

EXPATiation ON MAGIC BULLET THEORY EXTINCTION THROUGH THE EVOLUTION OF PERCEPTION STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

The mass media have, for sometimes, been seen as communication channels which possess direct, immediate and powerful effects, and the audience who appear helpless and passive responds uniformly to messages they receive from them. This has been the assumption of the magic bullet otherwise called stimulus – Response or hypodermic needle theory. Anchoring on the analytical research design, the author maintains that though the mass media have effects on audience, the effects are not all powerful as the magic bullet theory causes people to believe. He notes that studies in perception and other emerging media effects theories of communication such as selective processes, two-steps/multi-step flow, social categories, cognitive consistency/dissonance, among others, have proved the bullet theory otherwise, since audience who are very active can decide which message they receive and for what purpose. He concludes and affirms the extinction of the magic bullet theory which has now become an academic material and therefore advocates the final burial of the theory.

Keywords: *Magic Bullet theory, All Powerful Effects, Perception Studies, Media Audience.*

INTRODUCTION

Man lives in a complex environment where he daily tries to understand the rationale for the myriads of events happening around him. It bothers him why certain things happen the way they do and why man behaves or acts the way he does. It sometimes bothers him why certain goals are achieved as one time and not at the other. West and Turner (2000, P. 36) believe these can be sorted out through a theory which they explain as “a type of framework that helps us sort out the separate bits of our behaviour and guilt together in some meaningful way”.

Aneat, Onabajo and Osifeso (2008, P. 16) see theories as general statements that summarize our understanding of the way the world works”, whereas the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines a theory as a formal set of ideas intended to explain something which happens or exists or set of principles in which an activity is based. Nwodu (2006, p. 32) aptly observes that “a theory offers explanations to realities based on objectives and sustained observations”. A theory therefore provides explanation to occurrences, happenings or events.

Mass communication, as a discipline, does not operate in isolation, thus different theories at different era evolved to help explain its effects on audience Knenechukuru (2015) citing Baren (2006), P. 415) identifies the era to include; normative theories, mass society theory, social-scientific theory and the era of cultural theory, thus this discourse is based on the powerful effects and limited effect era, when the magic bullet theory is believed to be a theory only good for academic discourse based on the evolution of perception studies.

The magic bullet theory sees the mass media as possessing a direct, immediate and powerful effect on their audience. **De Fleur and Ball-Rockeach (1989)** note that the basic idea of the theory is that media messages are received in uniform way by every member on the audience and that immediate and direct response is triggered by such stimuli. Just as Severin and Tankord (2001, P., 124) observe that “if media messages hit the target, it will have its direct

effect". The direct effect, Daramola (2001, P. 45) in popoola (2012, P. 2019) believes, is that "once people listen to a message, they will comply" adding that "all the communicator needed to do was to get the audience to listen and the deed would be considered done".

Such assumption did not receive the blessings some theorists who argue that the mass media are not that powerful. Infact, Lazarsfeld, in 1940, disproved the magic "bullet theory" or hypodermic needle theory through election studies in the "The People's Choice" and introduced the two-step flow theory of communication. The uses and gratification theory also oppose the passive audience learning of the bullet theory, such informed the discourse.

METHODOLOGY

The discourse adopted the analytical research design which underscores critical thinking skill and gathering and evaluation of facts relative to the study being conducted. in this instance, related literature on magic and other theories which have been popularized to caricature the substance of the all powerful effect of the magic bullet were gathered from textbooks, journals online sources and lecture notes.

The Magic Bullet Theory in Perceptive

The Magic Bullet Theory is believed by media scholars to be one of the oldest mass media theories since 1930 during the Second World War in both Germany and United States of America. Propounded by Harold Lasswell, the theory dominated thought on the quality and quantity of effect media messages do have on the target audience members (McQuail 2005). As have been noted by scholars, between 1930s – 1950s, radio, movies and advertisements gained much popularity, and media effects on people seemed all too powerful and in some cases, extremely frightening?

According to Nwabueze and Okonkwo (2018), newspaper and magazine ads spurred on American consumerism, drawing even thrifty people into glittering department stores. President Frankline D. Roosevelt's radio speeches, known as the "Fireside charts" inspired millions of citizens to support his News Deal policies in the wake of the great Regression. Adoff Hilter used the media to spread Nazi propaganda in Germany, creating a unified force bent on conquering Europe (Communication Studies, 2011).

The Magic Bullet theory, because of the way people thought it operates, has variously been named. Defleur and Ball-Rockeach (1989) see it as the Stimulus – Response theory, the Hypodermic Needle theory and Transmission Belt theory. For Severin and Tankand Jr. (2001, and Bittner 1989, P. 3), it is simply a bullet theory or hypodermic needle theory, while Blark & Horoldson describe it as the Mechanistic Stimulus Response (S.R) theory, even as Ohunna, (1999), on her part, describes it as Hypodermic Syringe theory because according to her, it was believed that the media message acted like the content of a hypodermic syringe when emptied into an audience. Some persons still call it the conveyor belt.

Oso and Semiu (2012) note that based on the foregoing, the conception of magic bullet or hypodermic needle theory ascribes such unlimited power to the mass media that the first generation of mass communication scholars strongly held that the mass media had profound, direct effect on people assuming that the media could inject information idea and effect propaganda into the public. "This image of a hypodermic needle or a "magic" "bullet" were used to present an early but highly influential media version of the effect process. Media content was then seen as injected into the veins of the audience, which would react in uniform and predictive ways" (McQuail and Windahl 1993, P. 58).

Alluding to the stimulus – response perceptive, McQuail and Davis (2006, P. 2) state that the hypodermic, needle theory explains that the flow of information from the mass media source to the receiver is always direct and immediate, thereby making individuals cognitively passive and helpless in the face of a strong communication stimulus. Thus Kenechukwu (2015, P. 115) notes that "under this theory, the media are perceived as all powerful and believe that they exert tremendous influences on the reception of media messages. The media also hold the idea that

they penetrate people's minds and instantly create effect". This was practically the thinking because since people were seen to act immediately based on information they had from the media, there was no knowledge of other variables which could help ginger such perceived action.

Tenets of the Magic Bullet Theory

The magic bullet or stimulus – response theory, according to Lowery and Defleur (1995, P. 14) in Popoola 2012, (P.220-221) is anchored on the five propositions that;

- (i) People in "mass" society lead socially isolated lives with very limited social controls exerted over each other because they are from diverse organs and do not share a unifying set of norms, values and beliefs.
- (ii) Like all animals, humans are endowed at birth with a uniform set of instincts that guide their ways of responding to the world around them.
- (iii) Because people's actions are not influenced by social ties and are guided by uniform instincts, individuals attend events (such as media, messages), in similar ways.
- (iv) People's inherited human nature and their isolated social conditions lead them to receive and interpret media messages in a uniform way.
- (v) Media messages are like symbolic "bullets", striking every eye and ear, and resulting in effects on thought and behaviour that are direct, immediate, uniform and therefore, powerful.

The assumptions as enunciated may not have been formulated systematically, it is however argued that social scientists who began to study the process and effects of mass communication within scientific framework at that time entertained them (Popoola 2012).

These informed divergent views and theories which opposed the hypodermic needle theory and the all powerful effect of the media.

The mass media of the 1930s to 50s were perceived to be very powerful such that they could influence people's behaviour. This, therefore, presupposes that the mass media have the tendency to influence a very large group of people directly and by shooting or injecting them with relevant information meant to trigger a desired response. Communication scholars led by Lazarsfeld initiated studies which countered the propositions of the magic bullet theory which believed mass media have a passive audience. Such theories viewpoint was that the mass media have active audience. The findings of Lazarsfeld study which showed that people could choose which messages to accept from the media, as well as determine the degree to which those messages would affect them buttressed the active nature of the audience.

Events which appeared to Support the Magic Bullet Theory

An entry point to this discussion is the propaganda efforts of the World War II which tended to show that the mass media were all powerful, just as the belief that advertising campaigns were capable of surveying consumers to go for products so advertised because the message were the motivating factors which persuaded them to take decisions.

Oso and Semiu (2012, P. 228) emphasize the rationale for the strength of the all powerful effect of the bullet theory thus;

The trend as postulated by audience theories was the assumption that audience of mass media in general are such weak and feeble minded, opinionless and atomized individuals who are mere receivers and users of mass media contents so much that the first set of mass media researches and mass communication professionals assumed the mass media to have profound, direct, immediate and unlimited powerful effects on the receives beyond all bound.

Popoola (2012, Pp. 221-223) has identified some events and scenarios the bullet theory appeared to be still relevant. Among which was the Arab spring where in some North African countries, many people resorted to Face-book to share information which were acted upon immediately, causing the uprising in the region. Another was the electoral violence which took place in Ondo state during the 1983 gubernatorial election. In that scenario, the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, FRCN supported the candidate of NPN, Chief Omoborowo who was initially announced as the winner and the Ondo State Broadcasting Corporation (OSBC) controlled by the State Government rooted for the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) candidate. There was a sharp divide in the state and people depending on their side, started demonstrations.

While the FRCN played a popular song by late Christie Essien Igbokwe titled, "Give Peace a Change", the OSBC at the same time which supported Chief Michael Ajasin of the UPN played the record of Late Bob Marley entitled, "Get up stand up, stand up for your right". At a point the OSBC announced that the NPN candidate was running out of the state with a Peugeot 504 Saloon car and also providing the car registration number. The people swung into action immediately, desperately searching for Chief Omoborowo in all 504 cars they see. In the ensuing fracas, houses were burnt and other properties destroyed. Some communication scholars in Nigeria believed the bullet theory was responsible for such.

Other cases included the 2007 Delta State announcement of Great Ogboro as a winner of April 19, 2007 governorship election when his supporters stormed a radio stations and declared him winner. The announcement caused widespread jubilation. The death of the former head of state, Gen. Sani Abacha in 1998 and spontaneous jubilation by Nigerians after the information filtered out. The purported death of former President Obasanjo just after the won an election, the Lagos bomb blast of January 27, 2003, the Ebola saga in which people were asked to bath salt in warm water and drink same. In most of the incidents mentioned, Popoola (2012, P. 224) notes that "the mass media messages seem to have hit audience, there were reports of fathers abandoning their children or wives and vice versa..."

Oppositions to the Magic Bullet Theory

After evaluating the magic bullet theory, scholars emerged with different theories disapproving the functionality of the claimed all powerful effect hypotheses. Among the earliest was a study conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld and Herta Herzog in the 1940s. The study titled "The People's Choice" disapproved the hypodermic needle theory and analyzed the effects of media of propaganda on people's voting decision. Examining the voting data during the 1940 election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the researchers found out that interpersonal source of opinion influenced voters far more than media did. Griffin, (2000), McQuail, (2005), and Communication Studies, (2018) affirm the finding, stating that in many cases, the media's propaganda had no effect on the public at all. The same researchers had earlier on 1938 found out that the media messages may not affect audience. It was the thinking then that the magic bullet theory was not based on empirical test but mere assumptions which does not give room for empirical explanation for the relationship between the media and the audience.

The hypodermic needle theory which originated in the 1920s was the first major theory that attempted to explain media effect in society and the effect was very powerful, but this was dismissed by the thinking that people could choose which messages to accept from the media, as well as determining the degree to which these messages could affect them. The findings showed that people were not helpless, passive victims of the media as the theory made people to believe. Nwabueze and Okonkwo (2018) report that it was based on the research that Lazarsfeld, along with Alihu Kartz, developed the two step flow model of communication, stating that media messages are first received and interpreted by opinions leaders before they reach the general public (Griffin, 2000, McQuail 2005, Communication Studies 2017). The Panic Broadcast incident, "The War of the Worlds", the famous comic programme used to support the Hypodermic needle

theory was re-evaluated and declared to show diverse reactions among listeners (Communication Studies 2017).

Nwabueze and Okonkwo (2018) in affirming opposition to the non functionality of the hypodermic bullet theory note;

Although the hypodermic needle theory was instrumental in jump starting communications research of mass media effect, it has since faded into obsolescence. With so many sources of information available today through a variety of media outlets, people have more control than over the messages that influence them. Many people now exercise selective exposure seeking out only the information that support their world's view, people can now interact with the media through social networking sites and can even direct the flow of information to others.

The foregoing pre supposes that the magic bullet theory otherwise referred to as the stimulus – Response theory cannot be seen to perform the wonders earlier ascribed to it because emerging studies show that other factors may be directly responsible to people's actions not necessarily the message they received via the mass media.

Media Effects

For sometimes now, the question has been what is the actual effect of mass communication on individuals, groups, children, people in nations and other different cultural systems? Researches have been conducted on this and there seems to be some level of agreement at some point that the media have effect on society but the level is what researchers have continued to investigate.

Some schools of thought believe the media have powerful direct effects, others think otherwise and believe they have minimal effects. One can hardly exculpate the mass media from having effects, on the society. Gerry Kline, after an extensive literature review of media effects studies asserts that whoever says that the media have no effects is a victim of sterile research design. Folkerts and Lacy 92004, P. 765) maintain that the media have limited effects on individuals. Baran (2009, PP. 409 – 11) note the following on the limited effects thus:

- (i) Media content has limited impact on audience because it is only make-believe: people know it isn't real.
- (ii) Media content has limited impact on audience because it is only or just entertainment.
- (iii) If media have any effects at all, they are not media's fault, media simply hold a mirror to society and reflects the status quo, showing us our world as they already are.
- (iv) If media have any effects at all, it is only to reinforce pre-existing values and beliefs. Family, Church, School and other socializing agents have much more influence.
- (v) If media have any effects at all, they are on the unimportant in our lives such as fads and fashions.

As have been noted earlier, the debate on effect is still on as long as human beings live with their different needs to satisfy and perception based on prevailing circumstances and the nature of the society they live.

Paradigm Shift in the Media Effects: From All-Powerful Effects to Limited Effects.

A paradigm denotes an organized theoretical perspective that connotes various stages of theory formation where hypothesis are put forth, tested and processed or rejected. Baran (2009) citing Kuhn sees a paradigm shift as a fundamental, even radical rethinking of what we believe to be true. The shift becomes necessary because no one paradigm can provide an adequate explanation for all issues, thus a paradigm is a transformation from one organizing theoretical perspective to another.

There are two paradigms as identified by McQuail (2005) in relation to the study of media effect; the dominant and the alternative paradigms. The dominant paradigm combines a view of powerful mass media (all powerful media effects) in a mass society with some research practices of merging social successes especially social surveys, socio-psychological experiments and statistical analysis. Among the major theories under the dominant paradigm are: Magic bullet theory and Lasswell's propaganda theory, whereas the alternative (limited effects) is based on a more complex view of communication as sharing and ritual rather than as just "transmission". Major theories under this may include; two-step flow theory, attitude change theory, individual difference, cognitive consistency/dissonance theory, selective perception, etc (Kenechukwu 2015).

It is here pertinent to now examine how studies in perception nailed the coffin on Magic Bullet Theory.

How Studies in Perception killed the Magic Bullet Theory

To further the comprehension of the discussion, it is imperative to define perception as such will give a leeway into the discourse. The New Encyclopedia (2016) defines perception as the process by which we interpret sensory data. In terms of the theory of perception, its proponents, Berelson and Steiner (1962) state that it is a complex process by which people select, organize and interpret sensory stimulation into meaningful and coherent picture of the world. Such thinking infers that there are levels of perception which could enable one interpret messages which could be complex goals may be difficult to achieved.

The tendency for people's perception to be influenced by wants, needs, attitudes and other psychological factors is referred to as selective perception and it plays a unique role in communication. In today's world, it will be a fallacy for one to think that a communication message will achieve a 100% goal of the sender when one considers the fact that people have varying needs and these can only be possible if the receiver is ready and willing to be caught by such a message. The era of thinking that mass media message are like bullets or needle or syringe that when released hits the target is long gone. Media audiences are very active and would sometimes wave the information at their disposal before deciding either to open up for it or not. Even at a point the receiver accepts to expose himself to the message, he still will give his personal interpretation to the information, possibly takes in what he wants and leaves out others.

The magic bullet theory went into extinct as soon as it was realized that media messages do not affect all people in the same manner all the time. The evolution of the limited effects theory and selective perception paradigm made this possible because by these, it has become known that media audience were active and would discern based on their interpretation of what is good for them.

Kenechukwu (2015) observes that various intervening variables were known to affect audience member's use of and reaction to media messages in rather dramatic ways. According to him, though media messages are still believed to influence individuals, their effects were no longer perceived as too powerful, indiscriminate and predictable as was thought then. After all, people's biological differences, cultural differences, different socializing environments, different religious backgrounds or orientations and educational levels can change their perception of messages such that the intended goal of the communicator is not achieved.

The Two-Step Flow Hypothesis: The Rise of the Limited Effect Theory

The theory is to the effect that whatever information the media try to put forward to the audience, there are intermediaries which Lazarsfeld called opinion leaders who do not only pass on the messages and point of view to others, but also act as barriers to and mediators of effects of mass media. By the intent of the proponent of the theory, the opinion leader has a prominent position in information transfer. No wonder (Baran, P. 418) believes that opinion leaders are people who initially consumed media content on topics of particular interests to them, interpreted them

in the light of their own values and beliefs, and then passed then on to opinion followers, people like them who had less frequent contact with the media.

To strengthen the belief of the two-step flow hypothesis in working the extinction of the magic bullet theory, Vivian (2002, P. 367) notes the efficacy of this Lazarsfeld's theory).

Lazarsfeld's researches went back to the 600 people several times to discover how they developed their campaign opinion. Rather than citing particular newspapers, magazines or radio stations, as had been expected, these people generally mentioned friends, and acquaintances. The media had hardly any direct effects. Clearly, the hypodermic needle model was off base, and the powerful effects theory needed rethinking. Form that rethinking emerged the minimal effects theory.

The above scenario emphasizes the exit of the all powerful effect position of the magic bullet theory.

Multi-Step flow or N-Step flow

The sophistication in mass communication research gave rise to the multi-step flow model which Rodman (2006,P. 456) rates as a "mass communication model in which effects are parts of a complex interaction". The model suggests that other opinion leaders influenced the opinion leaders such that by the time the message gets to the audience, the effects, if any, become less intense. This is Baran (2006) idea. It therefore infers that experts in certain disciplines could be opinion leaders based on their areas of specialization and they influenced opinion leaders by their opinions on particular subject and the opinion leaders while trying to influence their audience inject their biases into the issue. Let us not forget that the family, friends, schools, church, etc. act as filters of media information and therefore affect how individuals react to mediated message. How then can the bullet theory be relevant?

Individual Differences Perspective

Kenechukwu (2015) notes that the principle of selective attention and perception, which holds that people pay attention to messages and interpret them in line with their own interest, beliefs, values and experiences dealt the final blow to the instinctive S-R perspective, although the mass society aspect has tended to die hard. What one believes was responsible for this view, the expositions and laboratory experiments on studies of behavior, classical conditioning, learning differences and attitude formation. Findings, perhaps showed that people differ in almost all things and that attitudes, values, beliefs are learnt by experience such resulted in differences in cognition and perception.

Perception Studies

As have been noted earlier, perception infers interpretation of sensory data, for the mere fact that audience of mass media can subject the messages they receive to interpretations is enough reason to conclude that the coffin of the magic bullet theory has finally been nailed. Perception can be said to be the filtering process which manifests because of differences in background and experience such that affect the way people see, fell about issues and this helps in the analysis of things.

Selective processes can be looked at from four levels and each buttresses the fact that media audience are quite active and therefore forecloses the tendency for their being forced to act, with response to the message of the mass media, the exact way the communicator had intended. From selective exposure, to selective attention, perception and the last not the least retention, such act as a defense mechanism. Based on these selectively concept, one can refuse

to first be exposed to media messages, if he does, may not pay attention to the information, and, when he pays attention, perceives the information differently from how the communicator intended and perhaps shakes off what he heard or saw, without retaining them.

To further put this clearly, Klapper (1960) in Asemah, et al, (2017) notes:

Mass media ordinarily, do not serve as a necessary end sufficient cause of audience effects, rather, they function through a nexus of mediating factors under mass communication as a contributory agent in a process of reinforcing existing conditions. Mass media alone cannot be the sole cause of audience change; they must walk with other variables or factors before they can have effect on audience members (P. 63).

Often people hold fast to what they already know and ensure the new things are not allowed in so that they do not conflict with what they believe in. even children who we may think have no choice when it comes to receiving media messages, sometimes refuse some televised programmes and even when they do, discuss only aspects they feel make sense to them. That explains why a child who watches a certain cartoon programme may decide to act some aspects of the show not all.

Selective Exposure: This infers the exposure of media audience by themselves to messages that are consistent with their pre-existing values, attitudes and beliefs. Often, we expose ourselves to information that supports our thinking and out rightly avoid those that are contrary. Whether for newspaper, radio, magazine or television, audience are mindful of what they expose themselves to. Parents and guardians do not allow their wards to watch all sort of programmes on television. Social backgrounds, such as religious, cultures, etc may contribute to this and are major factors in nailing the coffin on the bullet theory.

Selective Attention: This donates the tendency for media audience to pay attention to those parts of messages that are consistent with their strongly held attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. This is quite evidence in people who are adherents of certain religious groups and cultural leanings. This makes media message less powerful.

Selective Perception: This is the mental or psychological recasting of media message to be sure they align with pre-existing attitudes. This is just to make sure the messages fits into the preferences of audience members. Any message that tends to fall outside such preference is shot out.

Selective Retention: This is the tendency for the recall of information one had earlier received to be influenced by wants, needs, attitudes, etc. It means that people tend to remember best and longest those messages that are most meaningful to them. An audience who selectively retains the message he needs cannot be influenced by others he does not need.

The foregoing affirms the belief of Asemah, et. al. (2017) that the audience is made of different people with differing intents and needs.

Use and gratification theory

Another theory that supports the final nailing of the coffin on the bullet theory is the uses and gratification of Kartz in 1990 which argues that media audience are not passive buy are active in selecting and interpreting media contents. According to Wimmarr and Dominick (2000), the theory takes the view of a media consumer and examines how people used and the gratification they seek and drive from their media behaviours.

An audience may interpret a message of a particular programme different from the communicator's intention and in quite different ways from other members of the audience. When audience are able to identify what they want from the media and what they will use the information for, they do not receive all messages that come across them. This makes powerful effect non-existent, hence the magic bullet theory holds no water.

The Social Categories Perspectives

The assumption here is that members of a given social category (sex, age, location, socio-economic status etc.) will seek out similar communication messages which they will also respond to more or less similarly, other things being equal. This means that people with similar backgrounds differ from each other because each of these groups needs information that will be useful to them to the extent that media messages cannot affect them the same way and at the same time.

Cognitive consistency/Dissonance Theory

This theory holds that people consciously and unconsciously work to preserve their existing views. These result in individuals strive to attain a state of cognitive balance in an attempt to understand media influences. Ekenechukwu (2015) citing Vivian (2003, P. 372) states that the consistency theory raised serious questions about how well the media can meet the democratic ideal that forms a forum for the most exchange of divergent ideas, but the media cannot fulfill their role as a forum for people to hear only what they want to hear.

When an individual is confronted with two ideas that are psychologically inconsistent thereby creating unpleasant tension in attitude and comprehension, dissonance has taken place. Putting into perspective, cognitive dissonance in communication refers to messages that are inconsistent with a person's already-held attitude, thus creating psychological discomfort. When this happens, only selective processes could solve the situation. Asemah, et. al. (2017) corroborate this.

The foregoing have confirmed the belief that the magic bullet theory which basic tenets have been punctured by studies in perception and other critical theories has since died and the coffin nailed.

CONCLUSION

As a precursor in explaining the relationship between mass communication media audience, the magic bullet theory which has been swallowed by studies in perception is no longer in tune with realities when media audience, because of selective processes in the use of information, levels of cognition, individual differences perspectives, social categories, and two step/multi-step flow of information, etc., use the media to solve their problems the way they feel convenient. This underscores the position of proponents of the death of the magic bullet theory which today remains a theory only good for academic discourse.

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