THE WIDESPREAD EMBRACE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: REVISITING COMMUNICATION MODELS

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Abstract

The pervasive influence of social media has reignited interest in communication models among media scholars. This paper revisits foundational theories, integrating personality and socio-cultural variables into the Westley-MacLean model to better understand media effects in the digital age. By blending historical perspectives with contemporary insights, the paper proposes a comprehensive systems model that emphasizes the dynamic and interactive nature of modern communication. This enhanced model highlights the importance of the encoder and decoder's social and psychological predispositions, aiming to improve message delivery and communication strategies. Future research should explore the model's applications in various contexts, such as political communication, marketing, and public health, and investigate the role of emerging technologies in refining these strategies.

Keywords

Social Media, Communication Models, Westley-Maclean Model, Media Effects, Personality Variables, Socio-Cultural Variables, Communication Process, Systems Approach, Psychological Predispositions

> **The past is a prologue**
> -*The Tempest*
> William Shakespeare

The pervasive influence of social media in contemporary society has sparked extensive research and diverse theoretical interpretations among media scholars. Current research on media effects bears a striking resemblance to the early days of mass media research, characterized by the emergence of the magic bullet theory, also known as the hypodermic needle theory. This theory suggests that media messages have direct, powerful, and immediate effects on audiences, akin to a "magic bullet" penetrating the mind.

The earliest models of the communication process are primarily linear models, which view communication as a one-way process. These models typically focus on the linear transmission of messages from sender to receiver, emphasizing the technical and mechanical aspects of communication. They overlook the interactive nature of the communication process and the complex interplay of culture and psychological factors characteristic of the communication actors.

More nuanced and restrained theories of media effects emerged later, recognizing the complex interplay between media messages and audience interpretation. Recent theoretical designs dealt with media effects from varying perspectives. Manuel Castells in his "Digital Media and Networked Society" [1] explores how digital media has transformed social structures into a networked form, facilitating decentralized communication and rapid information exchange across global systems. The focus of Castells' work is on how digital media transcends geographic boundaries and traditional linear time.

Nick Srnicek examines how digital platforms like Facebook, Amazon, and Uber dominate the economy by extracting and monetizing user data. He highlights issues such as data extraction, monopoly power, and precarious labor, emphasizing the economic inequalities reinforced by platform capitalism.[2] Alternatively, Gillespie focuses on how algorithms shape cultural consumption, visibility, and social norms, raising concerns about social control

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[1] https://easysociology.com/sociology-of-technology/manuel-castells-and-the-network-society/
[2] Platform Capitalism". https://hubsociology.com/recent-theories-on-media-a-sociology-perspective/ .

and the influence of tech giants[3].

The list of scholarly work addressing the complexity and dynamicity of contemporary social media landscapes is growing. Nevertheless, little has been offered in the area of the actor's social and psychological preconception of messages. Media scholars continue to provide an incomplete depiction of the communication process. A more comprehensive systems approach that integrates insights from sociological and psychological theories of cultural and character types is still missing. The cultural and psychological predisposition of an audience to media messages is a research area that needs to be advanced to keep pace with the rapid growth of social media. As scholars examine the impact of social media, there is a need to revisit foundational concepts, exploring how digital platforms influence behavior, shape public opinion, and affect societal norms.

The predisposition to media messages is a research area that needs to be advanced and innovative to keep pace with the rapid growth of social media. There is a need for models that view the communication process within a systems frame of reference, allowing internal and external factors to be viewed together as a unit.

This paper aims to introduce a comprehensive systems model of the communication process, integrating personality and socio-cultural variables to better understand media effects in the digital age. It reflects a blend of historical perspectives and contemporary insights, aiming to understand the multifaceted effects of social media in an increasingly connected world. Its purpose is to introduce a workable systems model of the communication process, which takes into consideration personality as well as socio-cultural variables.

Old communication models provide an incomplete but reflective depiction of the communication process. A more comprehensive approach that integrates insights from sociological and psychological theories of cultural and character types is missing. The cultural and psychological predisposition of an audience to media messages is a research area that needs to be advanced to catch up with the fast growth of social media.

Today, as media scholars examine the impact of social media, there is a need to revisit the foundational concepts, exploring how digital platforms influence behavior, shape public opinion, and affect societal norms. New articles focus on the flow and effect of messages. What is lacking, however, is a focus on the preconception feature in the acceptance of social media messages.

In their effort to control entropy or "noise" in the communication process, social scientists were primarily concerned with understanding the communication process and the performance of its components. Early media scholars developed conceptual models of media effects that proposed the functions of different elements within the process. They isolated these elements and examined their interactions. Scholarly research at that time focused on developing clearer and more pointed messages, as well as improving the communication channels employed.

The primary focus was on controlling "noise" by attempting to understand the operational nature of these elements. Little or no attention was generally given to the role of the social or cultural background of the message source (the sender) or its destination (the receiver).

Models of the communication process represent conceptual schemes or frames of reference to view the interrelationship of the elements of the process. They are usually concerned either with individual levels of analysis—viewing the process within one limited system or social situation—or with the type of interrelationship between the ingredients of the model. The predisposition to media messages is a research area that needs to be advanced and innovative to catch up with the fast growth of social media. There is a need for models that view the communication process within a system's frame of reference that allows viewing internal and external factors together as a unit.

This paper reflects a blend of historical perspectives and contemporary insights, aiming to understand the multifaceted effects of social media in an increasingly connected world. Its purpose is to introduce a workable systems model of the communication process, which takes into consideration personality as well as socio-cultural variables.

To address this matter, it introduces social and phycological factors into the communication model by developing the Wesley-MacLean transactional model that was proposed in 1957 by Bruce Westley (1915-1990) and Malcolm S. MacLean Jr. (1913-1974).[4] This conceptual model considers the dynamic and interactive nature of the communication process. Its importance lies mainly in that it allows scholars to concentrate on the encoder and decoder elements without ignoring the other ingredients of the process.

The Westley-MacLean model is both descriptive and predictive, emphasizing the role of environmental factors in initiating communication, rather than starting with the sender. While the model cannot accurately predict communication outcomes since it does not account for the social and psychological factors involved in the process, it can be developed further by introducing these social-psychological factors. This paper argues that such an enhancement would be useful for understanding how messages may be perceived by individuals or social groups in social media environments.
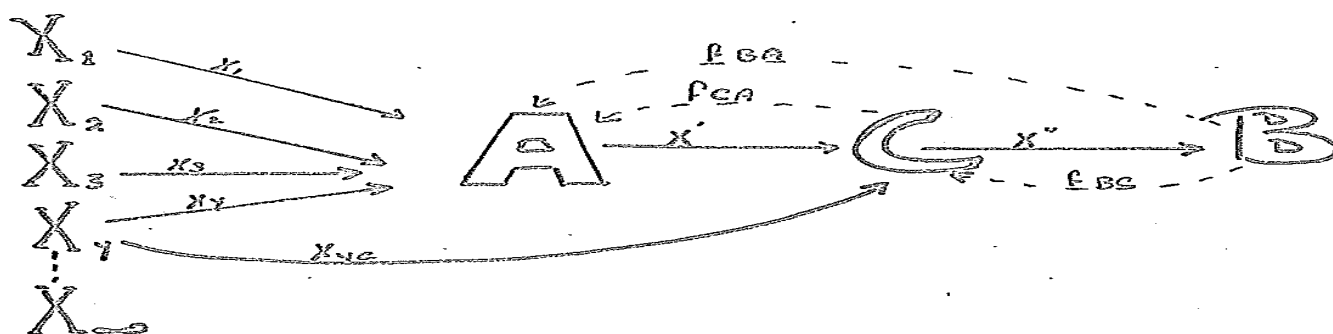
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[3] Tarleton Gillespie, Algorithmic Culture, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14614448221079037
[4] Westley and MacLean's Model of Communication, https://www.communicationtheory.org/westley-and-macleans-model-of-communication/

The principal elements of the Westley-MacLean model are:

1. *Advocacy roles (As):* Referring to the "communicator" - a personality or social system engaged in selecting and transmitting messages purposively.
2. *Behavioral system roles (Bs)*: Referring to the "receiver" - a personality or social system requiring and using communications about the conditions of its environment for the satisfaction of its needs and solution of its problems.
3. *Channel roles (Cs):* Serving as the agents of Bs in selecting and transmitting non-purposively the information Bs require, especially when the information is beyond the immediate reach of *B*.
4. *The totality of objects and events "out there" (Xs):* Abstracted into transmissible form: "messages" about Xs and *A-X* relationships (opinions).
5. *Channels:* How Xs are moved by way of As and/or Cs to Bs. Channels include "gates" manned by Cs who in various ways alter messages.
6. *Encoding:* The process by which As and Cs transform Xs into $X1$s. Decoding is the process by which Bs interiorize messages.
7. *Feedback:* How As and Cs obtain information about the effects of messages on Bs.

The Westley/MacLean model does not explain essential information about the encoding/decoding actions and requires elaboration to allow for introducing the personal and cultural variables in the model. An introduction of personal and cultural variables in the model can provide an improved understanding of communication situations as well as improve message delivery to target audiences (or individuals) of known characteristics.

The basic starting point in the development of the Westley/MacLean model is the proviso that individuals, or audiences, react to messages in ways determined by their personality "types or systems" and the way the social settings or systems have molded these personality types through history and culture. University of Chicago scholar

Kenneth Boulding[5] maintains that a "message which comes through the senses is itself mediated through the value system of the receiver. People are influenced by their position in a socio-cultural system and do not perceive our sense data raw. Messages are mediated through a highly learned process of interpretation and acceptance ... for any individual or organism or organization, there are no such things as 'facts'. There are only messages filtered through a changeable value system." Communicators who focus on audiences in their message strategy generally tend to typify audiences in terms of common social attributes, such as roles. These communicators usually choose these attributes arbitrarily and do not concern themselves with the personality system or the cultural system that characterizes their target audience. Sociologist Talcott Parsons[6] argues that "A social system is only one of three aspects of the structuring of a completely concrete system of social action. The other two are the personality system of the individual actors and the cultural system that is built into their actions... Each is indispensable to the other two in the sense that without personalities and culture, there would be no social system and so on around the roster of logical possibilities."

Accordingly, should someone isolate audiences based on social situations or groups, she/he could come up with an unlimited number of possible audiences—there is the audience of churchgoers, of colored people, of supermarket shoppers, etc. "A practical classification of social audiences would consider groups as those whose members share: (1) a general personality habit or character system that helps them arrange their lives and create a certain degree of compatibility between their inner needs and their outer demands, and (2) a similar combination of socio-cultural motivational orientations for social action. This type of audience will be referred to here as a
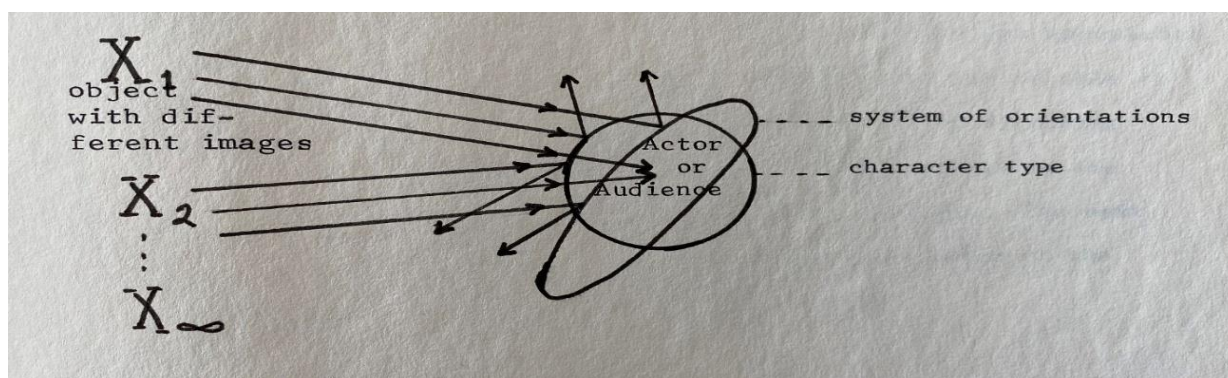
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[5] Kenneth E. Boulding, The Image (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1961), p. 14.
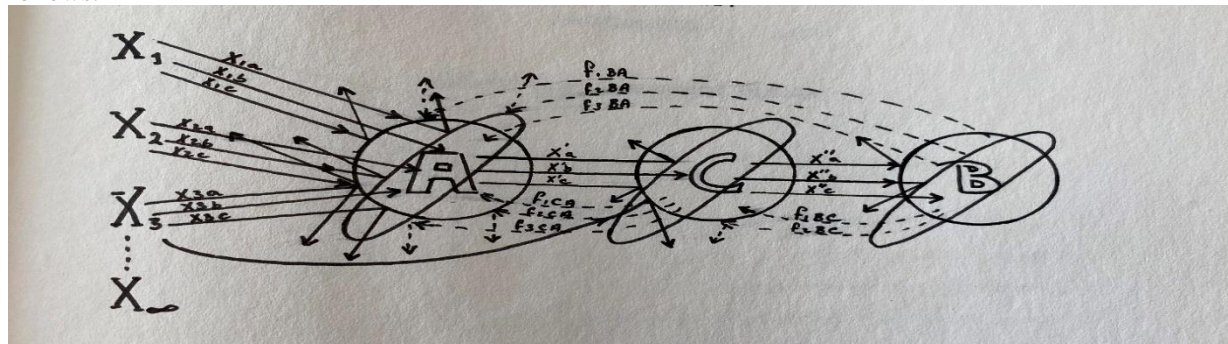[6] Talcott Parsons, The Social System (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 6.

"personality orientation." To expound on the above definition, this article accepts the Westley/MacLean model as a starting point. The *A*s, *B*s, and *C*s (when these *C*s are social objects) in this model may be individuals or groups. These *A*s, *B*s, and *C*s are viewed as having two rotating screens that allow into the system of each A, B, and C only "images" of messages fitting the nature of these screens. The way an encoder plans a message is, to a great extent, determined by the two screens. Again, the way another person decodes the same message is determined by her/his screens. The nature of these screens is decided by the actor's system of orientations to objects (the actor here may be the encoder or decoder). This system of orientation is a product of the interaction of the actor's personality, social, and cultural systems.

The actor's system of orientation to objects is based on Talcott Parsons's social action outlook that maintains that behavior must be referred back to the subjective intentions of the individual (source or receiver). Behavior "is oriented to the attainment of ends or goals or other anticipated states of affairs. It takes place in situations. It is normatively regulated. It involves expenditure of energy or effort or 'motivation' ..."[7] The general frame of reference of this social action view argues that to become meaningful, group behavior must refer back to the subjective intentions of the individual and that goal-oriented conduct occurs in a situation at a specific time and place. Furthermore, it suggests that choice is not entirely at random. There is choice and there are alternatives, but these are limited by cultural standards and norms. The minimal components of any social action frame of reference are means, ends, conditions, and norms. The actor's subjective intentions are indispensable to any attempt to understand social behavior.[8]

For a message to be decoded in a way giving the decoder the correct image intended by the communicator, it should be designed in a way to agree with the actor's (or decoder's) mode of socially motivated orientation and with his/her character system. Thus, one may state that the actor's system of communication is affected by two perception "screens" that will determine this actor's perception, or his/her image, of messages. These screens are rotating in the sense that they are dynamic and not static. They are constantly interacting with the environment. The first screen is that of the actor's character type and the second is that of the system of orientations he/she adopts. The model of the image forming process (decoding or encoding) may be viewed as such:

Integrating this model with the Westley-MacLean general model, the communication process may be viewed as follows:

The above-expanded model provides a suitable picture of the communication process. It provides a workable framework that allows directing our communication approaches to audiences. By making use of this model, a communicator may be able to plan better social messages that may affect the target audiences. Received messages, following this model, are decoded to give an image similar to the one this communicator had when she/he encoded these messages.

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[7] Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils, Toward a General Theory of Action (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 53.
[8] Roscoe Hinkle and Gisela Hinkle, The Development of Modern Sociology (New York: Random House, 1954), pp. 57-58.

In revisiting communication models, this paper has highlighted the transformative impact of social media on the communication process. By integrating personality and socio-cultural variables into the Westley-MacLean model, we have proposed a more comprehensive framework that accounts for the dynamic and interactive nature of modern communication. This enhanced model emphasizes the importance of understanding the encoder and decoder's social and psychological predispositions, which significantly influence how messages are perceived and interpreted.

This paper underscores the necessity of considering the audience's personality and cultural systems when designing and delivering messages. This approach not only improves the accuracy of message delivery but also enhances the effectiveness of communication strategies in the digital age. By acknowledging the rotating screens of character type and system of orientations, communicators can better tailor their messages to resonate with their target audiences, thereby fostering more meaningful and impactful interactions.

Future research should explore the practical applications of this model in various contexts, such as political communication, marketing, and public health campaigns. Additionally, further studies could investigate the role of emerging technologies, like artificial intelligence and machine learning, in refining and implementing these communication strategies. By continuing to advance our understanding of the complex interplay between media messages and audience interpretation, we can develop more sophisticated models that keep pace with the rapid evolution of social media and its effects on society.

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Dedicated To:

This article is dedicated to my late professor and mentor, Malcom MacLean Jr. who encouraged and enthused me, as a graduate student, to build on his communication model.