

***Environmental Dynamo: A Multi-Layered Approach to  
Mass Communication Theory***

Desmond Onyemechi Okocha, PhD

Department of Mass Communication, Bingham University, Nigeria  
E-mail: desmonddoo@yahoo.com/desmonddoo@binghamuni.edu.ng

Samuel Matthew Akpe

Department of Mass Communication, Bingham University, Nigeria  
Email: uyaisamakpe@gmail.com

---

## **Introduction**

A theory is not an end but the beginning of revolutionary ideas that could change our thought patterns and guide us in decision making. Every mass communication theory is based on the need to re-shape existing theories or fill a gap with the aim of making communication not only effective but capable of meeting certain pre-determined goals.

A theory is a product of its environment. For instance, the normative theories of mass communication were developed to fit the political and sociological environments of the era. Some were meant to sustain dictatorship while others fitted the beliefs and different ideologies. Unfortunately, such theories are usually adapted and practiced in other environments whose histories and political ideologies are different.

New theories are sometimes products of old and deficient theories. This explains why there is need to develop brand new theories to replace some of the existing ones whose usefulness are merely historic. This aside, man's advancement in science and technology has

created the need to formulate new communication theories that would rhyme or are suitable for the moment. There is no doubt that a quick look at some existing theories would expose certain deficiency gaps that must be filled. Let's look at three of such theories:

## **Framing Theory of Mass Communication**

Propounded by Gregory Bateson in 1972, this theory is about how mass media contents are selected, packaged and presented to the audience in such a manner that they distract the audience from every other view point by ceasing their full attention. It credits the mass media with the ability to select and magnify particular issues such that they gain the full concentration of the audience.

Bajracharya (2018) describes it as an approach that diverts the attention of media consumers to what the media want to selectively project rather focusing on the importance of the issue. It is simply about how information is structured and projected by the media to influence the mindset of the audience and affect decision-making. This theory believes that repeated activation of audience consciousness towards a particular information creates better effect.

However, framing comes with inherent weaknesses. It creates a sense of doubt and suspicion with repeated or framed messages. People have also come to realise that framing distorts truth and limits debates because of preconceived effects. But most importantly, framing is becoming less impactful as new media are developing and giving people opportunities to think about the same issue with different points of view (Bajracharya, 2018).

## **The Magic Bullet or the Hypodermic Needle Theory**

There is no evidence that this theory was based on any empirical research. The idea behind it is that information could be implanted or injected into a passive, gullible audience; incapable of any resistance. At the time of its creation by Harold Laswell in the 1920s, the Magic Bullet or the Hypodermic Needle Theory was validly magical for some reasons.

First, it came at a time radio and newspapers were the dominant or choice mass media. Second, the theory emerged between the First and the Second World Wars. This was when war propaganda was almost unquestionable. In other words, there were no variety in media contents. People believed what they heard and reacted without questions. So, it could be said in the words of Chantal (2021) that this theory exemplified the hitherto orchestrated,

“powerful and uniform effect of the mass media” on the audience characterised as sitting ducks. It was the passive nature of the audience—an audience rendered socially and politically impotent by the bloody war environment—that gave functionality to this theory.

Today, this theory has become almost irrelevant even in the crudest society. This is because certain environmental, technological, and cultural changes have influences over what we receive from the media and believe. In other words, mass media audience has evolved from being passive, manipulative, and gullible to being active, assertive, analytical, and judgemental.

This theory has equally failed to address the importance of the individuality of the media audience. In the modern world, there is almost no group reaction to media content. There are only individual differences. Again, with the advent of technological appliances, news no longer flows from one direction as it were in the 1920s. The audience now has opportunity to verify what the mass media feed them with.

## **Agenda Setting Theory**

Agenda Setting Theory of Mass Communication refers to the hypothetical powers of the mass media to influence thoughts patterns, shape opinions and determine audiences’ response to issues.

Propounded in 1972 by Dr Maxwell McCombs and Dr Donald Shaw, this theory is based on the belief that the length of time invested by the media on a particular issue and the amount or quality of news content “along with the story’s position, determine how much a reader learns and the amount of importance he places on the issue” (Orr & Harrington, 2021). It underlines the thought that the mass media have the ability to direct and shape our beings. It is about the assumed impregnable influence of the mass media to decide public discourse and guide for decision-making.

One significant shortcoming noticed in this theory is traceable to the advancement in communication technology. The world has since gone beyond the era of information monopoly exercised by the traditional mass media that existed at that time. Wireless journalism has since changed the environment where this theory was supreme. This implies that no particular mass media can overwhelmingly influence and shape the minds of the audience as it were applicable in those days.

## **SUPPOSITION**

The purpose of this presentation is to suggest a communication theory that is neither native nor alien to the African communication environment. It has to be a theory with potentials for global application but framed to fit our culture and environmental influences. Three principal elements are considered in the conception of this theory. These are: the Human Element; the Environmental Element, and the Mass Media Element.

## **MAN**

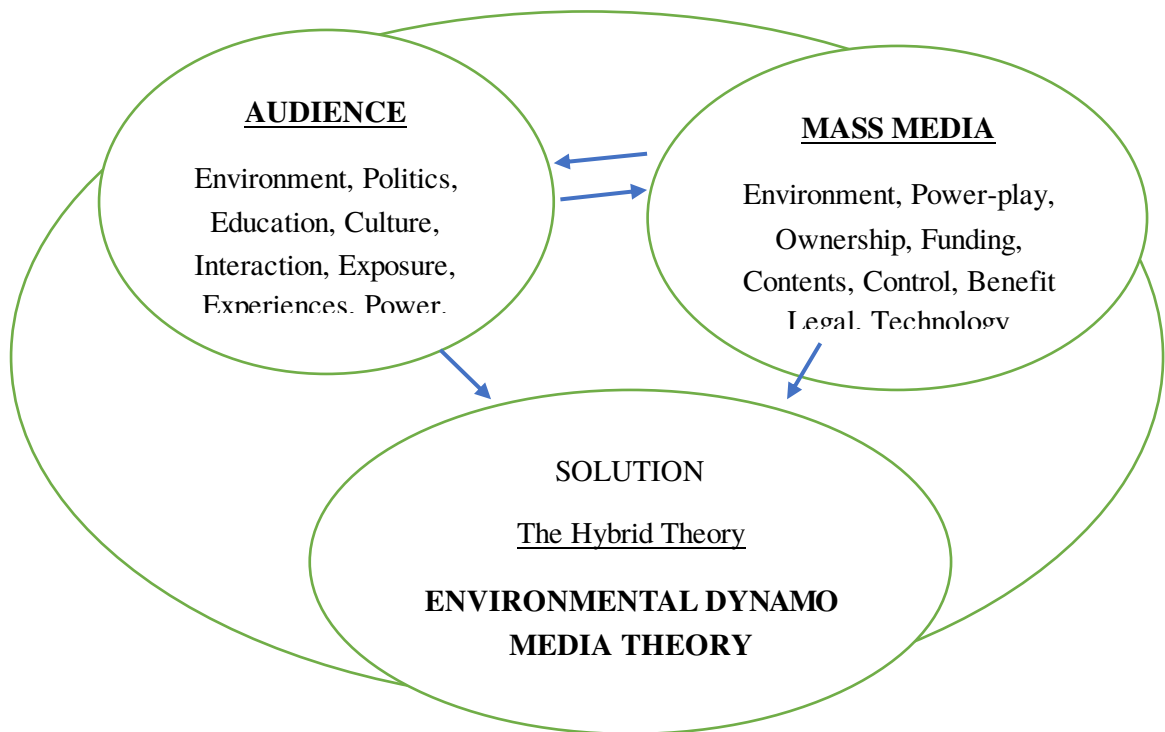
Diverse influences help in shaping the thoughts and actions of every human being, including animals. This implies that every man is a product of a system. This system is influenced by the environmental, life experiences, level of education, cultural background, certain power dynamics, depth of interaction, and scope of exposure. Loaded with and influenced by these elements—both satisfying and frustrating—the man then comes in contact with the mass media.

## **MASS MEDIA**

The mass media derive their influences from certain tangible and intangible elements which include: the environment, internal and external power-play, ownership, funding, media contents, system control, legalities, control and the inherent benefits.

## **NEW ENVIRONMENT**

The new environment is what is called the hybrid theory, which implies something created out of the interaction or cross-breeding of different entities—the man and the media within the old environment.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Environmental Dynamo Theory**

## **FINDINGS**

The interaction between man and the media within the old environment amounts to two opposing systems at war of influence and supremacy with one another. It is an interplay of contradicting power dynamics—with one trying to control and influence the other. Both parties draw their strengths from certain environmental pressure.

What is obvious here is that man is no longer a sitting duck—he is not as gullible, passive or controllable as the old theories want us to believe. You simply cannot inject man with information and expect him to silently absorb such without resistance. Based on some environmental changes in the area of technology, man is no longer limited to whatever the traditional media feed him with him. He is exposed to choices. The assumption that the traditional media set agenda for the man by limiting him in exposure and experience has been watered down.

The mass media on the other hand, are no longer so traditional in the content of their offerings; neither are they limited. They have gone wireless; almost uncontrollable. They have gone democratic since the collapse of famous political dictatorships. This implies that they are no longer subordinate to state bureaucratic or dictatorial machinery. The interaction also reveals that media contents are not defined by man, but as allowed by the system (environment).

There is a huge disagreement here between the man and the media—between the traditional system and the new system; between the alien system and indigenous system, between the globally acceptable system and the Euro-centric system. Man has refused to be passive and gullible. The mass media have rebelled against human control, subordination and manipulation.

## SOLUTION

Whenever two forces clash and each refuses to surrender, a neutral ground or a third party must step in. Here, the man-factor believes it has over-riding control or supremacy over the mass media. The mass media on the other hand are sure that the old era of undue interference and manipulative control has passed. The old environment can no longer contain these two opposing forces. It is this impasse that has given birth to a new communication environment known as the **Environmental Dynamo Media Theory**.

This theory believes in the interconnectivity or interdependence between man and the mass media based on certain environmental factors that keep evolving over time. It is a theory programmed to adjust to and accommodate changes in the environment, especially in communication technology and power dynamics; without each subordinating the other. This is an idea whose time is now.

## References

Bajracharya S. (January 2018). Mass Communication: Framing Theory. From: <https://www.businessstopia.net/mass-communication/framing-theory>. Accessed: 24/03/2022

Chantal, O. (August 2021). Early Theories of Mass Communication. From: <https://www.medium.com/@omlette/early-theories-of-mass-communication-1-magic-bullet-f7a5281a4f07>. Accessed: 16/03/2022.

Orr, A. M. & Harrington, S. (October 2021). Agenda Setting: Definition, Function, Process & Examples. From: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/agenda-setting-definition-function-process-examples.html>. Accessed 16/03/2022