

Mass Society, Mass Culture and Mass Communication Steps towards Defining the Concept of Mass

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Abstract

Communication has been perceived as a vital tool in causing social change and its main characteristics is dynamism in the society. Communication is replete with how share ideas, opinions, knowledge and influence individual attitudes and behaviour in the past. This study among others takes a wholistic perspective into these tripartite concepts such as mass society, mass culture and communication. Also, this paper takes an overview of the origin of mass and its changes by French German and American sociologists in the early mid-1930s. It examines the ideological and analytic connotations of mass in capturing the most general and specific effects of mass communication on the society.

Keywords: Mass, Society, Culture, Communication, Tripartite.

Introduction

This discourse is a fundamental one that invokes scholarly interest into examining the concepts of mass society, mass culture and mass communication. "Mass" as cited by Blumar (1936) is seen as a specific form of elementary collective behaviour within society, limited in time and directed toward some object of attention. He went further to assert that they are made up detached individuals, these individuals have their own local attachment, share similar associations, belong to primary groups live and act to a great extent in accordance with conventional patterns and binded by local customs and traditions.

There were contentions in mass society. There was deep poverty even in America. Yet, no objective observer during this post war period could have failed to recognize the rise in the general standard of living, the increase in home ownership and the significant gains in the well-being of parts of the working class gains that came to a level where one could even speak of the "affluent worker" (Gold Thorpe 1968).

Also, the arrival of industrial expansion facilitated the absorption of new people displaced from the countryside or abroad, many without special skills or unaccompanied family, so that they were apt to feel lonely, even altogether lost in an unfamiliar urban environment. Their predecessors, the ones who had provided raw materials from which the images of the mass had been constructed, had nearly dropped out of sight, and as living conditions improved, revised images became applicable. Especially important in reinforcing expectations of upward mobility were the generous benefits made available to returning war veterans. They opened up new opportunities for higher education and over time led to higher rates of political participation and more sophisticated cultural consumption. These same years were also a period of relative internal peace. Threats to public order from wild cat strike, illegal seizure of property, demonstrations culminating in violet clashes with the police and acts of terrorism had decreased significantly from highest level during the great depression. All these had been harbingers of what Bell (1960) foretold perhaps a bit prematurely would be the end of ideology. In any event, the model of nameless masses on the margins of society no longer quite fit.

The Concept of Mass Society: A Thorough Explication

In an analytical study of a renowned scholar called Tarde (1843-1904) in his work, the concept of mass and the role of the public in the management of mass society were analyzed in four headings.

Society and Collective Behaviour

Park (1864-1944), Tarde's immediate successor explained collective behaviour as the processes and interactions that give rise to certain recognizable usually ephemeral, social formations – crowds, masses, and currents of public opinions. He went ahead to posit that crowds form as a spontaneous coming together of people into more than normally intense interaction and they should be viewed as the result of a specific sociological process whose general characteristics are those, which generate collective attention.

Tarde his contemporary cited by Park (1972: 45) notes that a crowd is limited in size by the length to which a voice will carry or the distance that the eye can survey. Ultimately a public emerges through contagion without direct contact. This lack of contact does not connote that individuals who make up a public are isolated and that they exist only as part of an anonymous mass.

In the same vein, critics of mass society theory such as Simmel (1950:33), sees the concept of mass as a liberating influence: its unity, by virtue of its size, consists not of the totalities of its members but only of those fragments of each of them in which he coincides with others.

Simmel went ahead in his embrace of modern mass society when he landed the individualism fostered by a monetarized economy. Simmel (1907:490) avers that, money opens up opportunities for individual development, although those opportunities are limited to the intellectually motivated or the economically comfortable. Both the economic and non-economic individualism were also being fostered by the more impersonal lifestyle that flourished in the modern metropolis. As a result of Simmel's much of opinions and observations, he does not fit into the category of mass theorists as depicted by some critics.

Rebellious Masses

There were uprisings, disruptions of public order and demonstrations caused the collapse of government and it was the events that motivated the attacks of LeBon to present a challenge to social scientists. Theodor Geiger (1891-1952) offered a distinguishing disparity between mass and masses. He viewed mass as a collectivity supported by the destructively revolutionary multitude for which they exist. Such a mass arises not only in conventional politics; it also has to be understood as a protest directed toward community and against society.

In addition, Tonnies (1926:168) said that, the unity of purpose of the mass is evidenced in demonstrations, protests, strikes, seizures of property – actions that, although local, are nevertheless conditioned by the existence of a larger, more dispersed mass, encompassing a diversity of individuals, all of whom being similarly situated in society, have experienced similar frustrations and grievances. It is evident that, class conflict provides the context.

Masses and Public Opinion

With the evolution of modern society, Graham Wallas (1858-1932), tacitly posited to evoke an image of a social universe expanded to the point where people find themselves working, thinking and feeling in relation to an environment which has to enhance human existence.

It is a clear statement that, due to the complex nature of the society, it is expedient that policies should be more consciously shaped. When this is achieved we can no longer rely on the vague impulses to which people in crowds or in an agitated mass – ordinarily react from day to day nor can we rely on the simplistic ideas that parade as genuine thought but really are nothing more than some by-product whether of religion, tradition or someone's copy right, administrative position or private wealth.

The aforementioned issues are the fundamental factors that generate wild electoral contests, war, fevers and other negative results. They can only be countered by what Dalles called the organization of thought.

Also, Wallas isolated himself from the contemporary crowd psychology expounded in Britain by William McDoufall and Wilfred Trotter. The Individual Thought which takes place in silence and solitude which relies only on personal memory and imagination, no longer worked. The solution of problems required the organized thought which includes the entire stock of knowledge in which societal arrangements are grounded and only develops by way of discussion and communication.

The Shift to Propaganda as a Persuasive Tool

It is pertinent that, Wallas in his *The Great Society* before the mass disillusionment that followed the senseless slaughter during four years of warfare had taken hold. During the first world war, the people would have enjoyed popular support as expected and even embraced some of the educated men and women as actually liberating, raised questions about the efficacy of the crowd.

Also, Wallas contended that, how could people be so aroused and held captive to a cause that wasted their countries resources and deprived them of their productive labour force. This was hinged on the flagrant use of the machinery of propaganda. There was an overwhelming exposure of the monstrous and disastrous falsehood about enemy atrocities and the patriotic appeals that had emanated from the people's non-government.

In the same vein Lippman had a thin disparity from Walla's view as contained in his thesis on Public Opinion. He contended that people make decisions and act on the basis of information about the world. This assertion applies more on public sphere than to those in private life, yet, the world that people confront is too big, complex and with many things happenings all at the same time to give them direct acquaintance with anywhere near all relevant facts. No one even under the best of circumstances is positioned to experience more than a tiny slice of the events that rivet national attention. In order to navigate their way through the larger universe, people construct a rudimentary model, some sort of mental map from what they read in the press and since Lippman wrote from the never mass media. He contended that, the eminent leaders, statesman and law-makers no less than ordinary citizens – piece together our picture of the environment from what other people have observed and reported supplemented by what each imagines for him or himself.

Moreso, Lippman coined a new word, stereotypes to stand for the pictures that people carry in their heads. Once they take shape, stereotypes act like a screen that inserts itself between people and the more complex reality, including the light in which group actions and public events are perceived. The resultant picture is always refracted, not only by propaganda and manipulation of the events through formal and informal censorship, but equally by omission and misunderstanding on the part of recipients.

Also, Lippman further stressed that, the direct impact of what people see, read or hear about may be small but the emotion stirred by these impression tend to persist, especially when attached to some symbol – a name, a slogan, a cause or a party – that serves as the rallying point for some multitude. The power of such a mass, or however one calls it is nevertheless limited. People agree to act together to carryout strikes, boycotts or mass demonstrations.

Much commentary about the culture disseminated by the media does not specify exactly what is new and unique to it. One outstanding feature of mass culture is its lack of roots in a hallowed local tradition. It is not an expression of people' everyday life, certainly not in the same way that folk culture is. Instead, the content – the creations, artifacts and performances that constitute mass culture is received from somewhere else.

A second distinguishing feature is the pressure on the creators and distributors of these contents to find or build audience sufficient for economic viability. To maximize appeals, productions are suffused with marketing strategies. These include packaging, sensationalism, cross media promotion, a star system, going after records, offering prices, novelty and rapid obsolescence.

The fundamental fact has to do with the mass culture which Karl Mannheim asserted that, the absence of institutions that connect producers with recipients and the consequences of such a situations give rise to mass culture.

The audiences that represent organized groups were said to react differently than an unorganized mass, the kind that has taken over as the arbiter of success. Blumer conceptualizes that, mass as audience consists of individuals with the most heterogeneous background differences in families, in communities, in local cultures and in class affiliations. This mass like every other mass has no form or organization. It has no programme, no rules, no tradition and no culture. It has no group consciousness, no we-feelings, no bond of loyalty. In essence, the individuals are anonymous, have social functions and no designated functions.

Summary & Conclusion

This study among others takes a wholistic and thorough search into the concept of mass that gives birth to mass society where a specific form of elementary collective behaviour distinct from the emotional crowd, from the discourse that takes place in the public sphere and from mass movements with varying degrees of organization. The limits of media effects cited by Blumer are equally evident. The effects of mass communication messages on the masses have been very negative and have tremendous consequences that makes them to behave a predetermined way and they are easily influenced in their attitudes, behaviours and way of reasoning without having personal opinions and views.

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