

Handout: Five people I don't know and don't like!

It is asserted that one of the main functions of the media is to create a reality.

What are the implications of this assertion?

Something is considered functional when it contributes to the maintenance and stability of whatever it is part of. And dysfunctional when it becomes a destabilising factor. Thus, old media, radio and television can be considered functional in that they provide data for people, informing them about products, fuelling consumption, which is good for the market economy, and reinforcing status quo values through almost their entire range of productions.

According to sociological analysis there are also intended functions and unintended functions performed by the media. For example, the manifest function of news programmes might be presented as being to inform people, whereas, the latent function of these programmes may be to indoctrinate people with certain values and beliefs. The news and current affairs programmes may also be dysfunctional in that they tend, by their coverage, to portray the world as being more violent than it actually is. These may be either an unconscious or conscious effect of news dissemination.

Journalist may protest that they are not trying to indoctrinate their audience, merely reporting the news. But in selecting events to report, in editing and scripting and in ordering the priorities of a news programme, journalists are imparting a worldview.

People in community radio are well aware of many of the positive, developmental events that occur every day in their locality, yet the only time their area may be mentioned in mainstream media is when a violent event occurs. So whose reality are journalists reporting? What kind of reality are they presenting to us?

Sociological analysis is interested in the media roles assigned to women, to gays, to black people, the elderly, the young and those with disabilities. It is suggested that viewers often identify with the heroes and heroines in these productions incorporating what they see in creating their own identities.

You could usefully reflect on this, have you ever caught yourself acting in a manner similar to a television or movie character that you found attractive?

Clearly, the media as a latent function of its general output generates a considerable amount of 'social teaching'. Sociological analysis stresses that the values of the characters portrayed in mediated productions, suggest to the audience, certain values about their society.

These values generated by the media are important, as they influence people's values, which in turn affects their behaviour.

For example, women are frequently portrayed as idiots who get excited about a new bath cleaner, or who insist on going alone into the dark house where anybody with an ounce of sense would know that the maniac is waiting, with a chainsaw. And although the role of women in media is improving, watch how other characters, such as LGBTQ or people in wheelchairs are portrayed. From a sociological perspective, the media roles assigned to individuals are seen as representing that social group.

Do you feel that the generally negative images of such groups spills over into negative consequences for them in society?

This is just a brief overview of the sociological approach to media analysis, and to functionalism in particular. Of course, we may need to question the very premise of what constitutes 'functionalism'.

Community broadcasters might usefully ask why do we consider the media functional when they represent stability rather than transformation? *Is the very language biased?* Would community media be 'functional', were it to espouse alternative ways to live in the world?