

Part 1: Compare and contrast the ‘social mission’ (Topic 2) and the Frankfurt School (Topic 3) approaches to mass communication and culture. What do these approaches have in common, and where do they diverge? (approximately 800-1000 words).

To understand mass communication and culture, it is important for us to look into a range of theoretical approaches to facilitate a clearer understanding. In this essay, I will discuss the distinct similarities and differences between the ‘social mission’ and the Frankfurt School approaches to mass communication and culture, along with substantiating examples to support the arguments.

The ‘social mission’ approach refers to an idealist concept of culture that draws its views and ideas from the work of Arnold and Leavis. It sees the society as fragmented but thinks that culture can unify it, hence the term ‘social mission’. In contrast, the Frankfurt School approach founded by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer adopts a materialistic perspective of culture.

In one of his writings, Leavis accepted that “culture was at a crisis” (1930:3). What is ‘culture’? According to Barker (2000:57), there is no definite meaning attached to it. Generally, ‘culture’ refers to the active cultivation of the human mind and the traditions and practices passed down from different generations (Williams 1981:9).

The Frankfurt School approach shares some common ground with the ‘social mission’ approach to mass communication and culture. One of the similarities is that both employ the mass society theory to understand modern societies. With an industrial, contemporary mass society, it brought with it a state of alienation where individuals lose contact with the normative codes and traditions of a community (Dearman 2004:8). As society became increasingly complex, individuals became isolated. Such a ‘mass society’ was marked by a ‘loss of community’, with mass media taking over the role of creating and distributing values to a society. This results in audiences becoming passive, which is the next similarity to be discussed.

With both approaches seen as partaking of mass society theory, they consider the masses to comprise of passive, vulnerable audiences, incapable of developing any form of rational resistance to information that are constantly passed on to them. For example, in the case of television, we experience the process of modernization - the rise of technology in society. As one is exposed to the countless programmes on telecast, he absorbs whatever he sees. Consequently, he is led to believe in a fallacy that he knows what he wants but the truth is that his “wants” are actually psychological images that were imprinted into his subconscious mind (Adorno and Horkheimer 1977:352). Audiences are thus, lulled into the state of ‘false consciousness’ and are ‘enthralled’ – captured and helpless before the structure of television, making them its “patient, lobotomised ‘viewers’” (Conrad 1982:16).

Another significant similarity relates to both approaches' perceptions on mass culture, also known as popular culture. The idealist 'social mission' approach sees mass culture to be dehumanising humankind, leaving individuals vulnerable to the breakdown of traditional social institutions and traditions, resulting in a fragmented society falling into anarchy (Dearman 2004:16). Likewise, theorists within the Frankfurt School worried about mass culture. Though they do not see it as resulting in chaos, they thought mass culture confers 'false consciousness' or debased ideas and values on individuals. Both approaches view mass culture as inauthentic because it is not produced by 'the people', as manipulative because mass culture is commodity-based with its primary purpose is to be purchased and as unsatisfying because it requires little work to consume thus, failing to enrich its consumers (Barker 2000:66). An example to exemplify would be English literature. Culture is constantly changing and taking new form with the introduction of mass production and standardization. While Shakespeare literature may be 'high culture' in the early 20th century, it is no longer so in today's context due to the accessibility and easy availability of the paperbacks. It becomes relatively affordable owing to technological advancement and mass production. From this example, it proves that mass culture is viewed as inauthentic, manipulative and unsatisfying.

Although both approaches view mass culture as negative, either leading the society towards anarchy or creating a sense of 'false consciousness', the Frankfurt School still regards mass culture central to a society's achievement of unity and stability. This could be achieved if a mass society has a common culture, leading to a monolithically cohesive society.

The other glaring difference between the approaches pertains to their notions of ‘culture’. From an idealist view, ‘culture’ emphasis is on the ‘informing spirit’ of a whole way of life that is most evident in ‘specifically cultural’ activities (Williams 1981:9). This refers to particular kinds of texts – literary, musical and visual, which are the results of individual production and are expressive of individual difference. For example, in literary studies, the English canon is held out to be the essence of Western culture. ‘Social mission’ approach thus, views ‘culture’ as synonymous with the high arts and as autonomous from social relations (Dearman 2004:5).

From a materialist view, ‘culture’ is seen as the product primarily constituted by other social activities (Williams 1981:9). ‘Culture’ - as both social relations and forms of representation – is made possible by the political, social and economic conditions through which they emerge. This relates to the Frankfurt School’s ideology of culture being ‘socially determined’. ‘Culture industry’ termed by Adorno and Horkheimer suggests that culture is “interlocked with political economy” (Barker 2000:66). By this, it means that cultural values and ideas are no longer subjected to spontaneous bursts of creativity that give life to new forms of cultural and artistic expression, but subjugated by standardization and mass production (Adorno and Horkheimer 1977:349). Hence, a sense of ‘false consciousness’ had been fostered among the people in the society through the proliferation of ideas and values being imposed on them by the dominant class. The Frankfurt School approach thus, places ‘culture’ within a view of social totality and ideology where forms of social consciousness are determined by one’s human economic activity (Marx 1973:67).

Lastly, the idealist ‘social mission’ approach prioritises culture, ideas, values and the individual whereas the Frankfurt School approach locates cultural phenomena in a superstructure built on the foundations of a society’s economic base (Barker 2000:71). As such, ideas and culture are merely reflections of the economic activity.

In conclusion, the ‘social mission’ and the Frankfurt School approaches have their distinct similarities and differences. To understand culture in its entirety, it is important to look into the respective schools of thought to have a broader view of how a society and culture evolve.

Word Count: 1018 words

Part 2: Read “The business of being human”, included at the end of this Unit Guide. Briefly summarise what you see as Richard Neville’s view of the relationship between communication, media and culture. Discuss (with reference to readings covered in the Unit so far) how this fits with either the ‘social mission’ or the Frankfurt School approaches (approximately 500-700 words).

In the article by Neville (1997), he sees the society as one dominated by the rich and powerful media who possess the ability to exercise direct and large influence over a mass audience. The media utilise magazines or advertisements to portray images of famous people in hourglass figures, often an aspiration and envy for audiences. With majority thinking that being slim is desirable, media corporations with the aim of bringing in profits hence publish and produce materials that are highly sought-after. As a result, a society becomes subjugated by the aims of media corporations, where cultural phenomena are determined by the economic conditions of a society.

Neville’s view of the relationship between communication, media and culture fits with the Frankfurt School approach. In the same manner as the Frankfurt School, Neville employs the mass society theory in studying the contemporary society. This is evident in the sentence that says, “Once we were individuals ... Now we strive in an economy”. By this, it means that the society consist of a mass, not individuals.

With the sentence “Today’s cultural entrepreneurs play to the tastes of the not-very-smarts ...”, it coincides with ‘mass culture’ which is seen as inauthentic and unsatisfying

because it is not produced by ‘the people’ and requires little work, thus failing to enrich its consumers (Barker 2000:66). As a result, a monolithic ‘culture industry’ is formed.

The ‘culture industry’ thesis which suggests that culture is “interlocked with political economy” (Barker 2000:66) can be observed when Neville talks about how “media forums are controlled by the very institutions that have the most to gain” (Neville 1997). A mass culture is established when media institutions mass-produce materials, resulting in a universal culture, where culture is determined by mass production and material conditions of a society. Because of this, the masses are enthralled by a form of ‘false consciousness’, generated by the culture industry. This relates to the Frankfurt School’s ideology where forms of social consciousness are ‘socially determined’ (Marx 1973:67).

In the article, ‘false consciousness’ is frequently encountered. For instance, Neville’s description of the casino as “all seems so fake; so manipulated by hidden hands!” shows that global corporations and marketing have imposed on the people a sense of ‘false consciousness’, leading them to accept or believe what is presented to them. Another example where ‘false consciousness’ is observed is when Neville relates the relationship between mass corporations and mass media seen as “not only retooling our psychological make-up and moulding our tastes, it is shielding us from an awareness of the process” (Neville 1997). By this, it means that people are unwittingly accepting what the mass media and society are portraying.

Lastly, the section on the commodification of sex fits into the Frankfurt School's concept of a multilayered structure, also known as the 'essence/appearance' model, where mass media "consist of various layers of meanings superimposed on one another" (Adorno 1979:239). Neville regards sex as a representation presented as a surface 'appearance' in the mass media, under which a deeper 'essence' or meaning can be detected.

To conclude, Neville employs the Frankfurt School approach to give the points in his article a thorough and effective illustration of how the mass media view the society.

Word Count: 521 words

Total words for Part 1 and 2: 1539

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