Lecture: Mass Media and Diffusion of Innovation

Professor: Today we’re going to discuss how innovation diffuses—in other words—how change spreads. Specifically, we want to look at one of the most significant channels of diffusion—I think you know what that is? Right, the mass media. As you know, the mass media (Internet, newspapers, radio, television, and the like)—the mass media are very influential. That is undeniably true. However, you might be surprised to learn that the influence of the mass media has some limitations.

OK. So, let’s begin. Every day we are inundated by mass media messages trying to get us to do something, to change something, or try some new product. But most research about the mass media suggests that they have limited direct effects for producing change.

Let’s look back first. Before the printing press was invented in the fifteenth century, there had to be direct contact between people, and cultures, for information to spread. Once the printing press was invented, there was a new possibility: the diffusion of innovation without physical contact between cultures. However, there was a problem. To receive information, people had to be able to read. Literacy was historically in the hands of just a few people—for example, the rich, the scribes, or monks. So the real impact of print media was dependent on the development of mass education and literacy. And this is the first limitation of mass media—it depends on literacy and education. In the twentieth century, of course, the number of literate people was much larger than it had ever been, but illiteracy is a phenomenon that limits the effectiveness of print media even today in some developing nations. And electronic media still suffers from this limitation. If people can’t read, they can’t get access to the innovation the media describes.

Radio and television have great potential for the mass diffusion of innovation because they don’t require literacy. But like the limitations of print media, the absence of education, and the lack of resources to purchase these items limit the diffusion of information technology. So lack of education, money, and access limit the direct effect of the mass media.

Alright, I can hear you saying it, but in the literate and developed countries, mass media is “king.” There can be no other limitations for this channel of diffusion. Right? But let’s think about this. Mass media offers one-way communication with limited capacity for feedback from audiences who listen, read, or watch. Recipients of mass communication such as newspapers, magazines, television, and radio can’t really ask questions, get clarification, or talk back in any meaningful way. The interesting thing about this is that effective persuasion to adopt change usually requires interactive communication between an individual promoting change and an individual who might adopt the innovation. Direct effects of massmedia communication are limited until they’re modified by interpersonal communication among people who tuned to the same media message. You’re very likely to discuss media messages with friends, family members, and classmates, and these conversations will critically reshape the impact of the messages. So lack of personal interaction is another limitation of the mass media.
Perhaps this explains the power of the Internet. People can learn about innovations, new technologies and ideas, and discuss them with others all through the same channel. That’s a very powerful thing, as you well know.

And there are other factors that limit the ability of the mass media to diffuse innovation. The selective exposure, perception, and retention that people bring to their media exposure limit its ability to persuade people to change. People who initially feel positively about a particular innovation and change are the ones most likely to be receptive to mass communication about it. For example, television messages about voting for a certain political party (whatever the party)… are most likely to have positive impacts on people favorably inclined toward that party in the first place. People are, in other words, most likely to pay attention to and remember information about those things that they feel positive about to begin with. What people bring to the media is at least as important as what media bring to people.

The actual effects of mass media are quite complex. Research suggests that mass media are successful at intensifying or reducing the intensity of existing attitudes and opinions. However, they are not successful, or not very successful, at creating new attitudes and opinions or converting people to new attitudes and opinions. And this limitation is mostly a result of the fact that diffusion of innovation occurs primarily when there is reinforcement through interpersonal communication in an informal group context.

But, for sure, the media can have important long-term effects on social change. They may not be able to get individuals to believe or try new things. They do, however, help socialize people and can shape the culture of knowledge, attitudes, and behavior that people bring to media exposure.