies has finally nailed the coffin on magic bullet theory. Mass communicators want audiences to pay attention to their messages, learn the contents of the messages, and make appropriate changes in attitudes or beliefs or make desired behavioral responses. Perceptual theory tells us that the process of interpreting messages is complex and that these communicator goals may be difficult to achieve.

Perception has been defined as the process by which we interpret sensory data (Lahlry, 1991). Selective
perception is the term applied to the tendency for people’s perception to be influenced by wants, needs, attitudes, and other psychological factors. Selective perception plays an important role in communication of any sort. Selective perception means that different people can react to the same message in very different ways. No communicator can assume that a message will have the intended meaning for all receivers or even that it will have the same meaning for all receivers. This complicates our models of mass communication. Perhaps mass communication is not just a matter of hitting a target with an arrow, as some models suggest. The message can reach the receiver (hit the target) and still fail to accomplish its purpose because it is subject to the interpretation of the receiver.

The case of nailing a coffin on the magic bullet theory was as a result of the emergence of limited effects theory and selective perception paradigms. The realization that the media do not affect all people in the same manner all the time prompted the perception studies. Soon, it became clear that audience members were not passive recipients of information but active.

Various intervening variables were known to affect audience members’ use of and reactions to media messages in rather dramatic ways. Although media messages are still believed to influence individuals, their effects were no longer perceived as all-too-powerful, indiscriminate and predictable as was once thought. Moreover, studies in human perception showed that an individual’s values, needs, beliefs and attitudes are instrumental in determining how stimuli are selected from a complex media environment and the way meaning is derived from these stimuli within an individual’s frame of reference (DeFleur, 1970, pp. 63-73). The postulation of individual difference theory and perception studies finally contributed to the nailing a coffin on the magic bullet theory.

The Individual Differences Perspective

From expositions and laboratory experiments on behaviourism, classical conditioning, learning differences, and attitude formation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it became increasingly clear that individuals differ in their personal psychological organization, just as studies in the natural sciences had also revealed differential biological endowments in people. It was discovered that attitudes, values and beliefs were learnt in the context of experience and this resulted in differences in cognition and perception. The principle of selective attention and perception, which holds that people pay attention to messages and interpret them in line with their own interests, beliefs, values and experiences dealt the final blow to the Instinctive S-R perspective, although the mass society aspect has tended to die hard.

Perception Studies

Studies in perception helped to nail the coffin on the “magic bullet” theory. Perception is a large subject. But we shall confine ourselves to the area most relevant to our concern: the ways in which people perceive media messages targeted at them.

The selective processes can be thought of as four rings of defenses, with selective exposure as the outermost ring, followed by selective attention, then selective perception, and finally selective retention. Undesirable information can sometimes be headed off at the outermost ring. A person can avoid those publications or programs that might contain contrary information.

If one expects a mix of information in a message, a person can pay selective attention to only the parts of the message that are agreeable. If this fails, the person can then exercise selective perception in decoding the message. If this fails, the person can then exercise selective retention by simply failing to retain the contrary information.

Sometimes one of these selective mechanisms will be more appropriate or more possible to use than the others. For instance, in watching a televised debate between two presidential candidates, you might not want to practice selective exposure, avoiding the message entirely. If you want to see and hear the candidate you agree with, you may watch only that candidate, practicing selective attention. If you do see and hear the opposition candidate and are exposed to contrary material, you can always fall back on selective perception and hear only what is agreeable, or on selective retention and forget all but the points that reinforce your original point of view. In particular, we shall be looking at selective perception along with other related selectivities viz:

Selective Exposure: This is the tendency of audience members to expose themselves to messages that are
consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. People choose media messages that support their interest and avoid media messages that are contrary to their already-held dispositions. This option of media choice accounts for the reason why audience members prefer to expose themselves to any of the mass media such as radio, television, newspaper or magazine.

**Selective Attention:** This is the tendency of audience members to pay particular attention to messages that we feel are in consonant with our pre-existing attitude and then, filtering out messages that do not support our attitude.

**Selective Perception:** This involves the mental or psychological recasting of a message to make sure the messages align with pre-existing attitudes. It is simply an attempt to make media message fit into the preferences of audience members.

**Selective Retention:** Here, you retain only the portion of media messages that you have selectively perceived and exposed to. Selective retention, therefore, is the idea that people tend to remember (recall) best and longest those messages that are most meaningful to them.

**Other Theories that Equally Countered the All-Powerful Media Effects**

Apart from the abovementioned theories that nailed the coffin on the magic bullet theory, other theories that emerged during the experimentation on media effects include:

**The Social Categories Perspectives**
The basic assumption here (predicated on empirical evidence) is that members of a given social category (determined by age, sex, location, socio-economic status, etc.) will seek out similar communication messages, which they will also respond to more or less similarly, other things being equal. This means that people with similar background will have more or less similar reaction to the media messages. Thus the kinds of movies, music and broadcast programmes sought after by teenagers and adolescents are certain to be different from those preferred by their parents while different election candidates and campaigns may appeal to different social categories. It has also been shown that men and women may differ widely in their TV programme preferences. Whereas these studies of selectivity of the media came largely from psychology, a group of sociologists began to look at the various characteristics shared by people within social groups. The sociologists assumed that people in various positions in the social structure shared similar demographic characteristics and therefore would exhibit similar reactions to media messages (Konkwo, 2007, p.175).

**Two-Step Flow Hypothesis**

This theory hinges on the premise that whatever effect the media have on the majority of the population is through opinion leaders. Ezeweiku (1997, p.170) points out that these opinion leaders crystallize their views on the media messages into their consistent stance. They later retransmit and amplify the received information or news within the framework of face-to-face communication. Baran (2008, p.418) identifies two types of opinion influences: opinion leaders, who consume media messages initially, interpret it in the light of their own values and beliefs and pass it on to opinion followers who depend on the opinion leaders for media message because they have less frequent contact with the media.

The two-step flow theory identifies the importance of opinion leaders in formation of public opinion and it effectively challenges simplistic notions of direct effects. This theory is based on inductive rather than deductive reasoning and focuses attention on the environment in which effects can and cannot occur. Criticisms against this theory emanate from its uses of reported behavior as only test of media effects and downplay reinforcement as an important media effect.

**Cognitive Consistency/Dissonance Theory**

Cognitive consistency theory holds the idea that people consciously and unconsciously work to preserve their existing views. The result is that individuals strive to attain a state of cognitive balance in an attempt to understand media influences. Vivian (2003, p.372) asserts that the consistency theory raised serious questions about how well the media can meet the democratic ideal that forms a forum for the robust exchange of divergent ideas. The media cannot fulfill their role as a forum if people hear only what they want to hear.

Sometimes, an individual may stick to two ideas that are psychologically inconsistent thereby creating an
unpleasant tension in attitude and comprehension. The result is known as cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance therefore refers to messages that are inconsistent with a person’s already-held attitudes thus creating psychological discomfort or dissonance. A postulation of Festinger Leon (1957), he suggested that an individual should try to make all areas of psychological inconsistencies to be consistent in a variety of ways broadly known as selective processes: selective exposure, selection attention, selective perception and selection retention.

**Conclusion**

The emergence of the “Limited Effects Perspective” was inevitable. People were bound to realize sooner or later that the mass media could not exercise in peacetime the same degree of influence which they were supposed to have exercised during the war.” The subtle advent of empirical research, and other advances on the intellectual horizon, simply accelerated that realization. Perhaps the effects of war on media effects deserve more serious studies than may have been undertaken so far.

**References**


