

# Media and Society

When we as individuals think about our favorite shows, movies, music, books, podcasts, news sources, apps, social media platforms, etc, we tend to think only of our interaction with them. On an individual level. What we like about it, do not like, how it makes us feel. But it is also vital that we consider the effects that media has on our society as a whole. Media is an aspect of the United States' culture that has immense impact on nearly every part of our society. And our society, conversely, has given rise to the media as we know it. The media itself has also has a massive effect on storytelling: the detail with which we can do so, the number of ways we can do so, and how far we can spread our stories. Looking at one specific facet of our system that the media has effected, advertising has allowed Big Pharma an immense amount of power in a delicate field— medicine. The very thing that keeps our citizens well is being manipulated using certain forms of media.

The first thing to address is how, overall, media affects our society and vice versa. Each effects the other in these categories: entertainment, news/journalism, and advertising.

Media has effected our society through entertainment in various ways, but let us specifically take a look at music. In chapter seven, section 3 of *The Media of Mass Communication*, the authors discuss how music has affected American society. Decisions made by the entertainment industry helped to further the Civil Rights movement by integrating Rock 'n' Roll music. Previously known as "colored music," it changed with the introduction of Elvis Presley into the genre. While it is a shame that a white man had to come in to popularize an already impressive music style, that is what had to happen for the United States to see a change in segregated society. Our society has affected the entertainment industry in regards to music too. The textbook explains that "black music" and "hillbilly" music were as separate as the people who created them. Because of hard divisions between African Americans and whites, two different music styles developed. As society progressed, they slowly merged to create rockabilly.

News also has a massive effect on our society. The speed with which we as citizens receive news is unprecedented. With innovations that have occurred within the journalism and tech industries, everyone in the world can know about an event within hours or minutes of it occurring. Topics the news reports on also has an effect on us as a society. A disproportionate amount of tragedy, crime, and disaster rules the news. It has made us a rather paranoid people. Many Americans feel they need a firearm at all times to feel safe. If you go to bed without locking your front door, you are "just asking to be murdered." If you see someone coming toward you on the street in the dark, cross to the other side. Our society has certain values that have affected the news itself. Some personal values many tend to hold are ethnocentrism, democracy/

capitalism, individualism, maintaining social order, and having the media as a watchdog (Vivian et al. 108-9).

Another category of media that has affected our society is advertising. Advertising has brought an intense consumerism in our culture. The logic that things are disposable, that there is always something new around the corner, is especially prevalent in the United States. One can only surmise it is related to the amount of advertising we are exposed to, and the messages those ads give us. If the message could be encapsulated by one brand, it could be L'Oreal. According to an article by The Globe and Mail, "Because I'm Worth It" is not just any slogan. Introduced by L'Oréal in 1971 as the Parisian beauty brand prepared to launch its hair-colour business in the United States, these four words came to represent a movement as much as a product range." This slogan represents a sense of entitlement. "I deserve this product, because I'm worth it." While it is not an inherently bad message, it can be detrimental when applied to consumerism. "Because I'm worth it" is a good phrase that entails self-worth. However it implies, "If you like yourself, you should buy our makeup. You are entitled to only the best." Our society effects advertising by putting certain restrictions on it. In a lecture for MC101-Mass Comm and Society, we discussed the lawsuit against Vanity Fair for obscenity. The magazine featured Demi Moore pregnant on the cover. She was nude but covering her breasts and genitals with her hands. By today's standards, this photo is artfully done and unsurprising. In 1991 however, it was highly controversial. Societal and legal backlash is something that affects the media itself often.

So how does the media affect how we tell stories? Most obviously, human storytelling has evolved technologically. From books, to radio, to movies and television, blogs, youtube/video websites, to animation and beyond...the way we as a species tell stories is rapidly evolving. With new technology we can tell fantastical stories with immense detail. The Life of Pi is an example of a film that took great advantage of cgi. There were scenes in that movie that could have only existed in the heads of creatives before- and now there they are, on screen. Social media has even affected how we tell stories interpersonally. Someone can take a video of something going on in front of them and instantly send it to as many people as they want. Or they could share a story or video they liked by posting a link or recommendation. Instantaneously, all of their followers have access to listen to, watch, or read it.

On a mass media level, the movies we watch today have many impacts on our stories. We are seeing increasing diversity in films. This will hopefully affect attitudes toward certain groups and promote tolerance over time. One concept that The Media of Mass Communication referenced was blaxploitation. This is the idea that films focus on African Americans only in an urban context or in the times of slavery. Some view these films as helping black empowerment, but if black individuals are restrained to these settings it could be seen as detrimental. It is vital to have films depicting the brutality of slavery and the hardships of urban poor (a disproportionate number of whom are African American), but it is important that we do not confine certain groups to certain roles in our stories.

Another effect that the media has on storytelling is how it talks to children-particularly through Disney films. Most people are aware of the damaging messages that are communicated to kids through movies. For example, the movie *Beauty and the Beast* has a lot of societal implications. The depiction of Belle being trapped in a castle and then slowly falling in love with the beast has its own issues. The concept that if you trap a woman she will fall for you is a dangerous one. Further, several Disney movies define specific gender roles. Women are portrayed as unnaturally thin, loving, sensitive, dainty, pretty, and polished. Men are portrayed as the ones responsible for saving their female counterpart. They are shown as heroic, strong, never showing weakness or vulnerability, overly chivalrous, and sometimes as having questionable intentions like Gaston in *Beauty in the Beast*. These images of gender roles have been damaging to society, but fortunately, Disney has been making some changes. Its female characters are more heroic, some of its male characters are more sensitive, there are minorities featured in lead roles, and there is not always a romantic interest that has overtaken the film. Eventually many hope that a children's film will feature a protagonist that is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. This new storytelling likely having a positive impact on the children watching it today, and we as a society will see its effects as they grow into adults.

Diving into one specific area of media effects, the pharmaceutical industry and its advertising have had a massive effect on society. According to the documentary *Big Bucks, Big Pharma*, the entire pharmaceutical industry is run by five massive corporations: Johnson&Johnson, Pfizer, Novartis, Merck, and GSK. In 2005, the industry was worth 550 billion dollars. In 2017, it was 934.8 billion dollars and is predicted to be 1170 billion in 2021 (Business Research Company). Before watching the documentary, I never wondered why there are medicine commercials. But now, it seems incredibly odd that the pharmaceutical industry would invest so heavily in direct-to-consumer advertising. Between 1996 and 2004, ad expenditure for this industry rose from 791 million dollars to 4.02 billion dollars annually (*Big Bucks, Big Pharma*). So what is the big deal? Why does it matter that they advertise to us? It matters because of the misinformation they present about available drugs. Worse still, when confronted, Big Pharma will say that they are “educating the public.” If you have ever seen a drug commercial, it is not educational. It is usually images of a healthy person living their best life after taking the “miracle pill.” Marcia Angell, MD and former editor for the *New England Journal of Medicine* put it this way in the documentary: “It’s self-evidently absurd to look to a company for impartial, critical education about a product it sells.”

Something that drug companies have done in the past and continue to do now is to make up conditions or ailments that would require medicine. They want to sell more pills, so why not engineer a disease that would make people think they are in need of them? One example of this given by the aforementioned documentary is the remaking of the cholesterol guidelines. Nine “cholesterol experts” sponsored by the National Institute of Health came up with new guidelines that made the number that classified individuals as having “high cholesterol” lower. This increased the number of people technically in need of cholesterol medication skyrocket overnight. As it turned out, six

of the nine “experts” had ties to pharmaceutical corporations. Another made-up illness was Restless Leg Syndrome. When this “disorder” was first introduced, the commercial claimed that as many as one in ten Americans suffered from it. At the end of the commercial, they of course introduced a drug- a solution to a problem they had introduced. Another manufactured condition was PMDD- premenstrual dysphoric disorder. Prescription Sarafem (actually just Prozac, an anti-depressant) claimed to aid with the pain and mood swings that come with menstruation. In fact, mood changes are a relatively uncommon symptom of menstruation. But the commercial for Sarafem made it seem like the time right before a woman’s period was the worst time of her life and she needed these pills to get through it. Sleep aids are another common drug that is featured in advertisements constantly. These drugs are overprescribed, just like drugs for social anxiety, anti-depressants, and generalized anxiety disorder. There are individuals who legitimately have crippling anxiety, depression, or insomnia. However, doctors do not get as much of a chance to show the patient certain lifestyle changes the patient should make first. The patient already believes there is a magic pill out there that can fix them. So why try cutting screen time an hour before bed, exercising more, or drinking herbal tea when I can just take Lunesta to help me sleep?

Not only do the patients have a bias toward wanting drugs over lifestyle changes, but the doctors are influenced to lean toward a prescription. They are pressured by pharmaceutical representatives who come in to the office and promote a certain drug. This presents a conflict of interest because the doctors now, instead of trying to prescribe the cheapest and most effective drugs possible for their patients, may be biased toward whatever drug they were just advertised. Pharmaceutical reps do not just give presentations and hand out branded pens, notebooks, and stethoscopes. They are also known to buy the doctors lunch, pay for trips, give free samples, and call all of this bribery “education.” Drug companies will also advertise to physicians by being mentioned in medical journals. This is why medical schools have begun to fight back against this intensive advertising. They have started teaching their students about not taking free lunches or trips, and to avoid pharmaceutical reps as much as possible. According to an article on Healthcare Finance, editor Beth Jones Sanborn explains a new trend in hospitals and doctors’ offices all over the country. Some practices, mainly those owned by a large corporation or hospital, do not allow pharmaceutical reps to come in and talk to doctors. This is more common in larger hospitals and such because “powerful entities are able to exert more control over product uptake and treatment protocol across their networks”(Sandborn). The article explains that 40.6 percent of physicians have designated themselves as “no access,” meaning pharmaceutical companies are not allowed to make in-person visits.

The intensive advertising done by the Big Pharma has various negative effects on our society. Besides overprescribing, perpetuating a culture that relies on a magic pill, and manipulates physicians, this industry also drives up costs of medication. The drug Sarafem that I mentioned before was actually Prozac repackaged. As one could guess, it costed three times as much. Another drug rebranding was Nexium. The company that created Prilosec was about to lose their patent, so they knew they would have several other new competitors coming in and selling the same thing. The company

took the same formula, and rebranded it as Nexium. Nexium was 117 dollars a bottle, while Prilosec had been 24. The claim in the advertisement was that Nexium was a newer, more effective drug from the same company that created Prilosec. And what they did was perfectly legal. New drugs do not have to be any better than the old ones. This is why the industry is not improving as much as it could be. Big Pharma is making too much money to change its ways.

In conclusion, the media and society are deeply intertwined. They cannot escape from the effects that they have on each other. They effect each other in entertainment, journalism, advertising and more. The media has also impacted how we tell stories. Storytelling has evolved as technology and new societal practices have emerged. It is also vital that we understand the depth of each facet of the media effecting our society-Big Pharma being one of many. This industry has changed our culture to be one that relies heavily on medicine. This heavy reliance is not only on medicine, but on the media itself as well.

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