

MEDIA INFLUENCE: COMMUNICATION THEORIES

	Hypodermic Needle Theory	Agenda Setting Function Theory	Reinforcement Theory	Uses & Gratification Theory	Encoding/Decoding
YEAR	1920 - 1940	1972	1960	1974	1980
THEORIST	Various	Maxwell McCombs Donald Shaw	Joseph Klapper	Jay Blumler Elihu Katz	Stuart Hall
OVERVIEW	A linear communication theory which suggests that the media has a direct and powerful influence on audiences, like being injected with a hypodermic needle.	This theory suggests that the media can't tell you what to think but it can tell you what to think about. Through a process of selection, omission and framing, the media focuses public discussion on particular issues.	Klapper argued that the media has little power to influence people and it just reinforces our pre-existing attitudes and beliefs, which have been developed by more powerful social institutions like families, schools and religion organisations.	The Uses and Gratification Theory looks at how people use the media to gratify a range of needs – including the need for information, personal identity, integration, social interaction and entertainment.	Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory suggests that audience derive their own meaning from media texts. These meanings can be dominant, negotiated or oppositional.
AUDIENCE	Audiences are passive and homogenous, this theory does not account for individual differences.	Audiences are active but, when it comes to making important decisions like who to vote for, they draw on information that is particularly salient at the time.	Audiences are active and exist in a society where they are influenced by important social institutions. This theory considers the total situation.	Audiences are active and can have power over the media. If people don't watch a television program, it won't rate and it will be taken off the air.	Audiences are active in decoding media messages. They can accept or reject parts of the text based on their personal beliefs or attitudes.
EVIDENCE	This theory is often supported by early moral panics, including the Orson Welles War of the Worlds broadcast in 1938. Presented in the form of a news bulletin, this broadcast led some to believe that the world was being invaded by martians. The belief that the media has a direct and powerful effect on audiences was also supported by the Payne Fund studies.	Typically, evidence supporting this theory shows a correlation between the number of news stories on an issue and how important people think the issue is. McCombs cites a study that revealed in the early 1980s there was a correlation between the rise in 'ailing economy' headlines and poor consumer sentiment.	In 'The Effects of Mass Communication', Klapper cites hundreds of studies that support his theory, including a 1948 study which revealed that voters were predisposed to opinions and beliefs held by their families, including one young man who said he was going to vote Democratic because his grandfather would skin him if he didn't.	Uses and Gratification theorists examine what people do with the media and maintain that the best way to find out is by asking audiences. A recent study of how young people use social networking - 'Hanging out, messing around and geeking out' - took this approach, asking young people how and why they use social networking sites.	The idea of encoding/decoding is not supported by evidence. It is a way of thinking about the communication process which prioritises audience and culture. This theory shifts our attention to the reception of media texts and how meaning is created.
STRENGTHS WEAKNESS	Although many people still talk about the media in this way, this theory is disregarded as an outdated way of thinking about media influence. Audiences are more active than this theory suggests.	The way people receive media is changing, instead of mainstream media like newspapers and television, people now get information from the internet. Does this affect the media's ability to set agendas?	The strength of this theory is that it moves the discussion about media influence away from the assumption that the media has a direct and powerful influence on audiences, considering the total situation.	Uses and Gratification is an approach to studying the media, rather than a theory of influence. It has been criticised for its vague definition of important concepts.	Only three decoding positions. These three categories are not supported by empirical evidence. The theory does consider the importance of culture in determining dominant messages.