

# Theory of Mass Communications (Adorno)

Adorno and Horkheimer were some of the first scholars to critically engage with the proliferation of new forms of mass communications of the early 20th century.

*They argued that, in modern capitalist society, the increasing commodification of culture had transformed culture itself into a crucial medium of ideological domination, and a vital means by which the capitalist order itself was maintained.”(Max Klinger)*

Behind Adorno and Horkheimer’s work, there is a refusal of the modern capitalist society. On the one hand, they support the Marxism framework analysis and identify it as exploitative toward the human being and hence they recognize that must be overthrown. They argued that capitalism was doomed to be replaced by socialism. In their arguments, they also sustained that social and cultural factors played as important a role as economics in oppression. As Dr. Braddock mentions in this lecture, the difference with Neo-Marxism is that there is a belief that values and society can be shaped by people that do not belong to the Elite and do not have economic power. Naturally, if we could make an analogy with today’s communication media tools, those theories make much more sense if we think of the capacity of individual bloggers to challenge the communications of the Elite that have substantial economic resources.

To analyze Adorno and Horkheimer’s quote expressed in the lecturer’s presentation, we need to contextualize it in that during that period they witnessed the emergence of new forms of mass media and entertainment industry. It makes sense that such a revolution made a profound impact in a society that was

strongly influenced by these new media's features. They thought that industrial culture would result in commodification. They believed this was the natural result of capitalism. Further, they would argue that what they considered the culture industry would bind the audience to the status quo and have altered culture itself into a philosophical vehicle of control.

Their idea is that culture or art can abide by certain social conditions providing an alternate vision of reality. They did recognize the emancipatory force of art but only when it can be autonomous and independent. Therefore, they basically acknowledged that art does change historically. In the era of a capitalistic monopoly, they believed that new techniques of production and distribution of art meant that the free circulation of cultural products that had once characterized the middle-class era had come to an end.

Adorno and Horkheimer believed that the growth of the culture industry homogenized and restructured cultural form. By doing this, the individual was limited to being able to think for himself. The cultural form made him a conformist and a follower.

I think one example can be found in Hollywood. The movie's industry always had the intention to make a considerable profit. Hollywood was producing films with the sole idea of optimizing benefits by appealing to exact tastes of particular groups. This way the viewer is not required to think to be entertained. In essence, the style and the form of those films were identical to each other. Good examples are the old Western themes and the romantic comedies. Even if there were better promotions and a list of different movies with different characters, the truth was that everything was pre-classified by the production team. The audience had no choice but to become a passive, unreceptive recipient of the art.

The mass media are, in classical Marxist terms, a 'means of

production' which in capitalist society are in the ownership of the ruling class. One example can be found in my country the fact where Berlusconi, who was the head of the government and still is the owner of the major communication media and has ownership of more than 60% of the TV-channels and newspaper of the country. By controlling the media, he manages and manipulates the advertisements for political purposes and sometimes for a favorite industry or brand in which he might have economic interests. All this reminds me a bit of the propaganda theory studied last week, in particular, the bandwagon effect in which individuals will do something because others are doing it and they want to feel part of that community. So the elite can promote values and ideas to convince a group of people. If through these manipulations the group is loved and successful, the bandwagon effect itself will do the rest and "help" and "push" some consumers to buy a particular product.

Reference & Source Links:\*

- <https://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/bandwagon-effect.html>
- <https://www.iep.utm.edu/adorno/>
- <https://www.cym.ie/documents/chandler.pdf>
- <https://themaxklinger.wordpress.com/2012/11/27/a-summary-of-adorno-and-horkheimers-slightly-interesting-and-staggeringly-pretentious-views-on-art/>

*\*As external links, all will open individually in a new browser window/tab.*