



Communication

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Media and the Construction of Communities

The concept of community occupies a central position in communication and cultural theory, particularly when examined in relation to the role played by the media in modern societies. Far from functioning as neutral channels for the transmission of information, media actively participate in the constitution of collective identities and collective forms of belonging, shaping the ways in which individuals imagine, experience, and narrate their experience as members of a community. In this short essay I briefly discuss how the media have contributed to the construction of the idea of communities and how this continuous process of construction of a sense of belonging is fundamental to the preservation of the idea of “we” in contemporary societies.

How the Media Create Communities

Benedict Anderson’s seminal book – *Imagined Communities* – challenged essentialist understandings of the concept of nation by arguing that national communities are culturally constructed and don’t emerge naturally from political borders. For Anderson communities are imagined, not due to a lack of real existence, but because members of a national community experience a sense of connection with others whom they do not know personally yet conceive of collectively in their minds. In the author’s own words, “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1983: 6). So, how does one come to feel part of a community of people that he or she doesn’t know? According to Anderson, the media play

a pivotal role in this process by enabling individuals to consume content simultaneously with others who, despite being geographically dispersed, are part of the same social body. Even though his work has been criticized for overfocusing on the role of newspaper capitalism (e.g., Chatterjee, 1986), and the role that printed media played in the creation of national identities, his thesis remains uncontested when it comes to understanding how collective imaginaries are constructed.

Radio, as a mass auditory medium, intensified several of the dynamics identified by Anderson. As argued by Susan Douglas (1999), broadcasting played a crucial role in shaping shared national cultural imagination throughout the twentieth century. By airing entertainment, news, and commemorative events and political speeches, radio created a common soundscape that connected listeners thus cutting across geographic and social divides. What creates the sense of belonging to a community is not merely the simultaneous consumption of the same content but also the emotional dimension of how such content is mediated. This led Douglas (1999) to give particular attention to the radio voice that was intimate and seemingly directed at the individual listener which generated feelings of proximity and companionship. The emotional connection that emerged from the experience of listening was soon exploited by many leaders that found in the new medium a way to bypass newspapers and speak directly to the people. Mussolini and Hitler were particularly successful in this regard, as they capitalized on what was then a novel emotional experience for audiences: the transmission of the leader's voice through the airwaves. Both succeeded in fostering communities unified by fear of otherness and by hatred directed toward those constructed as enemies.

Parallel to allowing individuals to feel part of a community through the sharing of content and emotional experiences, the media became a central mechanism of social integration. During the second half of the 20th century television took a centre stage in this particular by organizing everyday life through schedules, routines, and habitual viewing practices. As Raymond Williams (1974) discussed, this temporal organization contributed to the formation of collective rhythms and shared experiences, reinforcing a sense of belonging among viewers. Broadcasting also allowed for national rituals to reach large audiences. By suspending ordinary programming to broadcasts State funerals, national festivities, royal weddings and other State rituals, the media gather large audiences around these "media events" (Dayan & Katz, 1992). These serve

to reaffirm social order and collective identity, often at the national level, also contributing to the imaginary of national communities.

The sense of unity propagated by the media does not come without problems. Instead, it defines the boundaries of belonging by privileging certain identities while making others invisible, especially those of individuals and groups who are more distant from power structures (Hall, 1997). Even though at the turn of the 21st century we were led to believe that the exclusions operated by the media would come to an end via digital media, this has not been the case. While digital platforms facilitate the formation of communities based on shared interests, values, or political causes, algorithms tend to ensure that the messages that get more attention online are those who are aligned with the interests of the social media business (Pasquale, 2015). So, while these platforms transcend national borders, they also lead to audience fragmentation and introduce new forms of control, visibility, and exclusion, frequently mediated by algorithmic systems. This ultimately contributes to the erosion of social cohesion as people spend more time interacting with information that reinforces what they believe in, while losing the habit of listening to those who think differently. The dangers of selective listening were masterly described by Jacques Ellul (1962: 213):

“Those who read the Press of their group and listen to the radio of their group are constantly reinforced in their allegiance. They learn more and more that their group is right, that its actions are justified; thus their beliefs are strengthened. At the same time, such propaganda contains elements of criticism and refutation of other groups, which will never be read or heard by a member of another group.”

Thus, while the tendency for individuals to engage primarily with information circulated within their own groups predates digital media, the contemporary media ecosystem has amplified the risks of enclosure within informational silos, thereby diminishing individuals' capacity to feel part of broader communities that share common values, hopes, and aspirations, even when they differ in their views on how best to address future challenges. Even so, despite all the transformations in the media landscape, shared narratives, and affective engagement continue to be central to community formation. Live-streamed events, trending topics, and shared online rituals reproduce many of the temporal and emotional

dynamics previously associated with newspapers, radio, and television, albeit in more decentralized and fragmented forms. By facilitating shared imaginaries, structuring collective temporal experiences, and mobilizing affection, media occupy a central role in the formation and maintenance of communities. A nuanced understanding of these processes is therefore essential for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners who seek to promote social cohesion.

References

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