

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKING THROUGH THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIOLOGY

Arif Hussain Nadaf, Ph.D Scholar, Centre for Culture, Media & Governance
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Abstract

The scholars in the field of mass communication and sociology have examined the evolving role of mass in media in a society from the classical theoretical perspectives of functionalism, social interactionism, and conflict theory. Each of these sociological perspectives has reflected strong relevance in the media theories that evolved since the beginning of functionalist traditions in mass media studies by Harold Laswell and Paul Lazarsfeld in the first half of 20th century. What is interesting is that with the advancement in mass media technology and the emergence of digital media technology, these theoretical perspectives of sociology have reinvigorated their relevance over the period of time. These social theories continue to remain relevant in current times of advanced digital media communications, especially social media networking. This study moves beyond the sociology of traditional mass media and will discuss the relevance of above theoretical perspective in the present context of rapid internet-mediated human interactions viz a viz social media networking.

Keywords: Social Media, Mass Media; Surveillance, Correlation, Transmission, Entertainment, Mobilization.

Introduction

Media plays a central role in mediation and transmission of culture, opinion, and information in the current era of the high media-saturated world. The mass media's relevance in a society has been fundamentally studied under the three sociological perspectives of functionalist theory (Laswell, 1948; 1960, Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948), conflict theory (Chomsky, 2002; Gramsci, 1971; McLuhan, 1994), and symbolic interactionism (Blummer, 1969; Spencer, 1991). The sociologists since early twentieth century took a keen interest in understanding the relevance of media as an integral institution in a society. The scientific research in media studies began with administrative research conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld (1948) that initiated the era of the functionalist approach to studying mass media's role in society.

The functionalists like Talcott Parsons (1991) recognized media effective tendencies to play an effective integral role in adaptation, integration and reinforces moral order in the society. The conflict theory that finds its roots in Marxist ideals of power, domination and class conflict perceive media as agency employed by the dominant class that controls the production of media content and used it to impose and promote desired culture and ideology in a society (Herman & Chomsky, 2010). The conflict theorists argue that mass media reflects and projects elitist views undermining the majority working class, the passive audience. The third and final sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism has developed mainly from the cultural studies of Sociology during 1980's and 1990's. The prominent Interactionist theorists like George H. Mead and Herbert Blummer argued that the audience interpret the media content themselves and derive their own meaning from the content they receive (Blummer, 1980). The Interactionist approach to mass media considers audience as active and responsive while engaging with the media content. This study will try to move beyond the sociology of traditional mass media and will try to discuss the relevance of above theoretical perspective in social media networking in the present context of rapid internet-mediated human interactions.