

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

“Virtual Cultural Resonance” as an Evidence for “Media Effect by Consent”: Notes on Media Audience Theories and Proposing New Communication Model

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Abstract:

Virtual Cultural Resonance (Adamu, 2014) is a new concept invented to explain the reality of the cultural intrusion of Transnational Media flows as against the previously much talked about Media Cultural Imperialism. Discussing the nature of media effect, Yusuf (2011) invented another concept he called ‘Media Effect by Consent (MEC)’. He suggested this media-audience relationship as an alternative to Media Domination or Cultural Imperialism. This paper is an attempt to present Adamu’s (2014) Virtual Cultural Resonance (VCR) as further evidence for Yusuf’s (2011) Media Effect by Consent (MEC). Being the amalgam that it is, the paper will use the models of Hindi movies’ audiences around the world and their localizations of their storyline as presented by Adamu (2014), to explain the reality of how audiences develop a mental frame of a particular media content right before their engagement with the media. This mental frame of the content, not the content itself determines to a large extent, the media effect. The paper will be arguing therefore, that audiences of the media especially the transnational media are being influenced exactly the way they want to be influenced.

Keywords: *Virtual Cultural Resonance, Media Effect by Consent, Media Cultural Imperialism, Audience theory/Media Effect, Communication Model*

1. Introduction

Text in its broad sense has always been the link between sender and receiver of communication. What that text does to the receiver has also always been a source of concern to the sender, receiver, researchers, politicians, policy makers, religious bodies, pressure groups, moralists communities leaders and many other stake holders alike. As an effort to make sense of the extent of the effect of text, we see the proliferation of many audience theories and Media Effect postulations for close to a century now.

While some panic over the tremendous changes expected to take place as a result of media, others saw tremendous opportunities of manipulating especially the opinion of the masses. Third world countries especially, sense the continuity of imperialism through media and engaged in some activities as a way of saying No to cultural intrusion through transnational communication. The subsequent pages of this paper are a summary of this marathon and the journey so far.

1.1. Theoretical Framework: Media Effect Models

Research on audience theory is relatively a young field of study. It is nearly a century now since the invention of Radio and which made scholars to start being serious about what actually happens when audiences engage media content. Looking at today’s prevalence of media traffic, we can say that the first theory of media effect came at a time when the media of mass communication was pretty new.

1.2. The Hypodermic Needle Model

Coming from the background of concerns and panicking about social disintegration, it is not surprising that the first audience theory to be developed in the 20s of the 20th century was *Hypodermic Needle Model*.

The World War I and its aftermath provided the thesis of this theory. Left to the powerful governments of those days, the newly found media of Mass Communication was a perfect tool to be used for propaganda reasons. They assumed that the powers of advertising for example, are sufficient to sway the masses into their own way of thinking. This explains for example, the British government’s BBC Re-diffusion to say, Nigeria in 1932.

This theory assumes that audiences are some simple-minded individuals. Personal intelligence and experience are irrelevant while engaging media content. This is because, according to this theory, our thoughts can easily be manipulated and opinions easily changed by the media content. Whenever a certain group of people are said to be excluded from certain classifications of media content for fear of behavioural alteration, either by authorities or otherwise, the reference is being made to *Hypodermic Needle Model* of media effect.

1.3. Two-Step Flow or Limited Effects Paradigm

For two decades or so, the *hypodermic Needle Model* reigned until worn out for its insufficiency to explain with sense of precision, the relationship between media and audience. The generation of people who grew up with media were not reduced into unintelligent individuals who react to media the same way every time. There comes, the need for a better explanation.

The central thesis of this theory is that, media content owes its effect to the opinion leaders who, in their turn retransmit the same information to the audience for maximum effect. The media therefore is understood to be less powerful without the existence of the right social factors. The thesis of this theory is credited at the first level to the work of the trio scholars Hazel Gaudet, Bernard Berelson, and Paul Lazarsfeld. They analyzed and published the decision-making processes of 1940's presidential election voters (Mc Quial, 2005). Their conclusion was that the voters' decision was not just based on the media content, but through the help of the opinion leaders' mediation.

1.4. Uses and Gratifications

In 1948, Laswell reversed our ideas about media content. While the previous *Hypodermic Needle* and *Two-steps Models* get us believe that we are being used by media custodians, Laswell drew our attention to the fact that we are actually using media to our own advantage not the other way round. He pointed out a number of functions of the media in the society and for individuals. He discusses media as an agent of surveillance, entertainment and cultural transmission. The list of uses and gratifications of the media kept growing with other researchers contributing to it constantly. Central to the argument of this model is the fact that audience are not passive while consuming media text. They intelligently and actively make choices about their engagement with media text for different reasons.

1.5. Reception Theory

Reception theory is more important to this work than the last three above. In fact, this paper argues that the three theories above are the foundations upon which Stuart Hall based his theory. It is clear that this theory is advancing the fact that audience is active contrary to the postulations of *Hypodermic Needle* and *Two-steps models*.

The theory emphasized how the individuality of audience affects the way in which they receive and interpret text. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (1973,) which explains the relationship between text and audience is the foundation of this theory. To its advantage, this model is an interactive one between the encoder and the decoder in clear contrast to the previous models which were linear in nature.

2. Media Effect by Consent Model

2.1. Definition

Media Effect by Consent is a communication model proposed by this writer in a 2011 publication. This model assumes that many models of communication especially those emanating from media effect theories are deficient. This, the model argues results into ignoring an important aspect of media effect or influence on the audience, which is the consent of the audiences themselves in the process of the impact or effect. Neither are the audiences, this model argues, passive nor gullible as previously assumed. The audiences are intelligent at the subconscious level and developed a defence mechanism even before their engagement with the media content (Yusuf, 2011).

NileSat being the starting point of rebroadcasting of the transnational programs, (Adamu, 2014); the scientific base of this model is a 2009 field work on Sudanese TV programs through NileSat and their effects on northern Nigeria audience. Specifically, the programs of *Sahoor*, *Sudan* and *Harmony* TV stations were used as the case study. The experiment tested the margin between the expectations of the audiences about the programs and the real effect of the programs on them. In this respect, Yusuf has the following to say:

- According to the data obtained in the cause of this work, which perfectly match to the above analyses, all the audience population who are recorded to have developed interest in a particular aspect of the media in question have reported being influenced in that same respect. Those, for example, who watch Sudanese satellite television stations for religious similarity, have reported being influenced from the religious viewpoint. Similarly, those who reported watching for language reasons are equally recorded as being influenced from the viewpoint of language. The fact is that the audience creates a mental image of how they want the media to influence them and have an impact on them, which eventually, happens exactly the way they framed it and beyond (Yusuf, 2011, p: 85).

Drawing from the above, MEC model concluded that cultural communication should be understood as exclusively cultural domination. The audience of cultural communication are not necessarily gullible passive audience that internalizes the content with filtering. In fact, the audiences are to a very large extent, part of the give-and-take process of cultural communication.

2.2. MEC in Contrast with Reception Model

Reception model is argued to be interactive rather than linear in clear contrast to the models previous models. MEC in contrast, is cyclic and it keeps revolving. Below are the four stages of *Reception Model* as pointed out by Hall (1973):

- Production – This is where the encoding of a message takes place. By drawing upon society's dominant ideologies, the creator of the message is feeding off of society's beliefs, and values.
- Circulation – How individuals perceive things: visual vs. written.
- Use (distribution or consumption) – This is the decoding/interpreting of a message which requires active recipients.
- Reproduction – This is the stage after audience members have interpreted the message in their own way based on their experiences and beliefs. What is done with the message after it has been interpreted is where this stage comes in. At this point, you will see whether individuals take action after they have been exposed to a specific message.

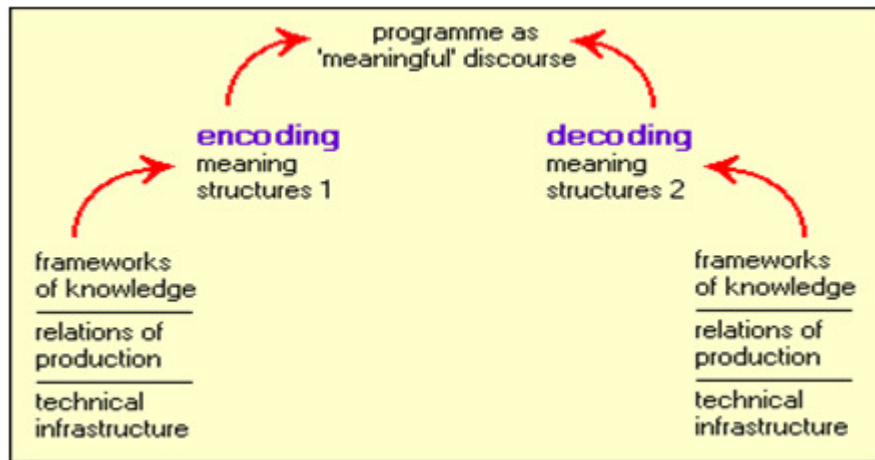


Figure 1: Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model: Adopted from Daniel Chandler, (2014)

2.2.1. In contrast, MEC proposes the following:

“→ Audience mental image of the message ↔ the audience (message receiver) ↔ the message content ↔ the channel ↔ the sender of the message ↔ the audience response to the message (influences and other mental frames) →” (Yusuf, 2011, p.85).

The most striking difference between MEC and all other models is that it is cyclic. Even though Hall's *Reception* is interactive, but it is at the same time linear just like the previous models. Find below a simple chart explaining the six levels cycle of MEC model:

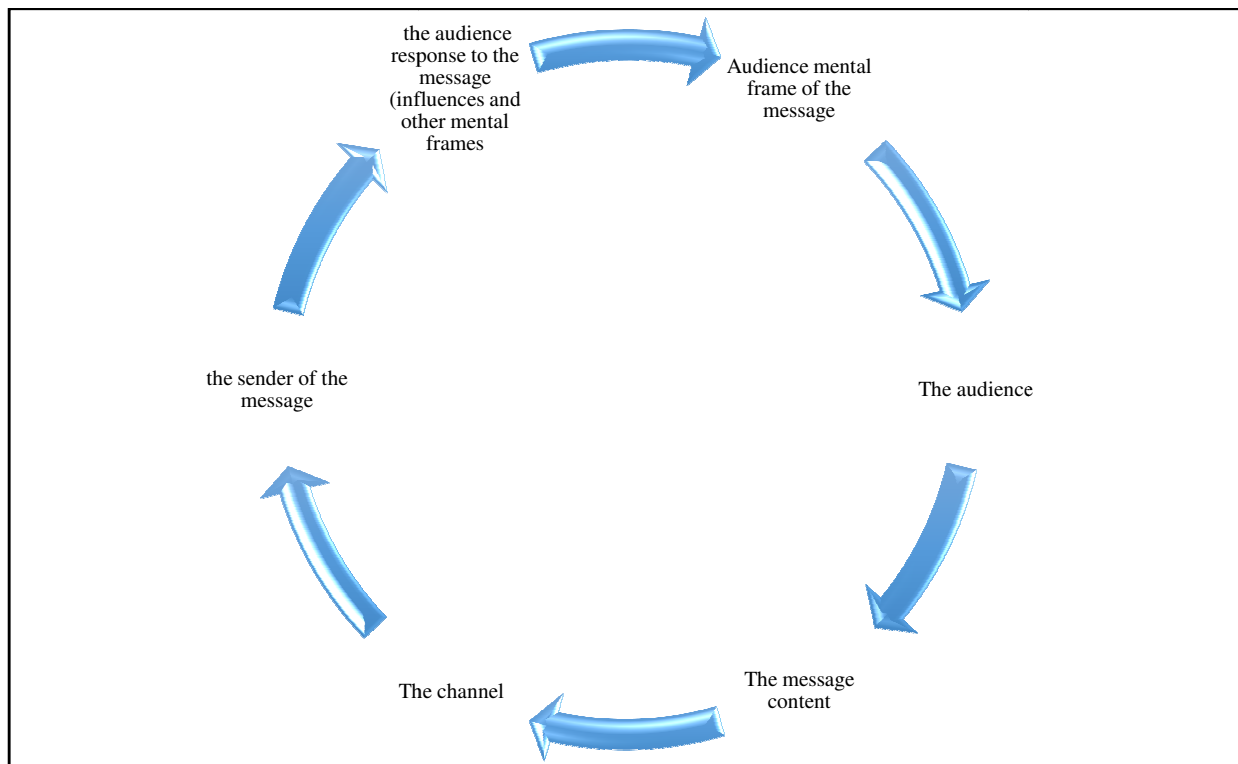


Figure 2

2.3. Six Levels of MEC Model

- Audience mental image of the message:

This is the starting point in creating media text. The producer of a media program doesn't just think of abstract dominant ideologies of the society, but he does that in relations to the perceptions of his audience. He always has audience at the back of his mind.

- the audience:

At this level, the producer of a program will consider the personality of the audience which in turn will influence the way in which the message is coded. This differs from the first level in that it focuses on personality rather than ideas

- the message content:

Having considered the two above, the media message is now produced and is heavily influenced by the audience even before the audience get to know of its existence

- the channel:

This level talks about the medium through which the message would be sent to the receiver. This can be TV, Radio, microphone, newspaper, internet or other media of communication. It, also, has its influence on the formation of the message.

- the sender of the message:

The sender will also influence the formation of the media content at a lesser level. This is because his influence is mediated by the mental frame of the audience about the content as well as the personality of the audience.

- the audience response to the message:

This is the effect that the media left on its audience. It normally happens in line with the mental frame an audience has at the first level. This will become another mental frame for a different text and the process will start all over again, making the process continues and cyclic.

3. Virtual Cultural Resonance as evidence to MEC Model

3.1. Virtual Cultural Resonance Definition

The term Virtual Cultural Resonance or VEC for short, is the sole invention of A.U. Adamu in his inaugural lecture in 2014. Adamu is trying to explain a phenomenon he observed throughout his career as a Media researcher which spanned 15 years starting from 2009. The systematic study of Hausa Popular Culture cutting across literature, music and film led at the early stage, to what Adamu (2008) calls "the whole idea of intermediality between one medium into another." This interdependence of different aspects the media further developed in Adamu's thought into interdependence of different global audiences of the same media message regardless of their regional differences. As evidence to this, a model is provided through the global audiences of Hindi movies. Several models of the viewership of Hindi movies around the world become relevant in the discourse for their unintended power to sneak their ways into the local media inventions of their host communities. This phenomenon otherwise described as media imperialism, Adamu (2014) insists should be described as Virtual Cultural Reasons because the media message is not coming from above but from what he called sub-below and new above. In his words:

- Global media traffic is not just one way, even though it is disproportionately towards non-Western directions. Thus new networks from the Southern urban creative centers of Cairo, Hong Kong and Mumbai represent what could be called "subaltern flows (Thussu, 2007, p.18). Such global traffic therefore leads to the emergence of counter, or contra-flows of media influences, often absorbed by audiences sharing.....what I call, "virtual cultural resonance"—for often such sharing is not seamless as it is disconnected from both historical factors or notions of nationality. Thus "in the era of globalisation, the one-way vertical flow has given way to multiple and horizontal flows, as subaltern [contra-flow] media content providers have emerged to service an ever growing geo-cultural market" (Adamu, 20014, p.18).

3.2. VCR Models as Evidence to MEC

Looking at the models of interactions between Hindi movies and their audiences around the world, especially when we look at the way the audiences localize the content of the movies and become encoders, to use Hall's terminology, in their own right, this speaks volumes of the consent they have given to the Hindi movies, in the first place to 'imperialize' them. Adamu (2014) explores "this media contra-flow from the analysis of how commercial Hindi language cinema spread and became new models of media entertainment among principally non-Western audiences" (Adamu, 2014, p: 11). In this regard, Adamu uses Larkin's (2003) submission where he observes that:

- Despite the successful dislodging of Hollywood in the global arena, there have [been] little studies on why Indian films achieved such success. Hindi films outside India are absorbed in two ways: the first was by audiences who simply prefer them to Western films; and the second was by popular culture purveyors, especially filmmakers, who appropriate Hindi films as local variants—using the same storyline structure as well as cinematographic styles (Larkin, 2003, in Adamu, 2014, p.11).

This is true to the several examples of Hindi viewership around the world, as well as it true to both Hindi movies and music. Adamu cites Pakistan, Indonesia, Turkey, Greece and Egypt as some of the places where Hindi movies and music are being absorbed beyond the level of viewership to that of appropriation to local communication industries. This goes a long way to buttress the point that this Virtual Cultural Resonance facilitating the process is an evidence for Media Effect by Consent.

4. Conclusion

There is a unique pattern of cultural flow between sender and receiver with virtual cultural resonance. This is especially true among “principally non Western audience”. The flow is characterized by some sense of selectivity and liberalism from the side of the audiences.

The new understanding we have here is that cultural communication is not necessarily cultural domination. Left to this proposed model, audience is the central part of this communication activity. To a very large extent, the audience determines the process from an imaginary beginning to an imaginary end since the process is a continuing circle of events.

Part of the revelations of this research is the fact that assumption of equality is an important factor in allowing the cultural flow between two cultural entities. This is because it helps in removing any sense of cultural domination which characterizes the cultural give and take relationship between the cultural entities with the past history of colonialism. The academic polemics about the western cultural domination of the African society through the modern media of mass communication is not unconnected with this fact. Coinage of the term “colonial mentality” is further evidence to that.

An important factor in the whole process and which gives the sender of the message an unparalleled power is the ability to imbibe the personality of the audience which is exactly captured with the phrase “*Virtual Cultural Resonance*”. Yusuf refers to this as when the communicator:

- Holds a mirror to the ‘acculturizing’ society and makes it see the cultural communicator as nothing more than a ‘distanced self’ rather than an alien, and the communicated culture as an extension of the owned culture rather than foreign. This however, smoothes the process and allows it to take place devoid of artificialities (Yusuf, 2011, p.112).

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