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Reading 2-4

Uses of the Mass Media

Werner J. Severin and James W. Tankard Jr.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Conceptions of the media audience are changing. Increasingly, media consumers are seen as active users of communication technologies rather than passive receivers of content. From a perspective of uses and gratifications, they always were. Rather than ask what media do to people, uses and gratifications research turns the question on its head and asks what people do with media. Different people, it turns out, can use the same media message for very different purposes. As this reading by Werner Severin and James Tankard illustrates, uses and gratifications is the area of communication study that most directly acknowledges the active audience.

CONSIDER

1. Conventional wisdom assumes that media audiences are generally passive. What is the evidence that members of the media audience are, in fact, quite active?
2. What specific uses and gratifications do you derive from your media use? Do different uses and gratifications vary according to different media? If so, how and why?
3. Are new communication media such as the Internet providing uses and gratifications that the old media did not, or are they just satisfying user needs in different ways?

Many of us, both in the media and out of the media, tend to think of the media “acting” upon their viewers, listeners, and readers. Subconsciously we often con-

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tinue to accept the model of the media as a hypodermic needle or a bullet directed to a passive target. But audiences are not always passive; one classic study, titled “The Obstinate Audience,” pointed out that the audience is often quite active (Bauer, 1964). Other researchers (Bryant & Street, 1988) echo the statement: “The notion of ‘the active communicator’ is rapidly achieving preeminent status in the communication discipline” (p. 162). Rubin (1994) has argued that audi-

ence activity—the deliberate choice by users of media content in order to satisfy their needs—is the core concept of the *uses and gratifications approach*.

Along similar lines, one group of authors suggested that the term “audience” be replaced with the idea of an active “reader” of mass communication content (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992). These authors stress that much mass media content is rich in meaning and open to multiple readings.

The uses and gratifications approach involves a shift of focus from the purposes of the communicator to the purposes of the receiver. It attempts to determine what functions mass communication is serving for audience members. In at least one respect the uses and gratifications approach to the media fits well with the Libertarian theory and John Stuart Mill’s notions of human rationality. Both stress the potential of the individual for self-realization.

BEGINNINGS OF THE USES AND GRATIFICATIONS APPROACH

The uses and gratifications approach was first described in an article by Elihu Katz (1959) in which he was reacting to a claim by Bernard Berelson (1959) that the field of communication research appeared to be dead. Katz argued that the field that was dying was the study of mass communication as persuasion. He pointed out that most communication research up to that time had been aimed at investigating the question “What do media do to people?”

Katz suggested that the field might save itself by turning to the question “What do people do with the media?” He cited a few studies of this type that were already done. One of them was, curiously enough, by Berelson (1965). It was his “What ‘Missing the Newspaper’ Means,” a 1949 study conducted by interviewing people about what they missed during a newspaper strike.

During this two-week strike of delivery workers, most readers were forced to find other sources of news, which is what they overwhelmingly said they missed the most. Many read because they felt it was the socially acceptable thing to do, and some felt that the newspaper was indispensable in finding out about world affairs. Many, however, sought escape, relaxation, entertainment, and social prestige. These people recognized that awareness of public affairs was of value in conversations. Some wanted help in their daily lives by read-

ing material about fashion, recipes, weather forecasts, and other useful information.

Another example cited by Katz (1959) was Riley and Riley’s study (1951) showing that children well integrated into groups of peers use adventure stories in the media for group games, while children not well integrated use the same communications for fantasizing and daydreaming. This example illustrates a basic aspect of the uses and gratifications approach—different people can use the same mass communication message for very different purposes. Another study (Herzog, 1944) examined the functions radio soap operas fulfilled for regular listeners. Some listeners found emotional release from their own problems. For others, listening provided escape, while a third group sought solutions to their own problems.

USES AND GRATIFICATIONS IN AN ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Blumler and McQuail (1969) used the uses and gratifications approach as the overall research strategy in a study of the 1964 general election in Britain. The central aim of their study was “to find out why people watch or avoid party broadcasts; what uses they wish to make of them; and what their preferences are between alternative ways of presenting politicians on television” (pp. 10–11). Part of their aim was to answer the challenging question posed by earlier election studies that indicated mass media election campaigns had little effect on voters: If voters are not influenced by mass media election programming, why do they follow it at all? Also, the researchers expected that classifying viewers according to their motives for viewing might disclose some previously undetected relationships between attitude change and campaign exposure and, thus, might tell us something about effects after all.

Blumler and McQuail began the task of determining people’s motives for watching political broadcasts by using open-ended questions to interview a small sample. On the basis of the responses to these questions, they drew up a list of eight reasons for watching political broadcasts. This list was used in subsequent interviewing with a large sample survey. On the basis of this interviewing, the researchers determined the frequency with which each reason was cited. The three most frequently mentioned reasons reflect a desire for what Blumler and McQuail call “surveillance of the political environment.” These reasons, each cited by

more than half the respondents, indicate that people used the political broadcasts as a source of information about political affairs. Other data from the survey indicated that one of the specific purposes of this surveillance was to find out about campaign promises and pledges. Only about a third of the respondents chose "To remind me of my party's strong points," a reason that would indicate the political broadcasts were being used for reinforcement of existing attitudes. This casts some doubt on the indication from some earlier research that people turn to the mass media primarily for reinforcement.

CLASSIFYING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS AND MEDIA USES

A few years later, in a paper that summarized work in the field to that time, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) pointed out that the studies are concerned with: (1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones (p. 20).

They cited two Swedish researchers who in 1968 proposed a "uses and gratifications model" that included the following elements:

1. The audience is conceived of as active, that is, an important part of mass media use is assumed to be goal directed.
2. In the mass communication process much initiative in linking need gratification and media choice lies with the audience member.
3. The media compete with other sources of need satisfaction (pp. 22-23).

The uses and gratifications literature has provided several ways of classifying audience needs and gratifications. Some have spoken of *immediate* and *deferred* gratifications (Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961); others have called them *informational-educational* and *fantasist-escapist* entertainment (Weiss, 1971).

McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972), based on their research in England, suggested the following categories:

1. *Diversion*—escape from routine and problems; emotional release.

2. *Personal relationships*—social utility of information in conversations; substitute of the media for companionship.
3. *Personal identity or individual psychology*—value reinforcement or reassurance; self-understanding; reality exploration; and so on.
4. *Surveillance*—information about things which might affect one or will help one do or accomplish something.

In 1975, Mark R. Levy (1978b) examined the cross-national applicability of the McQuail, Blumler, and Brown typology with a sample of 240 adults living in Albany County, New York. He found that their four groupings or clusters of items from England were reduced to three substantially overlapping dimensions in the United States. All three clusters contained surveillance items, and the other two clusters were equally mixed. Levy speculated that the differences may be caused by several factors, including the greater availability of television news in the United States, the fact that Americans may rely on it for a greater variety of needs, and the differences [between countries] in the style and presentation of television news.

In a more complete report of the same research Levy (1978a) concluded that besides informing viewers, television news also tests their perceptions and attitudes on "fresh" events and personalities. However, the participation is at a distance with reality, "sanitized" and made safe by the celebrity newsreader. Many viewers, he says, "actively" choose between competing newscasts, "arrange their schedules to be near a television set at news time, and pay close, albeit selective, attention to the program" (p. 25).

Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973) see the mass media as a means used by individuals to connect themselves with others (or disconnect). They listed 35 needs taken "from the (largely speculative) literature on the social and psychological functions of the mass media" and put them into five categories:

1. *Cognitive needs*—acquiring information, knowledge, and understanding.
2. *Affective needs*—emotional, pleasurable, or aesthetic experience.
3. *Personal integrative needs*—strengthening credibility, confidence, stability, and status.
4. *Social integrative needs*—strengthening contacts with family, friends, and so on.

5. *Tension release needs*—escape and diversion (pp. 166–167).

In a study comparing computers with other means of satisfying needs, Perse and Courtright (1993) identified eleven needs that might be satisfied by mass, interpersonal, or computer-mediated communication: to relax; to be entertained; to forget about work or other things; to have something to do with friends; to learn things about myself and others; to pass the time away (particularly when bored); to feel excited; to feel less lonely; to satisfy a habit; to let others know I care about their feelings; and, to get someone to do something for me.

NEW TECHNOLOGY AND THE ACTIVE AUDIENCE

Researchers have only begun to study the ways that cable television and other new media offering expanded user choices relate to the user's pursuit of uses and gratifications. A few studies done so far provide clues concerning the impact of new technology on how people use the mass media.

Cable television provides new and diverse opportunities for the audience to become active. With cable, the number of channels can increase from the ten or fewer available with broadcast television to over 100. Cable viewers adopt various strategies to cope with this increased number of choices. One strategy is to narrow one's regular watching to a subset of the available channels that correspond to one's interests. This subset has been called an individual's "channel repertoire" (Heeter & Greenberg, 1985). Viewers differ in their awareness of available cable options. To some extent, viewers appear to be overwhelmed by the number of programs and channels now available. One survey of users of a 35-channel cable system found viewers were able to correctly identify an average of only nine channels by their number or location on the channel selector (Heeter & Greenberg, 1985).

About half the time, cable viewers have a program in mind when they turn on the television set. The other half of the time, programs are chosen at the time of viewing. Viewers use a variety of scanning strategies to decide which programs to watch. These strategies differ in whether they are *automatic* (going from channel to channel in the order that they appear) or *controlled* (going from one selected channel to another on the basis of some desired goal); *elaborated* (involving all

or most channels) or *restricted* (involving a limited number of channels); and, *exhaustive* (searching all channels before returning to the best choice) or *terminating* (stopping when the first acceptable option is located). The most active viewers of cable television tend to use controlled, elaborated, and exhaustive searching strategies. They tend to be young adults (Heeter & Greenberg, 1985).

The videocassette recorder also gives the television viewer opportunities to be a more active viewer. It offers the user greater flexibility in terms of times for viewing and it increases the choices of available content. Levy (1980) argues that using a VCR to time-shift programs is a demanding task and that viewers who take the trouble to do it must be among the most active members of the television audience.

Several studies have looked at the uses to which people put computers as communication devices. Perse and Courtright (1993) found in a 1988 survey that computers ranked lowest among 12 types of mediated and interpersonal communication for satisfying communication needs such as relaxation, entertainment, self-awareness, and excitement. The picture changed a few years later, however. Another survey (Perse & Dunn, 1995) looked particularly at the use of computers to communicate with others through information services and the Internet, or what the authors called *computer connectivity*. People using computers for electronic communication were satisfying the following needs: learning, entertainment, social interaction, escapism, passing the time, and out of habit. Use of computers hooked to networks or information services for reasons of passing time or out of habit suggests a ritualistic use, not a use aimed at the gratifications provided by specific content. The authors suggest that this ritualistic use of computers for connectivity might actually lead some users of computer networks or information services to become addicted. [For further discussion about the effects of computer use, see Reading 8-2.]

The uses and gratifications approach may be particularly useful in helping us understand how people use the World Wide Web, e-mail, and other aspects of cyberspace.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN USES AND GRATIFICATIONS RESEARCH

One recent development has been a movement away from conceptualizing audiences as active or passive to treating activity as a variable (Rubin, 1994) That is,

sometimes media users are selective and rational in their processing of media messages, but at other times they are using the media for relaxation or escapism. These differences in type and level of audience activity might also have consequences for media effects. For instance, cultivation effects of the type proposed by George Gerbner and his associates might be most likely to occur when audience members are viewing television for diversion or escape.

Another new direction has been to focus on media use for satisfying particular needs. For instance, one possible use of the mass media is to relieve loneliness. Canary and Spitzberg (1993) found evidence supporting this use, but the relationship depended on the extent of loneliness. They found the heaviest use of the media to relieve loneliness was in the *situationally lonely*, or those who were temporarily lonely. They found less use of the media to relieve loneliness in the *chronically lonely*, or those who have felt lonely for a period of years. The explanation seems to be that the chronically lonely attribute their loneliness to internal factors and so do not believe that communication in itself will provide relief.

Film scholars have begun to use an active audience approach to help us understand the viewing of extremely violent motion pictures. Why do people watch films such as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *True Romance*, *National Born Killers*, *Man Bites Dog*, *Henry*, *Portrait of a Serial Killer*, *Bad Lieutenant*, and *Killing Zoe*? And what kinds of active cognitive processing strategies might they use to make the violence more tolerable? Hill (1997) studied focus groups of viewers of brutal films and found that they responded with *portfolios of interpretation*—particular methods of response that they brought to the viewing experience. Factors within the portfolio included a conceptualization of fictional violence as entertaining, anticipation of upcoming violence and readiness to choose methods of self-censorship, and establishing individual thresholds for acceptable violence.

CONCLUSIONS

The uses and gratifications approach reminds us of one very important point—people use the media for many different purposes. This approach suggests that to a large extent, the user of mass communication is in control. The uses and gratifications approach can serve as a healthy antidote to the emphasis on passive audi-

ences and persuasion that has dominated much earlier research.

The uses and gratifications approach may make a significant contribution to our understanding of media effects as we move further into the digital age and media users are confronted with more and more choices. It is obvious that the media user dealing with cable television with as many as 500 channels or with a videocassette recorder that allows time-shifting, archiving, and repeated viewing of television content is a much more active audience member than the traditional media consumer of a few years ago. The uses and gratifications approach should eventually have some things to say about the users of these new media. After all, it is the single area of theory that has attempted most directly to deal with the active audience.

At the very least, the uses and gratifications approach should direct our attention to the audience of mass communication. Brenda Dervin (1980) recommended that the development of information campaigns should begin with study of the potential information user and the questions that person is attempting to answer in order to make sense of the world. The same lesson probably applies to the producers of much of the content of the mass media. Media planners in many areas should be conducting more research on their potential audiences, and the gratifications those audiences are trying to obtain.

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- Uses and Gratifications of the Web Among College Students (<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol6/issue1/ebersole.html>)
- Why Do People Watch Television? (<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/usegrat.html>)



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