

The Hypodermic Needle Theory

History and Orientation:

The "hypodermic needle theory" otherwise known as "The Magic Bullet Theory" implied mass media were perceived as a powerful influence on behavior change. The bullet theory graphically suggests that the message is a bullet, fired from the "media gun" into the viewer's "head". With similarly emotive imagery the hypodermic needle model suggests that media messages are injected straight into a passive audience which is immediately influenced by the message. Several factors contributed to this "strong effects" theory of communication, including:

- the fast rise and popularization of radio and television
- the emergence of the persuasion industries, such as advertising and propaganda
- the Payne Fund studies of the 1930s, which focused on the impact of motion pictures on children, and
- Hitler's monopolization of the mass media during WWII to unify the German public behind the Nazi party

Key Features:

- Developed in 1920s & 1930s after the propaganda used in WW1
- Linear Communication Theory
- Passive Audience
- No Individual Difference

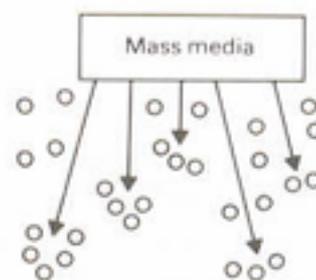
Largely thought to be outdated now, but still used by concerned parents with their children & the effects of mass media - e.g Grand Theft Auto

Example of 'The Hypodermic Needle':

The classic example of the application of the Magic Bullet Theory was illustrated on October 30, 1938 when Orson Welles and the newly formed Mercury Theater group broadcasted their radio edition of H.G. Wells' "*War of the Worlds*."

On the eve of Halloween, radio programming was interrupted with a "news bulletin" for the first time. What the audience heard was that Martians had begun an invasion of Earth in a place called Grover's Mill, New Jersey.

Early mass communication model



○ = isolated individuals constituting a mass

It became known as the "*Panic Broadcast*" and changed broadcast history, social psychology, civil defense and set a standard for provocative entertainment. Approximately 12 million people in the United States heard the broadcast and about one million of those actually believed that a serious alien invasion was underway. A wave of mass hysteria disrupted households. People fled their city homes to seek shelter in more rural areas, raided grocery stores and began to ration food. The nation was in a state of chaos, and this broadcast was the cause of it. Media theorists have classified the "*War of the Worlds*" broadcast as the archetypal example of the Magic Bullet Theory. This is exactly how the theory worked, by injecting the message directly into the "bloodstream" of the public, attempting to create a uniform thinking. The effects of the broadcast suggested that the media could manipulate a passive and gullible public, leading theorists to believe this was one of the primary ways media authors shaped audience perception.

Problems with the Theory:

Many researchers do not support this view and state "no two individuals can be alike in reactions to media contents, reactions differ according to motivation of audience members, their pre-disposition to accept or reject a given message, their needs, attitudes, intelligence, moods and prejudices etc. Many social and psychological factors tend to influence and intervene before a media message reaches from media to the audience.

This theory over simplified the media effects. But, somehow it hold significance as a early media theory and applicable to war like situations when people or audience are in sensitive state of mind and highly depended on media for information and awareness.