

Social Media and Mass Culture: The Culture of the Cultureless

وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي والثقافة الجماهيرية: ثقافة عديمي الثقافة

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Date de réception : 31/03/2023

Date d'acceptation : 17/09/2023

Date de publication : 02/11/2023

Abstract:

Mass culture is the influence and intellectual guidance of the media of all kinds on public opinion. With the proliferation of electronic communication and the widespread of its use, the means of culture diffusion have become part of everyday life, prompting owners and controllers to pay more attention to leveraging the impact of digital platforms on audiences.

Although the level of cultural production originally stems from audiences' needs, we find that they are required to approve what is displayed. Today's markets are overwhelmed with a commercial popular culture that stems not from the need of the audiences by which it is consumed, but from major intercontinental capitalist companies advertising specialists work to market this culture, which helps in shaping a collective public mindset that receives the produced without thinking in smooth and misleading ways.

Keywords: Social media; Mass culture; Culture industry; Digital content; Media audience

ملخص :

الثقافة الجماهيرية هي ذلك التأثير والتوجيه الفكري والإعلامي الذي تمارسه وسائل الإعلام بمختلف أنواعها على الرأي العام، وبانتشار سبل التواصل الإلكتروني واتساع رقعة الاستخدام أصبحت الوسائل الناشئة للثقافة جزء من الحياة اليومية ما دفع بالجهات المالكة والمسيطرة إلى الاهتمام أكثر بالاستفادة من تأثير المنصات الرقمية على الجماهير، ومع أن مستوى الإنتاج الثقافي ينبع أصلا من حاجات المتلقين، غير أننا نجدهم مضطرين للموافقة على ما يُصنع .

وهذا الواقع هو في الحقيقة دورة من الخداع ورد فعل للحاجات الاستهلاكية اللانهائية التي تجعل النظام الاقتصادي أكثر قوة وتماسكا. حيث تغمر الأسواق اليوم ثقافة شعبية تجارية لا تنبع من حاجة الجماهير التي تستهلكها، وإنما من شركات رأسمالية كبرى عابرة للقارات تصنعها وتسوقها وتدعمها وسائل الإعلام ومواقع التواصل، ويعمل المعلنون على تسويق هذه الثقافة والتي تساعد في تشكيل عقل شعبي جمعي يتلقى المنتج المصنع دون تفكير بأساليب ناعمة مضللة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي، الثقافة الجماهيرية، صناعة الثقافة، المحتوى الرقمي، جمهور وسائل الإعلام.

1. INTRODUCTION

The world's technological convergence has been marked by the emergence of means of communication that have created distinct relationships between society and culture. Social media have helped in the evolution of this relationship; however, there are optimistic and pessimistic attitudes towards this situation, as some view it as a tool to democratize culture on the one hand and

a way to stereotype awareness for the stronger side on the other. Since culture is a human-building project and the latter is the creator of civilization, new platforms as a means of making the most consumed content are now aimed at reshaping the human mind, attitudes and emotions, and thus the ability to shape societies. Under the new reality, culture has become sold and purchased, and held hostage between content creation and the audience's wishes.

On the other hand, the initial idea of social media came within the sociocultural recreational context. And with the widespread use of such networks and awareness, it started to take new roles in research and dissemination of information. Since the beginning of the third millennium, this field has been witnessing a genuine revolution that has profoundly affected and continues to affect the various social, cultural, political and economic aspects of human life. It is considered by many the key to the future, power, evolution and modernization in a changing world. One of the forms of social media proliferation nowadays is the ability to form a mass or a public opinion on many issues. Likewise, it applies on cultural matters, especially what is being created as a digital content of various kinds, through social media pages, personal accounts and sponsored advertisements that have become capable of creating and forming a "cultural mass." Accordingly, one might wonder: Is social media currently the most important means of creating mass media materials?

The communicative messages that this paper is concerned with are not addressed to a specific class, nor to a specific intellectual and cultural level, rather, they are concerned with the social dimension, and are addressed to a general public. They are materials presented to the audience and are subject to the Law of Supply and Demand. Thus, cultural industries and cultural output that are subject to market rules have become an area of discussion. Coupled with the power of social media platforms as a source and promoter of information, as well as the evolution of its tools in the prompt and sometimes immediate briefing of instant events, social media are a fundamental source today in establishing the symbolic capital of individuals and audiences. But the question arises: is it the audiences of these platforms that impose a particular culture or is it the culture created through these means that is imposed on the audiences?

1. Defining Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms are one of the 2.0 web apps, which allow everyone not only to access content on the Internet, but to create, upload, comment on and edit content. It also includes content sharing websites such as YouTube and Wiki pages that allow joint creation of content as a collective act, such as Wikipedia (Al-Hajjar, W. S., 2017, p. 14).

They are also defined as websites that provide social services to their subscribers for human and social communication purposes. They are established by major companies for all users and friends, and are programmed for the development of friendships, or the search for common hobbies, interests, photos, films and activities of other people which they may exchange among each other. In fact, these websites worked on to end many of the media and communication concepts that prevailed in the field of media and communication, especially mass media, such as the concept of Gatekeeper, the unilateral source of media message and hierarchical communication. On the other hand, some new concepts were introduced, and new roles and tasks have been undertaken commensurate with new social, media and political changes (Sari, H. K., 2014, p. 103).

These websites emerged successively in the mid-1990s, and went on until the early 21st century. However, they had been unsuccessful, despite the striking similarity between the services they provide, until new websites emerged that recorded significant successes such as Twitter and Facebook. They managed to attract large numbers of Internet browsers, and their role has increased in recent years (Al-Dehi, M. I. M., 2015, p. 442).

Social networking sites can also be defined as websites or apps that start with a user creating a social media account online. It allows them to build a personal database, a launching platform, an online presence and a virtual character to disseminate data, comments, documents, messages, photos and video films. Hence, they start the next phase of networking and sharing with others by making friendships and groups or joining existing networks of subscribers and users, which include

groups of friends, university or school students, neighbors, colleagues, and family members, as well as exchanging comments, opinions and media content with them. The electronic communication between the sender and the recipient takes place immediately at a moment's notice, and whenever the member wishes, within the network (Soft War Center for Studies, 2016, p. 27, 28).

-Criteria of Social Media Platforms

Social media share a number of characteristics (Tabri, S. & Graf, N., 2018, p. 94-95), mainly:

a. Participatory interaction: Communication through social networks is featured with interaction because each person enriches his/her personal page, which refers to the self-identification feature. Creating a personal information page is the first step the user takes to identify themselves through text, images, music, videos, and so forth, on various subjects they wish to present to others.

Social media also allow each member to exchange comments, posts and views discussion, which are very vital pages because they allow users to post, check the feedback of others, and track their interaction level, allowing communication continuity and content sharing with them.

b. Automatic: Social networking is automatic, informal or unexpected so that it can be carried out without any restrictions or regulations governing such communication.

c. Cost-effective: Registration on social media is free, as it can be noticed written on Facebook page that it is 'Free and always will be.

d. User-friendly: Most pages are easy to browse, for instance, in terms of guidance or the language adopted on the page, which corresponds to the language of each society.

e. Constant and Non-physical Presence: Communication does not require constant presence. Hence, a voice message or miscellaneous information can be left at any time and asynchronously. The message can be delayed to reach the receiver on a specific time.

f. Openness: The user's content represents the majority of the content posted on social media platforms. This prompts more interaction among participating members, as content creators, as opposed to traditional means of communication.

g. Group Support: This feature provides people with the possibility of forming groups that share competence, or religious/social affiliation.

h. Flexibility: It refers to the possibility of opening a website from any other device, such as mobile phones, without the need of a laptop because mobile devices now include special operating systems called social media applications (apps).

i. Virtual World of Communication: It is no longer conditional to travel to see or hear friends' voices, to sale and purchase or to study, within crowded social meetings.

These attitudes, opinions and information, artificially produced and disseminated by the mass media among the wider public, generate an artificial culture subject to market standards according to the principle of Supply and Demand.

2.2 Mass culture

It is a similar culture of content that does not regard the individuals' differences in terms of their ideologies, religions, values, or even their peculiarities, as Frankfurt School advocates have put it, "it is a culture addressed to a large number of individuals (social masses) that is subject to industrial production measures and transmits a standardized structure." It seeks to make the audience use its contents similarly, thus, becoming unified in terms of attitudes, behaviour, opinions and ideas, as well as stereotyped in terms of commodity consumption habits and its social lifestyle.

Therefore, mass culture produces an audience in a sequential manner.

Edgard Morin defines mass culture in his book *L'Esprit du Temps* (the Spirit of Time) as “a sociological subject and a complex body of rules, symbols, myths and images that gets into one’s subjectivity, forming their feelings, and channeling their emotions” (Balle, F., 1998, p. 120).

Moreover, Adorno and Horkheimer, in their papers, entitled *The Culture Industry: Dialectic of Mass Deception* (chapter) and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (book), exposed the collapse of mass culture from its value and spirit, and how it became prone to commodification, commercialization and easy profitability. “The cultural industry is a great model for the bankruptcy of culture and its downfall in commodification. The transition of the cultural act into a commercial value destroys its monetary capacity and erases the fingerprints of its inherent experience. The sovereignty of fake individualism began with the very experience of the bourgeoisie, which streamlined or extended wildly to the mass culture. Here lies the clear reservation or attractive appeal of the person that it makes in massive amounts. It also produces security padlocks of Yale brand which differ from each other only in few centimeters” (Laayadhi, N., 1998, p. 106).

These two scholars believe that “mass culture has lost its spiritual and national value and has become subject to monopolistic capitalist economic law based on sale and purchase, industrialization and profitability. They also claim that the cultural industry has become a merchandise on the market ... a tool of deception and manipulation ... imposed from higher powers, by the industrial system” (Philippe Breton, P., & Proulx, S., 2012, p. 147-148).

As for Hannat Arendt, she states that: “mass society is not looking for culture, but entertainment. The contents proposed by entertainment industries are actually consumed by society just as other items. The materials necessary for entertainment serve the vital path of society, even if they are likely to be non-essential such as bread and meat ...” (Laayadhi, N., 1998, p. 151).

Culture is concerned with objects, and it is a phenomenon in the world. Entertainment is attributed to people, and it is a phenomenon in life. Thus, a phenomenon is considered culture based on its sustainability and its permanent functional nature ... Culture is threatened when all the world's produced items, in the past and the present, are processed as functions of the vital course of society, as if they were founded only to meet specific needs.

In their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), Horkheimer and Adorno replaced the concept of mass culture with the cultural industry because they perceive the cultural industry as a means of integrating consumers, controlled by higher powers. It is a new method to incorporate various fields such as elite art and ordinary simple art. Doing so, elite art lost much of its value, peculiarity, and its role in cultural education. Adorno introduced this oxymoron to express his position against the economic exploitation of culture and art, as he considers that the subjection of aesthetic values to the principle of economic evaluation has negative outcomes on our relationship with art and culture (Adorno, T. W., 1964, p. 12-18).

2.3. Culture Industry

It is a complex contradictory concept due to the relevance of culture, as an immaterial form and product, with industry and commodification. As an attempt to figure the way culture is linked to the rules of commodity exchange, some practical definitions will be presented.

In his book chapter entitled *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, Theodor Adorno defined the Culture Industry as “a conversion or reproduction process of authentic cultural work in accordance with industry principles using modern technology and channeling it for consumption by the masses” (Adorno, T. W., 1964, p. 12-18).

Adorno used the term Culture Industry from a negative perspective that refers to rejecting the idea of commodification, considering the fact that this tendency adds an ideological legitimacy to capitalist societies. In his view, mass culture should not be imposed on society through radio, cinema or television, but such a culture, which stems from the lives of those who generated it, must originate from life to be reflected on the screen rather than vice-versa. That is what the media has been doing, showing the society a full pattern of life through advertising, films, music, and so forth. (Farah, M. A., 2014, p. 119)

Many scholars agreed with Adorno on the notion of the dominance exercised by the cultural production of the cultural industrial community through mass production to satisfy the contrived needs of the audience. In their view, the culture industry exercises an indirect authority over individuals, thus, manipulating them, hindering their independence and making them passive.

3. Mass Culture and Audience Characteristics

Cultural industries, along with mass culture, were among the phenomena brought by the relationship between culture and the media, as humans are an entity that needs not only physical commodities to satisfy their needs but also other materials or cultural products that nourish their thoughts, consciousness and spirit and support their freedom. The media industry has emerged and evolved in parallel with cultural industries as a result of political, economic and cultural incentives. The overlap between the fields of information, communication and culture has rooted the media dimension of culture and expanded the cultural dimension of media, thus, they cannot be separated (Tayeh, A., 2006, p. 134).

In their book chapter, *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as a Mass Deception*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno acknowledged that there is a mess that has featured the cultural sector as a result of the alienation and reification's impact on cultural production. This is what Adorno has endeavored to demonstrate how cultural content has changed and deteriorated under the industrialized society, the conditions that have necessitated the culture industry and its production apparatus, and the entry of human culture into the field of sale and purchase making it subject to the technique of publicity and excitement, under the monopoly and sovereignty of the State and its bureaucratic institutions over the media.

Media, as social systems, have functions in modern society that combine industrialization with consumption. The latter cannot be separated from culture as it is an immaterial element based on the public's image and the implications of its needs. From an industrial perspective, the media will inevitably produce a different culture. In this context, Francis Balle argues that "means of communication are merely techniques, and the manner by which these techniques are used is determined by the market." (Balle, F., 2004, p. 118)

With the emergence of the industrial society, culture is no longer directed at a particular group by not discriminating against the parties to which it will be directed. It has also turned into consumable items whose significance is measured by its exchange value rather than utilitarian value. This is manifested through the multiplicity of means of production and the dissemination of new cultural materials, which resulted in the demise of the boundaries between elite culture and folk culture, and the imbalance between elites and audiences through limiting the elites and reducing their role in society in exchange for increasing the audiences. Ultimately, it has caused an imbalance in the cultural production which made it subject to industrialization mechanisms. Moreover, mass culture derives its content from elite culture and popular culture, however, it is quite different from them. It refers to cultural commodities created for the mass market in line with the consumer market (Jad, S. & Ali, S., 1997, p. 54).

In this regard, Adorno says, "Culture is a commodity of apparant contradiction. It is wholly subject to the law of exchange, although it cannot be exchanged per se. It is a product that melts blindly in consumption despite its inability to do so. Therefore, it fuses with advertising that increasingly becomes more present so that monopolizing it would become pointless (Horkheimer, M. & Adorno, T., 2006, p. 6).

Modern culture, according to Adorno, is in fact an industrial product sold to the audiences as a product. On the other hand, only that strange convergence between culture and industry demonstrated the fact that culture is no longer the free human expression of social integration as much as it is the product of overlapping business interests based on manipulation. Thus, the individual is now in the hands of the social authorities (Alan, H., 2010, p. 62).

Therefore, the concept of mass or popular culture is disingenuous, and this culture characterized with audiences has nothing to do with their needs and concerns. It is a culture that

neither expresses nor represents them, rather, it meets producers and manufacturers' need for abundant consumption and rapid profitability. That is, it is the culture favourable to market culture.

Meanwhile, if we dig a bit deeper into the image of the masses and their features according to the connotations of the concept of mass culture, we find a fine line reminiscent of that negative image drawn by Gustave Le Bon about the masses, as he claimed: "The inability of the masses to think reasonably deprives them of every critical spirit, that is, of every ability to distinguish between truth and error and thus to form an accurate judgement on matters. From this point of view, we notice that the individuals who do not rise above the level of the masses are many"(1991, p. 50).

What is most significant to understand from the former statement is that an individual's conscious personality is not manifested in this audience. For a psychological audience to be formed, general and temporary characteristics that vary according to the constituent elements of the mass are required (1991, p. 55).

What is more astonishing is the collective spirit that forms within the masses. Albeit their qualities and lifestyle, once individuals convert and belong to a certain audience, the quality of collective spirit prevails which makes them resemble. If the audience is psychologically formed from what digital media and platforms produce, its ability to think independently and critically would be undermined, gradually limiting the diffusion of cultural products to a dull similar and superficial commercial promotion. Mass culture from this perspective is therefore an omission of the individual's mind.

3. Reification and Alienation as Aspects of Technological Advances

Applying the dimensions of the culture industry concept to the content offered by the websites is convenient nowadays. It is evident that there is a tendency of competition between web-pages and personal video websites, mainly YouTube, on presenting entertainment topics and most often instilling commonly popular superficial content. Although they functionally mitigate the monotony of everyday life, overemphasizing such topics and making them the forefront content of these platforms enshrines the principles of rapid profitability and reliance on devices. Thus, the interconnectedness between mass culture and the culture industry and the imposition of the concept of reification claimed by George Lukács, to which they refer, are clarified. According to Lukács, reification means that the society must satisfy its needs by exchanging commodities. This requires that the whole society becomes organized according to the framework of its economic relations, and thus the phenomenon of reification would prevail. He goes on to add that reification is the convergence of human qualities into inanimate objects, taking an independent existence and acquiring indefinable and inhuman qualities. Accordingly, reification here means the alienation of man under capitalist relations, where products are no longer assessed by their actual value, but are identified by an abstract value determined by the market.

In Lukács's view, this idea constitutes a strong ethical critique of the capitalist system, making it a system that objectifies the human beings into items that can be sold and bought. Moreover, this thought implies that the social world becomes a world of objects, like the natural world, and society becomes a second-nature alongside the original natural world, seeming as if it is independent of the human act, as is the independence of laws of nature.

It is undeniable here that reification turns the humankind into objects. Under such phenomenon, the human's worth becomes assessed by the products he/she produces, and people start to feel alienated and self-lost. Lukács also emphasized that reification affects people's perception of their society, viewing it as governed by constant laws of nature. However, these laws are in fact specific to a certain historical period, the one in which capitalist production was prominent.

Hence, it is clear that reification in the use of websites is a common phenomenon that controls human consciousness, through which man becomes like any other object, and his/her value is measured by videos and contents that depict their general life, consequently, feeling alienated

from themselves. Likewise, economic relations have become the ones that govern the spheres of life, including social fields and human relations.

Alienation cannot be disregarded when discussing reification. It occurs generally when humans are controlled by the social environment they have created themselves. "This phenomenon occurs particularly in capitalist societies, as humans dissociate and do not control what they produce. They separate from one another, and their cooperative principle in action loses its ground" (Lukács, 1967, p. 112-172).

In Marx's view, human beings, under alienation, do not control the outcome of their work, and lose their decision-making ability. It seems as if they are forced to work by other people. Alienation is also a situation in which humans become puppets of the social systems they made themselves. (Marx, K., 1990-1967, p. 108).

Despite the technological advances, human beings have lost themselves and their identities, and felt alienated, worthless and having no real existence. Correspondingly, they separated from what they produced, and their social relationships became subject to productive relations. On that basis, the YouTube culture industry, as a website for creating media materials of various purposes, attempts to make the mass media revitalize the human instinct in man more than the mental, rational and critical aspects of it.

It is easy to note the mass media's bias towards the concept of mass culture in the needs of the audiences, which is originally a reflection of the principle of the mainstream and dominant pattern of industry in consumer societies that has been mistakenly attributed to the masses. It is easy to observe such bias when measuring the space devoted to a culture different from the common ones, reflected in topics of thought that depend on conformity between reality and websites.

Technological dominance thus mediates the essence of modern culture, which is considered, in return, as a depleted technological mediation through a dominant mass.

The issue of hegemony in critical theory studies has received a significant amount of criticism. Stuart Hall is one of the leading scholars that have tackled the means of communication and media through an approach based on criticism of the hegemonic phenomenon. Hall's approach is summarized in the following points:

- Media content promotes the interests of the ruling class of society.
- By virtue of the media's bias towards dominant groups, they produce unbalanced and poorly credible media contents.
- The media content employs symbols and connotations that serve the ideas and interests of the dominant groups, and are created in such a way as to ensure influence over the public (Al-Abdullahi, M., 2006, p. 147-200).

Based on these critical notes referred to by Stuart Hall, the media, through its content, works to support positions of power both in politics and economy. The seriousness of hegemony in this context lies in the set of negative effects on public opinion, especially on the formation of ideas, feelings, attitudes and behaviour, considering the symbolic role of the media, whose provisions hold and support hegemonic thoughts according to linguistic mechanisms and a competent formula of influence.

Francis Balle clearly expressed the phenomenon of communication and influence as he pointed out that the means of communication, specifically the media, are "no longer used merely to form or exchange a dialogue, but to influence others, precisely to sell them something, to imprint a particular idea in their minds or to give an impression that prompts sympathy towards a politician or a particular institution" (Balle Francis, 2004, p67).

4. CONCLUSION

Social media of all kinds have become the bearers and promoters of cultural messages and products, through which culture goes beyond its narrow concept. The latter was confined to the conventional literary expression forms to take on a broader dimension, including behaviour, actions, statements, lifestyles and ways of thinking, through which man's relationship with his environment is defined. Mass culture through these means has thus become the broader norm. It aims to simplify things and introduce arts and sciences, which were limited to elites with high levels of performance and cultural awareness, into forms that any individual can understand and assimilate. However, controversy will persist over this mass culture, that is viewed by many as inadequate, made deliberately for commercial purposes, embodying hegemony and control.

In the same vein, we live in an era of masses, in which elites vanish under the influence of reality, as there is no inclination of researchers to learn about the audiences' acts and psychologies that influence their thoughts. The media's challenge, therefore, is to spread culture and simplify its notions in a way that does not fall short of the required level and the desired objectives.

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