

## **THEORIZING IN THE ERA OF MEDIA ADVANCEMENT: A CASE FOR AUTHENTICATION THEORY**

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**Abstract:** *The earliest theories of effect came with the assumption that the mass media audiences are passive and as such believe every message that emanate from the media. This assumption was proved wrong by the study of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, (1944/1968) in the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 which sought to find out the voting patterns and the relationship between the media and political behavior. This study found that there were other factors that influence voters' behaviour rather than media messages alone. Consequently, there were other theories of effect otherwise referred to as the intervening variables or the mediating factors explaining what really influence media audience. In this era of media advancement, especially since the advent of the social media that allows internet users to post message at will, the need to authenticate the sources of news stories becomes imperative to avoid misinformation, hence the case for authentication theory which posits that the believability and acceptability of media messages is dependent on the credibility of the source*

**Keywords:** Theories, internet, social media, media literacy, authentication theory, misinformation, credibility.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the years, a number of theories have been propounded ranging from political theories of the press to the theories of effect explaining the developments in communication. At the beginning, it was assumed that the audiences of mass communication are passive and consequently believe every single story that comes from the mass media. Theorists in trying to explain this effect used bullet or hypodermic needle theory to buttress their points. Page | 2

## HISTORY AND ORIENTATION OF THE FIRST EFFECT THEORY; THE HYPODERMIC NEEDLE THEORY ALSO KNOWN AS THE BULLET THEORY

The mass media in the 1940s and 1950s were perceived as a powerful influence on behavior change. The "hypodermic needle theory" implied mass media had a direct, immediate and powerful effect on its audiences.

Factors that contributed to this "strong effects" theory of communication as explained by University of Twente, Dutch home page on hypodermic needle theory, include:

- the fast rise and popularization of radio and television
- the emergence of the persuasion industries, such as advertising and propaganda
- the Payne Fund studies of the 1930s, which focused on the impact of motion pictures on children, and
- Hitler's monopolization of the mass media during WWII to unify the German public behind the Nazi party

## CORE ASSUMPTIONS AND STATEMENTS

The theory suggests that the mass media could influence a very large group of people directly and uniformly by 'shooting' or 'injecting' them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response.

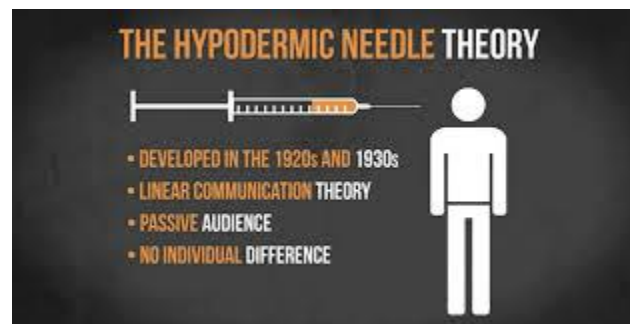


Figure 1: The Hypodermic Needle Theory



Both images used to express this theory (a bullet and a needle) suggest a powerful and direct flow of information from the sender to the receiver. The bullet theory graphically suggests that the message is a bullet, fired from the "media gun" into the viewer's "head". With similarly emotive imagery the hypodermic needle model suggests that media messages are injected straight into a passive audience which is immediately influenced by the message. They express the view that the media is a dangerous means of communicating an idea because the receiver or audience is powerless to resist the impact of the message. There is no escape from the effect of the message in these models. The population is seen as a sitting duck. People are seen as passive and are seen as having a lot media material "shot" at them. People end up thinking what they are told because there is no other source of information.

Instead of living on this assumption of the "powerful effect" of the media, Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, (1944/1968) decided to conduct election studies in "The People's Choice," to ascertain the veracity of the claim of the "powerful effect" of the media. The project was conducted during the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940 to determine voting patterns and the relationship between the media and political behavior. This study found that the majority of people remained untouched by the propaganda; interpersonal outlets brought more influence than the media. The effects of the campaign were not all-powerful to where they persuaded helpless audiences uniformly and directly, which is the very definition of what the magic bullet theory does. As focus group testing, questionnaires, and other methods of marketing effectiveness testing came into widespread use; and as more interactive forms of media (e.g.: internet, radio call-in shows, etc.) became available, the magic bullet theory was replaced by a variety of other, more instrumental models, like the two step of flow theory, uses and gratification theory and other theories that are referred to as intervening variables.

**Uses and gratification theory (UGT)** as a mediating factor, for instance, explains what the audience does with the media and not what the media do to the audience. Katz (2011) explains that uses and gratification theory assumes that "audience members are not passive consumers of media. Rather, the audience has power over their media consumption and assumes an active role in interpreting and integrating media into their own lives. Unlike other theoretical perspectives, UGT holds that audiences are responsible for choosing media to meet their desires and needs to achieve gratification". This theory would then imply, he opined, that the media compete against other information sources for viewers' gratification.

**Dependency theory** on the other hand states that the more a person depends on media to meet needs, the more important media will be in a person's life, and therefore the more effects media will have on a person. This in other words suggests that the media has more effect on those that depend on them than those that do not. Besides people have individual differences and needs which determine what they look out for in the media. Most people use the selective processes available to them during exposure to media messages which influence the kinds of media messages they expose themselves, how they view the message and what they make of it. In the mid 90s, a lot of people depended on the radio and television but since the internet revolution and



the advent of the social media, majority of the people have taken to the Web for news consumption.

## THE INTERNET

As explained in Madu (2015), the internet otherwise known as the Net, means in full “International Computer Networks”. The development of the internet and the revolution in technology has brought about digital devices and software, which in turn ensured the emergence of the **new media**. With internet connectivity, it has been observed that people make use of computer sets (desktop, laptop, palmtop or notebook) and mobile phones (tablets or smartphones) to access news, entertainment, education and other forms of information, at anytime and anywhere. For Melanson (2011, cited in Ogbeja 2012, p. 211) most people who have internet connection are already aware of some of the major types of new media, which includes social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as Blogs and video sharing sites as YouTube.

There are many services available on the internet (internet services). They include e-mail, e-magazine, e-newspapering, web-conferencing, chatrooms, internet phone call, e-sponsorship, e-exhibitions, e-weddings, etc. (Chukwu, 2007; Nkwocha, 2004). With all these services available on the internet, the world has been reduced to a global village. Speaking of the services and opportunities provided by the internet, McLuhan (1964) as cited in (Baran 2009, p.332) wrote that “a person can communicate to any place, from any place, at any time. This affords freedom of more movement and convenience in terms of space and time. Individuals will have access to other people despite lack of physical proximity. We can finally, truly, be a global village.” Correspondingly, Agba, (2001, p.6) sees the internet as a “technological revolution of monumental capabilities, an information revolution that has further reduced the size of the world into a global village. In other words, the Net is seen as the most ambitious attempt so far to miniaturize the physical planet earth. It is a system which allows messages, pictures and texts to be transmitted simultaneously or simply from one computer anywhere in the world to another.

Virtually everything has gone online and for this reason Okoro, (2007, p.19) wrote that “the world of today has largely become the world of the internet as virtually anyone who has anything to say, says it on the internet.” Even news publications by newspaper organizations have gone online too and there is arguably, almost no subject matter known to humanity that is not available on the internet. Stressing this point, Oyero, (2013, p.46) observes that we are now living in a world where great deals of mass communication activities take place on the internet. Millions of people go to websites to watch television shows, read newspapers, download music, and do so many things that Turow, (2010, p. 132) describes as having “traditionally been associated with separating non-computer media forms.” Statistically, the amount of information produced in Nigeria, like every other country in the world, increases by 30% every year. Every day, with the invention of the printing press, telephone and computers, Nigerians are bombarded with plethora of information in all forms (International NGO journal Vol 6).

The internet gave room for the social media to thrive and since the advent of the social media; the media for mass communication has been revolutionized.

## THE SOCIAL MEDIA

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The term “**social media**” was coined in 2007 by Dana Boyd of the School of Information at the University of California, and Nicole Ellison of the Department of Telecommunications at Michigan State University, who published a paper that first used the term.” Social media according to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) is “a group of Internet-based applications that is built on the ideological and technological foundations of [Web 2.0](#); and that allow the creation and exchange of [user-generated content](#).” Also, Ahlqvist, Toni, Bäck, Halonen, & Heinonen (2008) hold that social media is the social interaction among people in which they create, share or exchange information and ideas in [virtual communities](#) and [networks](#). Heathfield, (2007) outlined the user generated contents available in the social media to include: conversation, articles, images or pictures, recipes and anything that an individual might share with others in their daily lives. Also, Greendhow, (2009) sees the Social media as media for social interaction, which use highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques.

The advent of the social media has no doubt attracted millions of users globally. According to International Telecoms Union (ITU) World Report 2013, the total number of Internet users globally is more than 2.7 billion about 39 percent of the world’s population. Majority of the people that use the internet arguably may be using one social network or the other. Online statistics showed that as at August 2015, Facebook has surpassed 1Billion active subscribers. Facebook as we know is just one out of the plethora of social networks that abound. Apart from individuals, the government of some countries and most organizations now tap into the social media that abound to reach out to the public. Take for instance in Nigeria, the president has special adviser on social media. This is because they have realized the importance of relating with the public through the social media because the idea of bringing down the government or entrenching the government can be carried out in the social media. The Arab Spring should be a reference point here.

The social media has cut across the barrier set aside by the government to checkmate the press. Gone are the days when the government will be after everyone that wrote a story that is contrary to the views of the people in power or slam a defamatory suit on anybody that publish a story against it because some of the users of this network are faceless. This has made the government to sit up and do what is needful to avoid criticisms from the citizens. This anonymous feature of social media users has made some people to write and post unverified stories online. One has to be careful while reading some of the things posted online to avoid misinformation or aid in spreading rumour. It is only those that are literate enough on the modus operandi of some of the blogs that try to authenticate the source of the news before spreading it.

## **MEDIA LITERACY AND NEWS AUTHENTICATION**

The terms 'media literacy' and 'media education' are used synonymously in most English-speaking nations. Many scholars and educators consider media literacy to be an expanded conceptualization of literacy. In 1993, a gathering of the media literacy community in the United States developed a definition of media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a wide variety of forms (Canada's Centre for Media Literacy). Page | 6

Media Education is the process of teaching and learning about [media](#). Buckingham (2007) explains that media education is about developing young people's critical and creative abilities when it comes to the media. Being able to understand the media enables people to analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a wide variety of media, genres, and forms. Education for media literacy often uses an inquiry-based pedagogic model that encourages people to ask questions about what they watch, hear, and read. Media literacy education provides tools to help people critically analyze messages, offers opportunities for learners to broaden their experience of media, and helps them develop creative skills in making their own media messages.

Canada's Centre for Digital and Media Literacy defined media education as the process through which individuals become media literate – able to critically understand the nature, techniques and impacts of media messages and productions.

They further explained that media education acknowledges and builds on the positive, creative and pleasurable dimensions of popular culture. It incorporates production of media texts and critical thinking about media to help us navigate through an increasingly complex media landscape. The European Charter for Media Literacy explains that critical analysis can include identifying author, purpose and point of view, examining construction techniques and genres, examining patterns of media representation, and detecting [propaganda](#), [censorship](#), and [bias](#) in news and public affairs programming (and the reasons for these). Media literacy education may explore how structural features—such as [media ownership](#), or its funding model affect the information presented.

Hobbs (2010) wrote, "that media literate people should be able to skillfully create and produce media messages, both to show understanding of the specific qualities of each medium, as well as to create [independent media](#) and participate as active citizens. Media literacy can be seen as contributing to an expanded conceptualization of literacy, treating mass media, popular culture and digital media as new types of 'texts' that require analysis and evaluation. By transforming the process of [media consumption](#) into an active and critical process, people gain greater awareness of the potential for misrepresentation and manipulation (especially through [commercials](#) and [public relations](#) techniques), and understand the role of mass media and participatory media in constructing views of reality". Media literacy is therefore the understanding of how the media operate and the ability to critically and constructively analyze media messages with regards to reality. Being media literate will help the audience to know when media content is mere propaganda or round table journalism.



The opportunity provided by the internet and the knowledge of its use is being abused by individuals who think they can write and post unverified stories as they like which consequently requires that readers authenticate what they consume from other credible sources to avoid misinformation. This act of authentication is performed by individuals that know how the social media operate. They are literate enough on the modus operandi of the social media and consequently, do constructive and critical analysis of social media contents in order to discover which is propaganda and which is not, to avoid spreading wrong information.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND AUTHENTICATION THEORY**

Over the years, the media for mass communication have been increasing year after year. The most recent is the social media that has become the order of the day. Arguably, people spend much of their time on social networks than they do reading books and newspapers and consequently 'murdering' the reading culture that have existed over the years.

The social media is not just an avenue for instant messaging and posts, it also allows the dissemination of information and publication of news stories online. The advancement in technology is gradually reforming and transforming the way news gathering and dissemination is done over the years. Speaking about this, [Bakhurst](#) (2011) said that, "It may seem like re-stating the obvious but looking in our rear-view mirror back along the road of technological change shows just how news has changed: typewriters out, computers in; newspaper cuttings libraries closed as the internet opened access to information; mobile phones rather than messages at hotel receptions; satellite technology to feed material rather than tapes put on planes and so on. Powered by these changes, news has become 24 hours a day; immediate; available on new platforms; mobile. And now the latest powerful tool to change news - social media." The advent of the social media has contributed immensely to the way news is gathered because users tend to break news stories as soon as it happens but some of the blogs on this network publish unverified news stories which in communication parlance is called round table journalism and that puts any news story published by these blogs under scrutiny with regards to its authenticity.

[Bakhurst](#) (2011) opines that "social media has trashed many of the foundations on which "traditional" media stands." He further outlined some of the news features in social media that are not obtainable in the traditional media because of the co-operate identity and professionalism in their duty.

Below are the areas that the social media has trashed the traditional media as outlined by [Bakhurst](#), a journalist with BBC:

**Anonymity:** Many people joining the debate or discussion or sometimes accusing, or attacking, have no name and no face and therefore no seeming personal responsibility for the impact or truth or validity of what they publicly say. Professional journalists, like ours (BBC journalists) are encouraged to engage in social media spaces but held



to account for their views and values, often find themselves engaged in a wholly uneven discussion on coverage or stories with an invisible opponent.

**Privacy:** In particular privacy of the individual, where are the boundaries? Are there any areas off limits? It seems we can all discuss pregnancies, affairs, ethics, finances, abilities, families. It's out there on Twitter and Facebook and there's no real protection for what, until now, has been largely personal or private.

It leaves traditional media in a very different universe. We mitigate this via very clear guidelines to our staff, which states that although content placed on social media or other websites "may be considered to have been placed in the public domain, re-use by the BBC will usually bring it to a much wider audience". They go on to say that: "We should consider the impact of our re-use, particularly when in connection with tragic or distressing events."

**Ethics:** Most of us work within an ethical framework. We won't report the death of a loved one until the family knows; we won't just steal material from others; we try to establish facts before pushing a story out there. These are all fundamental and long cherished principles of the way BBC News operates. But not the ground rules of many, making use of the social media.

**The Rule of Law:** We work within the laws of our land - we avoid libel; or contempt of court; or revealing the names of young victims or juveniles accused of crimes. We don't break court injunctions. Some social media users do many of these things. Sometimes it has been argued they show up the failings of the laws of the land, and they may do, but often it is done in ignorance of the law, or simply on the assumption that it doesn't matter. And that can leave traditional media looking slow or stick-in-the mud or somehow part of an "establishment" that doesn't tell the whole truth. Look at the case of Ryan Giggs.

**The role of traditional media:** Some of our role is probably gone. Will we be "First with the Breaking News"? Probably, not in many cases; someone on Twitter will be. Will we have the first still of a hero or victim? Facebook probably will have it. Will we get the first video out of Syria or Burma? YouTube will almost certainly have it posted first, although we'll often be one of the first to verify it's genuine (or not).

**Audience interaction:** This can be a great way of hearing what your audience has to say, and answering questions or engaging. We have sophisticated ways of measuring what our audiences consume, and we keep an eye on what's being said to us and about our content, all of which we consider in our editorial discussions.

Some of the social media users do not understand the word privacy neither do they understand the word rule of law or ethics. Take for instance the time that the wife of the former president Dame Patience Jonathan travelled abroad to treat herself and a lot of false stories found its way in different blogs with some claiming that an insider in the hospital told them that she had died. It is true that she came out to admit that she actually died and rose again, which unconscious or coma should have been the best word to use, but the person that broke the news should have waited for official statement from the family. The same thing happened to President Yar'Adua, Pete



Edochie, Jackie Chan etc. This singular act has made a lot of people to lose faith in the news stories from these blogs and the credibility of the source of news stories now to a great extent determine its believability and acceptability. Some of these blogs try to make their stories believable by attributing it to a source that is credible. A story surfaces online that the writer claimed was published by BBC which he said that ladies will soon start paying for their breast to be sucked by men because of the health benefits. In respect of this, Yetunde Arebi wrote an article on May 25, 2014 in online vanguard news on breast sucking which he based on the article on breast sucking that was claimed to have been published by BBC. The article was well articulated and written with dexterity but the story could not be traced to the source the writer claimed by the vanguard reporter when he tried to authenticate the source. Page | 9

News stories that are published in online national dailies tend to be more credible than the ones that are published in various blogs and when asked the source of a news story and it is said to be from one of the blogs, readers that are in the know tend to visit any of the most trusted online dailies to search for the news in order to authenticate the news before spreading it to others and that is where **authentication theory** comes in.

Authentication theory is of the stance that media audience are now more conscious of what is happening around them and as such question the credibility of news stories in this era of media advancement that has enabled internet users to publish unverified news stories online at will which has consequently made it that the credibility of a news source now to a great extent determines the believability or acceptability of a news story. The idea of the active media audience here is not just based on the use of selective processes available to them alone to accept or reject media content but also on their ability to critically analyze media content based on the source as a result of their media literacy.

## **TENETS OF THE AUTHENTICATION THEORY**

The tenets of the authentication theory are as follows:

1. The credibility of the medium through which information is disseminated or published determines its acceptability.
2. The news is subject to verification.
3. The story must be aired or published news story.

Unlike some bloggers and social network users that are faceless, a medium with cooperate identity that can sue and be sued would take precautions to avoid anything that would keep it out of business and as such would avoid publishing fake news stories to avoid being sued for damages. As for the ones that do not have cooperate identity, once that news is not carried by a trusted medium, it could be possible that it was fabricated by the publisher. Finally, it is difficult to authenticate rumour; therefore, the story must be aired or published to aid authentication.

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