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Mainstream Critique, Critical Mainstream and the New Media: Reconciliation of Mainstream and Critical Approaches of Media Effects Studies?

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Are mainstream and critical research reconcilable? First, this paper juxtaposes two tendencies within the two approaches: homogenization and agenda setting. Doing this suggests that despite the bridges between these tendencies such as their conceptualization as powerful and longitudinal effects, there are also crucial differences to factor such as methodology, questions motivating the scholarship and interpretative framework. Secondly, this paper asks whether homogenization and agenda setting specifically, and powerful media effects generally, are still applicable in the new media environment. Although the Internet increases content amount and diversity, and might thwart the power of the media to homogenize the audience and dictate political issue salience, external factors uphold homogenization and agenda setting. This paper concludes by showing that media effects might be yet more powerful in the new media environment.

Introduction

Since the public reliance on the media presupposes some media impact, the question asked by communication researchers has not been "do media have an effect," but rather "how large is the effect?" Studies designed to capture it have generally fallen within the taxonomy provided by Lazarsfeld (1948). Although Lazarsfeld (1948) advanced 16 categories of media effects, and although some scholars focus on long-term institutional changes caused by an economic structure (e.g., Bagdikian, 1985; McChesney, 2004) or technological characteristics of the media (e.g., Eisenstein, 1980; McLuhan, 1964), effects research primarily analyzes short-term media impact (see Katz, 2001 for alternative categorizations). Gitlin (1978) classified such research as administrative and introduced, or rather amplified, the distinction between mainstream and critical scholarship.

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This distinction has been reinforced by "overspecialization" within the "effects" and the "critical-cultural" approaches to communications, a phenomenon that might create "several hundred subfields" (Tunstall, 1983, p. 93), make it difficult for scholars to relate to one another due to "mutual hostility and ignorance" (Livingstone, 1997, p. 23; see Ortega y Gasset, 1944; 1960) and result in a failure to produce "a central interrelated" theory (Schramm, 1983, p. 14). This state – if perpetuated – might weaken the field as interconnectedness helps develop any discipline.[1]

Given the potential consequences, this paper focuses on two issues related to this divide. Continuing the debate (Adorno, 1969; Lazarsfeld, 1941), it first asks whether critical and mainstream approaches are reconcilable.[2] Has the replacement of the limited with the powerful media effects paradigm provided a meeting point for critical and mainstream scholarship? These questions are addressed by juxtaposing two powerful effects – homogenization and agenda setting.[3] The reason for analyzing these

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[1] The seminal special issue of Journal of Communication, *Ferment in the Field* (1983), focused precisely on this fragmentation. Contributors asked whether communications has "produced a central, interrelated body of theory on which the practitioners of a discipline can build and unify their thinking?" and answered "I am afraid that is has not" (Schramm, 1983, p. 14). Others similarly noted that the field "gets split into many separate media, many separate disciplines, many separate stages in the flow, and quickly you have several hundred subfields" (Tunstall, 1983, pp. 92-93) or argued that progress in communications "is little more . . . than fragmentation. (. . .) We 'gain' by knowing more and more about less and less" (Thayer, 1983, p. 84). These preoccupations, which are still pertinent (see Liebes & Katz, 1990; Livingstone, 1997), directly relate to "overspecialization," about which Ortega y Gasset (1960) wrote: "The specialist 'knows' very well his own tiny corner of the universe; he is radically ignorant of all the rest" (p. 111). Illustrating the phenomenon, Ortega quoted a Chinese thinker: "How shall I talk of the sea to the frog; if he has never left this pond? How shall I talk of the frost to the bird of the summer land, if it has never left the land of its birth? How shall I talk of life with a sage, if he is the prisoner of his doctrine?" (Ortega y Gasset, 1944, p. 58).

[2] Lazarsfeld (1941), who also raised this question, answered it affirmatively. At the same time, he subordinated the critical scholarship to producing ideas, interpretations and new data for empirical testing, and also was himself not successful at integrating the two (Jay, 1973). Critical theorists also attempted to bring the critical and the administrative approaches closer. Adorno (1969) "justified" mainstream research, while distinguishing the two sub-fields, stating "I consider it to be my fitting and objectively proffered assignment to *interpret* phenomena – not to ascertain, sift, and classify facts and make them available as information" (p. 339). Some scholars argued that there are no intrinsic incompatibilities between the positivistic administrative or empirical research and the critical approach (Rogers, 1982) while yet others stated that "distinct epistemological positions" that are based on "fundamentally different value assumptions … cannot easily and even should not be reconciled" (Hamelink, 1983, p. 77). The debate, that is, has been largely inconclusive and recently abandoned.

[3] Katz (2001) argues that although agenda setting started out as a powerful effect, it fits better within the limited effects paradigm, because it is affected by personal characteristics. At the same time scholars have abandoned the notion – never established in the first place – that the media influence everyone, simultaneously and directly, for a more accurate concept that the media are powerful when

two effects is that homogenization, explicated by the Frankfurt School, is a motif that in various forms recurs in critical scholarship. Agenda setting, on the other hand, is a well-established approach within the mainstream research.

These two specific tendencies are not necessarily representative of the philosophical, methodological, or epistemological core of critical and the mainstream scholarship. Homogenization and agenda setting have been, however, highly influential, providing a theoretical and methodological foundation for other approaches such as cultivation or framing and priming (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele, 2000). Also, although Frankfurt School theory does not encompass all critical-cultural scholarship, it has been a fruitful point of departure, dialogue, and contrast for critical scholars. Similarly, although agenda setting cannot be equated with other mainstream theories, it was the first to challenge the limited-effects perspective, reject persuasion, and initiate the cognitive paradigm in effects research.

Secondly, this paper asks whether homogenization and agenda setting, and powerful effects generally, are applicable to the new media environment. Has the increase in content diversity decreased their explanatory power? Have the changes in message production, dissemination, and reception introduced by the Internet undermined the powerful media effects paradigm, thus invalidating the distinction between the critical and mainstream approaches?

The Bridge – Similarities between Homogenization and Agenda Setting

Similar Power

The limited effects paradigm, criticized for its focus on persuasion, lost academic hold with the shift from attitudinal toward cognitive media effects. This shift featured approaches such as agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), and also framing and priming (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). These and the concurrent adoption of critical studies in the U.S. established the powerful media effects paradigm (Katz, 2001). To follow Gitlin (1978), the media are powerful inasmuch as they define "normal and abnormal social and political activity . . . say what is politically real and legitimate and what is not . . . establish certain political agendas for social attention and . . . contain, channel, and exclude others" (p. 205). Both homogenization and agenda setting fit this category, potentially bridging the gap between the mainstream and the critical approaches.

Homogenization as a Powerful Effect

Homogenization refers to the power the media have to shape the audience and the context in which they function. According to Frankfurt School theorists, this effect results from the culture industry, defined as the collective operation of mass media (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1982). The culture industry is characterized by technological and economical rationality, with which comes standardized production (see Wojcieszak, 2005). Given that products and messages are manufactured to be reproducible, the culture

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they exert a small influence on large numbers, large influence on small numbers, or small – but socially significant – influence on small numbers, among couple other possibilities (see Katz, 1987).

industry "impresses the same stamp on everything" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1982, p. 120). It is through this uniformity that the media shape individuals, in that from "every . . . film and every broadcast program the social effect can be inferred which is exclusive to none, but is shared by all alike. The culture industry . . . has molded men as a type unfailingly reproduced in every product" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1977, p. 354).

Contemporary critical scholars distance themselves from such determinism, noting that media messages can be contested and interpreted in alternative ways (Fiske, 1989). At the same time, this approach is criticized as "a new revisionism" (Curran, 1990), precisely because "active" does not equal "critical." That is, theorists note that celebrating the active audience overlooks political economy and social inequalities that impact readings and resistance (Hagen & Wasko, 2000; Morley, 1993) and diverts the focus from the influences exerted by the power structure, especially on the disadvantaged groups (Seaman, 1992; Swanson, 1992). While not denying that the audience can negotiate, the media as a cultural discourse are seen as bearing the power to impact meanings, subjectivities, and social relations (see Dahlgren, 1997).[4]

In addition, the media have socializing power. Consonant with Gitlin's (1978) definition, they define "normal and abnormal" social activity (p. 206). By repeating certain plots and themes the media project what reality is like and provide categories through which people experience the world. The media create a symbolic environment, have functions analogous to religion, and link viewers' lives to the larger world in "a manner which is ritualistic, symbolic, and ultimately mythic" (Dahlgren, 1988a, p. 287; see Dahlgren, 1999; Gerbner et al., 1986). Through this process, the media determine what is acceptable and valuable, and produce aspirations by which the apparatus integrates individuals into society and into specific roles within the structure (Gerbner et al., 1986, 2002). Through this integration people are socialized into *in abstracto* constructed reality that is disconnected from their real needs (Adorno, 2000). This disconnect results from the fact that the reality created by the media might not reflect what people desire when they are "'free to think about what we shall do,'" but is a "domestication" technique whereby people depend upon "those forces that prescribe social reality as an objective fact to which they must adapt" (Hamelink, 1983, p. 77). The disconnect is also due to the fact that the culture industry enables access to goods or services which Horkheimer (2004) calls the "pleasures of the ball park and the movie, the best seller and the radio," that produce fleeting gratifications (p. 160). Those gratifications, in turn, lead people to want to live as advertised and as others do, and – collectively pursued – result in false contentment or "Happy Consciousness" (Lowenthal, 1944; Marcuse, 1991, p. 84).

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[4] Some scholars thus note that "the ability of audiences to create meaning and experience pleasure" has been confused with social, political, or cultural power (Hagen & Wasko, 2000, p. 17). Others add that the "power of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralized media institutions to construct the texts that the viewer then interprets" (Morley, 1993, p. 16). Finding the golden middle, yet others observe that interpretations are influenced by "textual factors" and also "(psycho)social factors," and that "both text and reader" are subject to "structural and agentic factors" (Livingstone, 1998, p. 248), and propose seeing the audience as public, or as thinking citizens who are socialized within a liberal/pluralist framework (see Livingstone 2006).

Although the audience may partly resist this process, the media influence needs, both in the formation and gratification stages (Lull, 1995). Also, although messages may be negotiated, there is a "dominant code" disseminated by the media as the "privileged" reading (Hall, 1980). Hence, the fact that audience is active "within certain parameters set by the text" means that "we can acknowledge the relative power of the audience . . . without losing sight of the powerful role that the media plays in shaping public understandings" (Roscoe, Marshall & Gleeson, 1995, p. 105). Finally, the gratifying goods and services might no longer be uniformly pursued by everyone and might contain messages that challenge the system. This oppositional potential, however, is increasingly commodified. As a result, western societies are not only exposed to a relatively uniform agenda that encourages consumption but also daily activities, political opposition and articulating resistance are submitted to a power apparatus that is consonant with the post-Fordist economic order (Grossberg, 1992).

Agenda Setting as a Powerful Effect

The media's capacity to "establish certain political agendas for social attention and . . . contain, channel, and exclude others" (Gitlin, 1978, p. 205) also defines powerful effects. Gitlin (1978), Blumer and Gurevitch (1982) write that agenda setting research focuses on the media providing "frameworks through which people regard political events," a role performed "by the manner in which (the media) select, highlight and assign greater prominence to some issues rather than to others" (p. 262). The media, it follows, politically socialize the audience by suggesting what people should think about, know about, and have feelings about.

The so-called "first level agenda setting" effect sees the media as defining reality by making problems salient as political issues. Studies show that topics become priority issues for the public after they become priority issues for the news media (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Kiousis & McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), also when controlling for real world events (Henry & Gordon, 2001; Watt, Mazza & Snyder, 1993), and especially for people who are knowledgeable, trust the media and have high need for orientation (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Tsfati, 2003; Wanta, 1997). The media exert this influence even among those who are not exposed, as news reaches people through interpersonal interaction (Cook et al., 1983).

Apart from drawing attention to certain issues, the media are powerful inasmuch as they shape "images" (Gitlin, 1978, p. 205). This is precisely what the "attribute agenda setting" effect entails. Experiments find that the audience evaluates political candidates in ways that mirror the ways in which the news media portray them (Kiousis, Bantimaroudis & Ban, 1999), and surveys show that voters' descriptions correlate with the ways the media describe political actors (Kiousis, 2005; McCombs et al., 2000; McCombs et al., 1997; Soroka, 2002). The media, it follows, tell us not only what to think about, "but also how to think about it, and, consequently, what to think" (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, p. 65). Powerful effect indeed.

Similar Time

Further similarities between homogenization and agenda setting might come from them falling within the long-term effects category. Following Lazarsfeld (1948), effects are longitudinal inasmuch as the media "shape for us the picture of the more distant world with which we do not have direct personal contact." Also, "over a lifetime, the mass media accentuate for some people parts of the social world and conceal from them others" (pp. 255-256).

Homogenization as a Long-Term Effect

According to the Frankfurt scholars, the media industry aims to maintain the status quo, and achieves this goal by producing and distributing uniform messages. This leads to "massive, long-term" exposure to "repetitive systems of stories" (Gerbner et al., 1986, p. 20). These stories, as the cultivation theory argues, contain stable and standard ideas and norms that are interiorized beyond audience awareness. These stories not only shape the way people see others, in that perceived social reality reflects the mass-mediated reality with heavy television viewers having a homogenized or "mainstreamed" worldview (Gerbner et al., 1986; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Also, the mediated stories impact subjectivity and individual experiences in society (see Dahlgren, 1997). The media thus affect the ways people see their participation in youth or lifestyle cultures (Bar-Haim, 1989; Frith, 1981) and influence gender relations and self-image by traditionalizing women's roles and privileging men's place in society (Saito, 2007; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999; Signorielli & Lears, 1992). Inasmuch as the media influence social relations and create a space in which "the viewer celebrates the structure and function of the social order and sees himself or herself as part of the whole" (Dahlgren, 1999, p. 189), their effects are bound to be long term. Hall (1992), whose notion that readers decode texts (Hall, 1980) underlies critical reception theory, echoes the Frankfurt School saying that the media

> are more and more responsible (a) for providing the basis on which groups construct an 'image' of the lives, meanings, practices, and values of other groups and classes; (b) for providing the images, representations and ideas around which the social totality, composed of all these separate and fragmented pieces, can be coherently grasped as a 'whole' (p. 340).

The culture industry has long-term effects also because it induces society to conform to existing reality, by creating "the very problems it subsequently resolves" and the "needs it fulfills" (Adorno, 2000, p. 236). Thereby the system is naturalized, and people come to believe that the society they live in and their place in society are the best possible (Marcuse, 1991; McGee, 2005). This flattens the conflict between the given and the attainable, minimizing the potential to "transcend the existing society" (Kellner, 1991, p. xxvii). Although there are possibilities for change, since competing discourses can be disseminated and people are active agents, the system as a whole is upheld because "[s]ome discourses, usually those that promote and support the status quo, are more frequently reiterated and come to achieve 'commonsense' status" (Roscoe et al., 1995, p. 89). Also, since human agency is closely bound to the socioeconomic structure, the subordinated groups might either not realize the subordination or lack

the efficacy to oppose it. On a societal or international scale, moreover, political economists show that the media promote a relatively unified agenda in the systemic or economic realm, ultimately justifying and reinforcing liberal capitalism (see McChesney, 2004).

Agenda Setting as a Long-Term Effect

Although agenda setting and other cognitive media effects have long-term implications, mainstream researchers generally do not examine agenda setting, framing or priming beyond their immediate impact (see Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Scrutinizing the premises behind and the broader outcomes stemming from agenda setting, however, reveals its longitudinal nature.

Politicians base some proposals on polls that show voters prioritizing certain issues over others. Voters, in turn, prioritize these issues because the media covers them. Time-series analyses show that trends in news coverage impact fluctuations in public opinion (Funkhouser, 1973; Henry & Gordon, 2001; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Watt et al., 1993), and experiments find that groups exposed to certain issues or attributes see these issues or attributes as more important than the control group (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Kiousis et al., 1999). It is not only the general public, but also politicians who are susceptible. Governmental elites exposed to news about an institutional problem regard this problem as more pressing than the non-exposed group and are also more likely to advocate policies aimed at correcting it (Cook et al., 1983). This research suggests that the electorate's decisions, the pressure voters exert on the representatives via public opinion polls, and also policymakers' actions might be based on the prominence given to issues in the media. Over time, it follows, the agenda setting effect might indirectly influence the political system.

Differences: Burning the Bridge

Categorizing homogenization and agenda setting as powerful and longitudinal might bridge the gap between critical and mainstream communication research. Nevertheless, some differences persist. Deeper epistemological and philosophical divergences pertain primarily to methodology, the questions motivating the research, and the consequent ideological or interpretative framework employed by scholars (see also Smythe & Van Dinh, 1983).

Methodological Differences

Narrow Mainstream

According to Gitlin (1978), mainstream researchers study media in a "behaviorist fashion, defining 'effects' . . . narrowly, microscopically, and directly," focusing on "short-run 'effects' as 'measures' of 'importance' largely because these 'effects' are measurable in a strict, replicable behavioral sense" (p. 206). Identifying the treatment and the outcome in such a concrete way makes it easier to detect effects and also limits them to those immediate, individual, and cognitive or attitudinal. Accordingly, agenda setting researchers focus on information flow temporarily close to the analyzed

outcome. They manipulate exposure to specific programming and the topics within the content (Henry & Gordon, 2001; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Kiousis et al., 1999), analyze the time recently devoted to certain issues (Henry & Gordon, 2001; Kiousis & McCombs, 2004; Soroka, 2002; Watt et al., 1993), or rely on respondents' self-reported media use prior to the outcome (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Then, scholars measure whether the messages, programs, or aggregate coverage affect individual assessments or the fluctuations in opinion polls. Perhaps partly due to this methodological specificity, researchers are able to show that exposure to certain content influences the way people perceive issues or attributes or that the aggregate coverage causes shifts in public opinion.

Agenda setting and other mainstream research thus generally focus on the influence that identifiable media characteristics have on cognition or attitudes. This approach is grounded in the empiricist tradition, according to which knowledge is derived from experience rather than from reason alone (Reichenbach, 1951). This methodological tendency also derives from functionalist sociology, which aims to move "general imputation to testable empirical enquiry" (Merton, 1955, p. 510), and from pluralist ideals, which see the audience as autonomous and independent. Those traditions also involve a belief in positive knowledge and scientific objectivity that require value suspension and political neutrality (see Livingstone, 1997). As a result, mainstream research rarely attends to meanings, values, production and consumption processes, and larger social and political structures (Melody & Mansell, 1983).

Broad Criticism

Critical scholarship focuses precisely on the issues omitted by mainstream research, scrutinizing the media's societal effects, homogenization included. Since these effects are difficult to evidence, because the treatment and the outcome are not easily measured and because critical scholars focus on stability rather than change, and "[h]ow to operationalize the hypothesis that the change would be accelerated if it weren't for the media is a nice puzzle" (Katz, 1987, p. 31), the gap between the two approaches is sometimes characterized as one between empiricism and theory (Curran et al., 1982). This heuristic might no longer apply. True, Frankfurt scholars generally discredited quantitative methods as inadequate to tapping the media's ideological implications. Some theorists simply did not want to empirically ground their claims, aiming to transcend tested reality and focusing on immanent critique instead. Others in the Frankfurt School attempted to combine the neo-Marxist approach with scientific requisites (see Lowenthal, 1944), concurrently complaining that mainstream scholars "failed to see the political and analytical meaning" that such studies conveyed (Jay, 1987, p. 132).

Contemporary critical theory no longer rejects empiricism. Cultivation researchers rely on content analyses, national surveys, and longitudinal observations, concluding that television "serves primarily to extend and maintain rather than to alter, threaten, or weaken conventional conceptions, beliefs, and behaviors" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; p. 175; e.g., Saito, 2007; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).[5] Critical

[5] While cultivation is classified as a critical or ideological effect Katz (2001), Smythe and Van Dinh (1983) writing on the Ferment in the Field, classify it as administrative. They argue that the Cultural Indicators project was funded by agencies that represent "the establishment," used "conventional content analysis combined with conventional survey research techniques" and lacked "a historical, institutional,

reception theorists use ethnographic methods to analyze the meanings constructed by the audience, demonstrating that taste, needs, or interpretations are socially determined (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Jensen, 1986). Yet political economists conduct historical content analyses to show that commercialization, commodification, and state powers influence ideological narrowing or de-politicization in American news (e.g., Benson, 2002; Benson & Hallin, 2007; Hallin, 1994).

Aiming to demonstrate longitudinal and ideological effects requires that critical scholars examine not only personal conditions and temporarily close treatments but also attend to such distant exogenous factors that lie beyond individual awareness, as social inequalities and power structures. As a result, although no longer rejecting all empirical investigations, critical scholars invariably distance themselves from an experimental approach to immediate effects. Also, the method used is only one step in the process, with the interpretations further distinguishing the two approaches.

Different Starting Point and Ideological Involvement

Gitlin's (1978) observation that mainstream research has been "certifying as normal precisely what it might have been investigating as problematic" (p. 206) points to other gaps between homogenization and agenda setting. These include different preoccupations motivating the research and, consequently, divergent importance that scholars attribute to the ideological stance in their interpretative frameworks.

Critical Means . . . Critical

Frankfurt theorists question the culture industry, positing that it aims to reinforce the system (Adorno, 2000). Contemporary scholars, while acknowledging that the reinforcement can be contested, also regard culture and the media as bearing power (Dahlgren, 1997). Thus the "audiovisual discourse" is seen as containing an ideological dimension and having a "hegemonic import on the audience" (Dahlgren, 1988a, p. 287), and as disseminating evocative "hypnotic formulas" that are seemingly unquestionable, induce the audience to comply, and impose limitations on individual thought and freedom (Marcuse, 1991, pp. 85-91). In addition, critical scholars note that the culture industry constructs social discourse and delineates its boundaries, in that the media "promote particular accounts as being the most legitimate and valid, while other accounts are excluded or marginalized" (Roscoe et al., 1995, p. 91).

In other words, critical scholars note that mass communication has a "predominantly ideological role" (Blumer & Gurevitch, 1982 p. 239) which inevitably leads to ideologically laden effects, including homogenization. Studying those effects involves taking stances, questioning the taken-for-granted consensus and social foundations, and aiming to illuminate the problems inherent in capitalism, commodification, market liberalism, and media monopolization. Thus, too, critical terminology is far from neutral. The *leitmotif* is the media system providing a *standardized world view*, and exerting *social control*.

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dialectical materialist context" (p. 121). An additional requirement that critical research calls for "drastic restructuring of institutions" (p. 121) would likely exclude other studies cited here from the critical category. Paradoxically, cultivation has also been criticized for insufficient methodological sophistication, with the critics focusing on spuriousness or effect sizes (Hirsch, 1981).

Homogenization created by mass media is dialectically based on *and* leads to *false consciousness*. The media *naturalize the system,* silence dissent, and result in *one-dimensionality*.

Mainstream equals Affirmative

It is not the reliance on empirical evidence *per se*, but also the problems chosen, the decisions as to what evidence will be sought and how it will be interpreted that classify research as mainstream (Melody & Mansell, 1983; Smythe & Van Dinh, 1983). As Gitlin (1978) notes, administrative scholarship generally does not address the following questions:

> Who wanted broadcasting and toward what ends? Which institutional configurations have been generated because of mass broadcasting, and which going institutions . . . have been altered in structure, goals, social meaning? . . . How does the routine reach of certain hierarchies into millions of living rooms on any given day affect the common language and concepts and symbols?

Instead, "[a]dministrative research assumes these issues away" and asserts the existing sociopolitical consensus without challenging it (Melody & Mansell, 1983, p. 110). Accordingly, agenda setting research demonstrates the mechanism by which issues or attributes, agreed upon in the existing sociopolitical arrangements, are made salient. Specifically, first level agenda setting affirms that the media influence how the public prioritizes recurring topics, such as energy or inflation, also controlling for pertinent issues, such as energy costs or American dependence on foreign energy sources (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Attribute agenda setting similarly asserts that the media impact the importance the public assigns to presumably central characteristics, such as political actors' leadership skills, intellectual abilities, and moral qualities (Kiousis, 2005). This research, however, generally does not question whether those issues or qualities are relevant to society and does not attend to economic and political power structures that explain public attention to those and not other topics or characteristics. That is, "the administrative theorist . . . begins with the existing order and considers the effects of a certain use of it" (Gitlin, 1978, p. 225), and interprets results in ways "that supports, or does not seriously disturb, the status quo" (Smythe & Van Dinh, 1983, p. 118).

These methodological or interpretative frameworks are criticized without sufficient attention to the institutional and epistemological underpinnings. Specifically, mainstream research, along with agenda setting, conceptualizes news media as transferring information to the audience (Dahlgren, 1988b), and - embracing pluralist ideals - sees the audience as autonomous (Swanson, 1992). In addition, the notion that the media convey information stems from agenda setting's roots in the public service idea that sees the media as providing agendas and "public space" for citizens (see Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1982). Critical scholars conversely construe "audience members as embodying larger social and political structure" (Swanson, 1992, p. 322) and also argue that "there is something more than just information which is conveyed in TV news and, more importantly, that these other 'messages' (ideology) are not necessarily apparent to the viewer" (Dahlgren, 1988a, p. 287). That is, "a campaign message during an election does not simply tell us how to vote," or how to evaluate political issues or candidate traits, but also implicitly

assumes that a certain political system is legitimate (Philo, 1990, p. 5). This second level is not scrutinized by mainstream researchers, who – seeing the media as information providers – divert the focus from persuasion or thwarting change, and do not regard the media's role as ideological. Although first level agenda setting sees the media as successful in telling people what to think about (Cohen, 1963), and attribute agenda setting assigns the media the power to tell us what to think (McCombs & Shaw, 1993), this power is not problematized. Consequently, scholars discuss agenda setting *effect*s or *function*, not the more ideologically burdened *power.*

Cyber Optimism: Does it Really Matter?

Do the outlined differences matter? Are homogenization and agenda setting applicable to the new media environment? Or have the changes in the media landscape made each approach and also the differentiation between critical and mainstream research obsolete? Not only are there more media options available, with television channels an American household doubling in number between 1989 and 1999 (Nielsen Media Research, 2000). Also, more diverse content is easily accessible due to channel specialization and audience targeting. The Internet furthers diversity with blogs, news Web sites, chat rooms, and discussion forums representing every ideological or topical niche. Those changes instigate the need to reconsider content production, reception and dissemination, and consequently to scrutinize the existing approaches to media effects and the distinctions between them.

Computer-Mediated Homogenization

There are two main assumptions underlying homogenization. The media system is centralized and disseminates uniform messages, and those messages impact everyone, overcoming individual characteristics. Both premises are challenged by the Internet. Unlike mass media, the Internet is a decentralized network that enables end-to-end communication and grants everyone relatively equal control to create, duplicate, and disseminate content. Since the content is digital, it can be compressed, stored, and reproduced easily (Shapiro, 1999). These features allow individuals to be creators. Thus the Internet is an outlet for those who would not enter the mainstream media, contributing to growth in niche markets and "reconceptualizing audience as smaller and discrete 'taste cultures,' rather than as an amorphous mass" (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001, p. 370). As increasingly diverse content is readily available, the messages are no longer uniform and no longer disseminated from the culture industry to passive recipients.

The new media environment also alters the content reception stage. The Frankfurt scholars posited that messages affect everyone equally. But the question that is now more pertinent than ever is not what the media do *to people* but what people do *to media?* Since content diversity facilitates interest and ideology driven selectivity, audience characteristics become central to understanding effects. With regard to divergent needs, politically oriented citizens seek news while those disinterested learn about sitcom characters or technological gadgets (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003). While one person may listen to Bach, the otherwise inclined can watch cyber-porn. Ideology also affects content selection. Partisans tend to obtain information from attitude-consistent online news sources (Best, Chmielewski & Krueger, 2005;

Iyengar & Morin, 2006), and political online groups are likely to expose users to consonant views (Wojcieszak & Mutz, forthcoming). All this might terminate homogenization, as the ability to blend the audience to a single worldview declines with so many worldviews available.

Computer-Mediated Agenda Setting

Do multiple and diverse news sources thwart agenda setting? In brief, the presumptions underlying agenda setting are that the media are limited and identifiable, and also that they transmit a single agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Winter & Eyal, 1981). These assumptions no longer hold, as news outlets proliferate and as the Internet affords users unprecedented control to customize information. Acknowledging these changes, scholars predict that the "redundancy across outlets . . . will be greatly reduced as niche media offer very different agendas," and that the "audiences will fragment and avail themselves of vastly different media" (McCombs, 2004, p. 147). For one, reduced redundancy is attributable to decentralization and digitialization that allow individuals to create alternative Web sites, independent blogs, and non-mainstream discussion forums. Inasmuch as the authors differ with regard to interests and ideology, those sources emphasize different issues or perspectives, creating competing agendas.

Also, these agendas might be differentially salient to various subpopulations. Since Internet users are able to circumvent gatekeepers, individuals can *select* agendas based on interest, ideology or group membership. The fragmentation in the public's political priorities might be yet advanced because Internet users can customize their news input thanks to services such as automatic removal of e-mails from *a priori* identified sources, filtering protocols that reduce the accessible Web sites by using rating systems from preferred outlets, or software options that personalize news. Since users can select topics they deem important, a customized "Daily Me" could feature a leading article on seals in the Bay Area and entirely disregard international affairs (Negroponte, 1995).

Even those who simply rely on media conglomerates can attend to different content than selected by people who use the same sources offline. Experimental participants who read *The New York Times* online rated international issues as less important than those who read the paper-based version (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). This finding indicates that political priorities depend on whether people turn to online or offline sources, and also suggests that the prevalent methodology used by agenda setting researchers – analyzing the content available in specific time and location – might no longer apply, as it is unclear what media to analyze and to what content people attend (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001).

Cyber-realism: It Does Matter

It could be concluded that the Internet has not only made homogenization and agenda setting less theoretically and methodologically relevant, but that it has also reintroduced limited effects paradigm. Limited effects would result from the interplay between such personal factors as interest or ideology and such external conditions as content diversity. Challenging the powerful media effects paradigm would consequently attenuate and the divisions within, providing a meeting point for the critical and the

mainstream approaches. Before asserting changes, it should be examined whether or not there is "a gap between the *potential* and the *achieved*" as far as the Internet's implementation is concerned (Preston, 2001, p. 273).

Homogenization Reconsidered?

Critical scholars acknowledge that diverse online publics that could end homogenization may become a "fragmented secondary force in comparison to the increasingly centralized . . . .mainstream information and communication systems" (Preston, 2001, p. 210). In other words, the culture industry has been gradually dominating the Internet, limiting diversity, and ensuring that uniformity may to some extent continue. The two main culprits are a resource gap on the production side and electronic commerce. A resource gap refers to production values that thwart meaningful competition, with alternative authors being able to devote fewer resources to creating online content than media conglomerates can. Also, niche Web sites are less visible, and the well-established corporations with "experience honing their skills at attracting audiences" continue to exercise their influence (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001, p. 377). As a result, the most frequently visited sites include Yahoo!, AOL Time Warner, and MSN-Microsoft (Adkinson, Lenard & Pickford, 2004). Those centralized sources, focused on profit and rooted in liberal market ideology, might disseminate similar homogenizing messages.

The Internet might impose yet more limitations than the culture industry. This is because the Internet facilitates electronic commerce and is a platform for advertising and marketing. The online environment, which makes it possible to track and store information about users, enables marketers to tailor advertising to individual preferences (McCallister & Turow, 2002). Thus, individual freedom is directed toward freedom to consume, leading scholars to conceptualize audiences as consumers rather than citizens (Gandy, 2002). Also, diversity might undercut, rather than reinforce, idiosyncratic identities, in that "[i]ndividuals experience more diversity and choice, but traditional group cultures are overlapping, losing identity, and blurring into each other" (Meyrowitz & Maguire, 1993, p. 49). Using the previously unavailable services, feeling unique and empowered by the new media, people might celebrate changes without contesting the dominant order or the continuing inequalities. Meanwhile, the corporate capitalism might be incorporating the countercultural forms into the mainstream, reducing the culture's oppositional potential and depoliticizing the population (Graham, 2000; Grossberg, 1992, McChesney, 1996). This would indicate that the Frankfurt theorists' concerns are still relevant.

Agenda Setting Reconsidered?

The agenda setting effect is also likely to persist because the public primarily relies on mainstream news outlets online (Horrigan, Garrett, & Resnick, 2004). This reliance results from content cross-promotion and cross-purposing that produces benefits to online sources due to their offline popularity. Available agendas may be further limited by news centralization, which is paradoxically greater online than offline. While the five largest daily U.S. newspapers, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today* and *The Washington Post*, account for 22% of the total circulation of 100 newspapers, the top five online newspapers account for 41% of the total links generated by the top

100 Web sites, and are visited by half of the Internet users who go online for information (Hamilton, 2004). This might reduce diversity because – across online and offline outlets – similar stories might be given equal importance and be similarly featured with headlines, photographs, or hyperlinks.

The digital divide on the reception side, understood as unequal access and skills among Internet users, also limits information input diversity. To fully use online resources, that is, "one should be technologically savvy and have the 'geek' enthusiasm for technology" (Preston, 2001, p. 207). Most Internet users lack the enthusiasm and obtain news online simply because it is convenient. Apart from turning to the familiar media conglomerates, users rely on major Internet service providers, such as Yahoo! and AOL (Adkinson et al., 2004). Since these and other major Web sites use the same wired information sources, online newspapers (*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*), online television (CNN and MSNBC), or online news services (Yahoo News and Google News) present redundant issue agendas (Yu, 2005). Even those savvy and enthusiastic users who turn to alternative online outlets encounter agendas that are already popularized in and congruent with traditional media because the topics featured on bulletin boards correlate with issues covered in offline media (Lee, Lancendorfer & Lee, 2005; Roberts, Wanta & Dzwo, 2002). This indicates that Internet users relay the information gained from mainstream sources, further amplifying the agenda-setting effect.

Discussion and Persisting Questions

Should this analysis conclude that critical and mainstream communication research are reconcilable because homogenization and agenda setting are both powerful media effects? After all, agenda setting can be seen as creating long-term sociopolitical homogenization, and homogenization can be thought about as prioritizing a single agenda that shapes individual experiences. In other words, both tendencies conceptualize the media as potent agents with longitudinal effects, and some methodological distinctions are also partly overcome. The differential approaches to what constitutes power or longevity, and to what is an overreaching research question seem to outweigh the similarities. Agenda setting's premise that the media impact what people think *about* differs from the critical scholars' claim that the media influence *how* to think, *within what boundaries* to think, what *not to* think (see Katz, 2001). Although attribute agenda setting makes the terminological distinction less apparent by also focusing on the "how," the interpretations still differ. According to critical scholars, culture is related to power relations within society, and the media "condition our entire intellectual gestalt" rather than simply tell independent individuals whose interpretations are socially unbound "what we think about or this or that particular issue" (Bennett, 1982, p. 44). These interpretative differences minimize the overlap between the critical and the mainstream scholarship.

Should this analysis conclude that the Internet annihilates powerful effects and also the gap that has persisted since Gitlin (1978) identified it three decades ago? This question deserves closer attention, as it might underscore the need for new directions in communication effects research. Since the Internet transgresses the limits inherent in the mass media system, it challenges traditional approaches to analyzing media impact. The challenge does not, however, preclude powerful effects. Given online personalization, the media influence could be yet greater. Contrary to the theoretical and methodological

presumptions driving Frankfurt School theory and implicit in agenda-setting research, the effects might not occur across various subpopulations.

Homogenization, as theorized by the Frankfurt scholars, might no longer have societal and involuntary impact. For one, selectivity might create homogenization within certain ideological or demographic groups, a phenomenon that could paradoxically be termed *pluralistic homogenization*.[6] Also, since individual factors now dictate content selection, homogenization into various lifestyle, interest, demographic and political or ideological segments might not be involuntarily imposed but might rather be chosen by media users. These very notions contradict the Frankfurt scholars' presumptions as to the direct media effects occurring beyond audience awareness. This contradiction arises because the culture industry precluded individual control altogether, and thus the Frankfurt scholars analyzed the *imposition* of effects, not the *selection* that is now occurring.

Critical scholarship should thus account for the differentiation between imposition and selection, and focus on the reasons why people do not fully use the diversity offered by the Internet. That the limitations to the Internet's potential are caused in part by media concentration or production values cannot be denied, and political economists continue analyzing those factors (Graham, 2000; McChesney, 1996). The question to be emphasized, however, is what individuals do to media. It follows that the reception side, unacknowledged by the Frankfurt School and insufficiently studied by the critical research on the Internet, is central to analyzing the new media environment. Focusing on why people do *not* use certain possibilities could be more informative and more critical [*sic!*] than celebrating the gratifications they derive from online activities. Perhaps it would reveal that easy access to seemingly universal services generates desire for further consumption and obscures underlying social inequalities? Perhaps problematizing the use to which people put the Internet would show that such factors as social structure or even false consciousness limit individual online activities and impede dissent among those who would mostly benefit from changes? Perhaps challenging the perceived empowerment provided by new technologies would find that the "power" causes placid contentment rather than instigates to action?

The agenda-setting effect will also persist, but not without changes. For one, inasmuch as available outlets cover the same issues, first-level agenda setting might become more powerful not only because Internet users turn to major media conglomerates, but also because some online and offline sources focus on similar topics and user-generated Internet sites relay agendas disseminated via traditional media. At the same time, viewpoint diversity might decelerate attribute agenda-setting effects, in that various sources portray the same issue differently. This differentiation between the strengthened first-level agenda setting and the weakened attribute agenda setting deserves scrutiny, and offers new areas for research.

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[6] Although this notion might seem paradoxical and be the case against homogenization occurring in the first place, this effect refers to the media shaping people's needs, the context within which they function, and their experienced life-world, which would still be occurring within large subpopulations rather than across them. In addition, no matter what the ostensible differences among the sources, the messages generally continue promoting consumption or market liberalism. The uniformity within large subpopulations would thus be the case for homogenization in that certain lifestyles, products, or activities are promoted as appropriate for and unifying those social segments.

In a similar vein, inasmuch as some topical variation across sources exists, the agenda- setting effect may manifest itself differentially for various subpopulations. That is, while certain issues or attributes might not be regarded as important *across* diverse interest or ideology groups, they might be unanimously perceived as salient *within* those groups. This *pluralistic agenda setting* is likely to be yet stronger because people regard the sources they actively select as trustworthy and are more affected by content they themselves seek (Perse, 1990, Rubin & Perse, 1987). Since source credibility (Iyengar, 1988; Iyengar & Kinder, 1985; Wanta, 1997) and low skepticism (Tsfati, 2003) augment agenda setting effect, the fragmented media might more directly impact users. While some scholars have started to tackle this phenomenon, indeed finding that partisans who select different news sources have divergent assessments as to what is the most important problem facing the country (Stroud, 2006), agenda setting research should further scrutinize the *pluralistic agenda setting* across and within different interest, demographic or ideological groups and analyze whether this phenomenon thwarts effective democratic debate and political integration (Katz, 1996).

Will the theoretical or methodological adaptations required from critical and mainstream approaches to analyzing effects bring these two realms closer? The changes instigated by the Internet certainly provide an opportunity for scholars to develop new research foci that would increase the chances for the two approaches to intersect. Using this possibility for convergence – provided by the challenges that the demassified media presents to communication studies – might strengthen the field and differentiate it from related disciplines.

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