

Sensurveiledning

General comments

The students are not expected to give exact references from the syllabus for their answers, neither are they expected to include a list of references in their answer.

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Task: «Below, you see five questions/tasks. Please choose and answer four of them. Each answer should not exceed 1,200 words (approximately 3 pages), but your answer does not need to approach this maximum. Shorter answers can be very good answers, too. Clarity, conciseness and structure of the answers will be a part of the total evaluation of your answers.

Each question you choose will count 25% of the final grade. You need to pass all four questions/tasks individually in order to pass the exam.»

1) There is a number of theoretical concepts in media sociology which have been developed in the analogue age, but have experienced new actuality most recently due to the rise of the internet. Three of these concepts are (a) the Uses and Gratifications Approach, (b) Cognitive Dissonance and (c) Audience Fragmentation. Choose one of these concepts, describe its core assumptions and discuss reasons for their newfound popularity.

Any answer, independent of the concept chosen, has to mention that the internet has strongly changed media consumption and with it potential media effects due to the multiplied information supply («high-choice information environment»). This is the precondition of the newfound popularity of each of these concepts. Very good answers should in addition critically discuss how realistic the concerns raised by these concepts actually are when taking into account empirical studies thereon.

(a) Uses and Gratifications: The audience is active and its media use is goal oriented. The initiative in linking need gratification to a specific medium choice rests with the audience member. The media compete with other resources for need satisfaction. People have enough self-awareness of their media use, interests, and motives to be able to provide researchers with an accurate picture of that use. Only the audience can assess value judgments of media content. Altogether, individual needs and motivations are reasons of media effects. This concept was developed in the 1970s (after first attempts in the 1940s), but has become popular again recently because of the information flood on the internet that has multiplied users' opportunities to choose content. The content received has become highly individual, not least because of personalized information sources such as social media and search engines. Thus, the users' underlying motivations have become very important for understanding and explaining why people choose and use certain content online and offline.

Therefrom result concerns about highly individualized information environments (filter bubbles, echo chambers), but based on empirical research, it is still unclear how justified these concerns are.

(b) Cognitive Dissonance: People hold many cognitions (internal beliefs, ideas, and values) and strive for consistency between these. Cognitive dissonance occurs if at least two cognitions are perceived as contradictory (conflicting/inconsistent) or if a cognition and a behavior of the person are contradictory (conflicting/inconsistent). This cognitive dissonance feels uncomfortable for the

person, and one tries to reduce or completely avoid it – either by changing the behavior or the cognition or by ignoring or denying new information that conflicts with existing cognitions. This theoretical approach, originally developed in the 1950s, has become popular again because the internet allows each user to choose their own information diet in accordance with existing cognitions more than ever before. In addition, personalized information sources such as social media and search engines try to provide every single user with content that fits into their existing cognitions. These developments foster selective exposure and can in the long run contribute to audience fragmentation and polarization at the societal level. The concerns about fragmentation have not been justified by empirical research yet. There are clear signs of an increasing polarization in certain countries (e.g. the United States) while being widely absent in others (e.g. Norway), dependent on the framework conditions.

c) Audience Fragmentation: A healthy and stable democracy needs social integration which requires a minimum level of consensus among its members on which issues are currently important – a so-called common meeting ground (common core). In the past, this was (and still is) ensured by the agenda setting function of the mass media. Audience fragmentation describes a disintegration respectively breakup of the society in smaller subunits that do no longer form a common entity. McQuail describes four consecutive stages: unitary model – pluralism model (diversity in unity – core-periphery model (unity in diversity) – breakup model (fragmentation). This approach was first discussed in the 1980s in the context of the introduction of commercial television in many European countries, but research arrived at the assumption that the breakup model was not reached. The rise of the internet and particularly personalized information sources such as social media and search engines reignited the concerns about a breakup since the individual news diets might drive the fragmentation process forward. However, research so far has proven these concerns exaggerated.

2) Since a few years, there is an economic crisis of newspapers that is said to have been caused by the rise of the internet. Why is the internet seen as a main reason of this development?

The answer should base on a description of the business model of newspapers most of which (except free dailies) are financed by a mix of advertising revenues and sales revenues. Both are connected: The more readers/sales revenues a newspaper has, the more advertising revenues it gets which can be used for increasing quality, which ideal-typically leads to more readers/higher sales revenues and so on. Since the rise of the internet, an increasing amount of advertising revenues has been given to online content suppliers. At the same time, many users are not willing to pay for online content provided by the newspapers. As a result, the costs for producing news content stay the same, while the newspapers' revenues are shrinking. This leads to economic problems for the newspapers – the so-called newspaper crisis. Very good answers will in addition discuss the consequences of this development for our society.

3) The freedom of the press has been called «the backbone of democracy», and authoritarian regimes have regularly tried to suppress it. Discuss this relationship between democracy and freedom of the press against the background of the history of press freedom and current developments.

The media have many different function, amongst them informing the public, criticising and controlling the powerful, mobilizing the citizens, and ensuring social integration. By fulfilling these functions, the media provide the preconditions for a well-informed citizenry that democracies rely on. But they can only do so if freedom of the press is ensured. Authoritarian regimes have regularly tried to suppress press freedom because they are afraid of loosing their power when being criticized and when the people are getting information that enables them to build their own, independent opinions. This can be seen repeatedly in the long history of press freedom: It took several centuries from the beginnings of press freedom in England in the 17th century until it was guaranteed in most Western countries, and until today, there are large parts of the world in which it still does not exist.

The current developments that can be discussed here are manifold (to mention just three examples: journalists are attacked in arrested in many authoritarian states, e.g. in China; populist political actors in many democracies are continuously attacking the free press; Hungary has introduced very restrictive laws in the context of the corona crisis that also affect the freedom of the press and is thus in line with former attempts of this government to restrict the freedom of the press).

4) Quantitative content analysis is a central empirical method in media sociology. Discuss why it is important to investigate media content and give examples for chances and challenges when applying this method.

The answer should start with defining quantitative content analysis, for example: "Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication." (Berelson 1952: 18) Media content has effects on media users undoubtedly. If we want to learn more about how exactly media content influences the users, we need to know which content media users are confronted with. Content analyses are a way of doing that. Even though not telling us anything about effects, they can give evidence of the impact potential of certain content. Chances of this method include, e.g., that it is possible to investigate communication in retrospect and its unobtrusiveness, that is, applying the method does not have an effect on the materials/people we investigate (different from surveys and experiments, for example). Quantitative content analysis, in particular, enables us to identify patterns in (media) content in a representative way (different from qualitative content analysis) and describe it systematically. That allows for statistical calculations with the data. Challenges of quantitative content analysis include, e.g., the necessity of focusing on certain, pre-defined aspects of content while neglecting many others, not allowing for in-depth analysis of individual texts, not being able to adjust the measuring instruments during the process of data collection, and the focus on manifest content/explicit messages because it is in most cases not possible to code implicit content (e.g., irony, "reading between the lines") in a reliable way. Very good answers will illustrate these chances and challenges by giving concrete examples of topics/questions that can be analyzed by means of quantitative content analysis.

5) The Internet has enabled average people to address and reach broad audiences. It seems everyone can now be a journalist. What does this mean for the social importance of professional journalists and news media in democratic societies?

It is important to notice that the internet provides the opportunity to address and reach broad audiences, but that this does by far not mean that every user in fact can and will reach broad audiences. Most users still rely on the traditional news providers when looking for news, and most average users will not reach broad audiences. That is, professional journalists still play an important role in democratic societies, but in some respects, this role has changed: In the past, journalists were gatekeepers responsible for selecting which topics, actors, and opinions appeared in news coverage. Nowadays, they still have this role, but in addition they have become gatewatchers who help the users with orienting in the information flood online and provide information about which sources and information are important and reliable and how to interpret information found online. This is a function urgently needed in today's democratic societies: We need reliable sources which provide us with reliable information. At the same time, journalism has become more interactive since the internet provides more ways of direct communication between journalists and users, and the influence of the users on journalism has increased, both due to direct communication and audience metrics (e.g., click rates). Very good answers will in addition discuss the challenges this brings along for journalists (e.g., an increasing number of tasks, an increased pace due to "24-hours journalism", decreasing resources due to an increasing competition for audiences and advertising revenues, decreasing trust in journalism, "fake news"/disinformation online).

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