

# A COMPARATIVE MEDIA RESEARCH STUDY ON THE RELEVANCE OF THE MAGIC BULLET THEORY OF MASS COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

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**Abstract:** The present research study has observed and examined the relevance and non-relevance of the media effects theory of 'Magic Bullet Theory' of communication which earlier in the past was considered powerful media effects theory over the audiences through its one way messages, news, contents over the mind of the audiences and audiences as they were considered passive to receive its bad and good messages. The thinkers and supporter of Magic Bullet Theory proposed that 'Messages' are like a 'Bullet' and 'Media/Medium/Channel' is a 'Media Gun' through which bullet like message/content/agenda is shoot on the minds of passive audiences who were not able to react to that media messages as they followed which media served them. The other name of this media effect theory is 'Hypodermic Needle Theory' as 'Needle' is a 'Channel/Medium' and 'Fluid' in the needle is a 'Content/Message/Agenda' which is injected on the passive audiences to follow the media messages. To examine the relevance of the Magic bullet Theory of Mass Communication in the age of social media, the media coverage by modern Indian media (Print media, Electronic media and New media) on the political agenda, election agenda, war-fear; judiciary decisions, viral messages of social media, propaganda, government decisions and reaction of the modern Indian audiences to the media content, news, messages has been studied. For this study, the media report by big channels and newspapers of India and audiences of some border area villagers of Srinagar of J.K., border area villagers of Rajasthan in news and their reaction to the messages, news of war like position between Indian Army and Pakistan army media, has been taken and also the media coverage over scrapping Article 370 & Article-35A from Indian constitution in connection to the present UTI Jammu & Kashmir of India have been inducted in the research study.

To conclude the whole research study, it is found that the effects of Magic Bullet Theory of mass communication have been experienced by exploratory research method over the audiences of the digital social media age. This theory media theory's effects over audiences had been rejected by other researchers and claimed that it has no direct influence over audiences while present study reaches to this conclusion that this magic bullet theory of mass communication has its own influence or media effects and relevancy even in the social media age of modern information communication technology.

**Keywords:** Magic bullet theory, Powerful media effects, Medium, Media gun, Hypodermic needle theory, Fluid, Modern information communication technology.

## INTRODUCTION:

A theory means an explanation of how a phenomenon works or is likely to work and used to understand how things are likely to happen. In mass media, a theory of mass communication is also an explanation for understanding the phenomenon of any action of media messages. Like this, the media effect of Magic Bullet<sup>1</sup> Theory of Mass Communication in the form of media content, media agenda, news, messages, and social media messages disseminated to the audiences through different media channels under such phenomenon to its target audiences. In the age of information technology, the tastes, understanding, perceptions of both audiences and

media operators have been changed as audiences are not those audiences of the time of traditional or one way media channel who were considered not to react the messages of one way media. Modern audiences are media literate and they have their different vision and perceptions to the messages of media as they live in the age of multi-step flow of media and digital media to test and reacts the media messages through their own sources of mass communication. To test the different perception of media audiences and media messages over war like position between Indian Army and Pakistan Army after Pulwama militant attack<sup>2</sup> on 14 February, 2019 from the side of Pakistan based Jaise-e- Mohammed militant group as in this attack forty soldiers of Indian CRPF have been

<sup>1</sup> Magic Bullet Theory is in the context of media message as media message is just like a injection which injects into receiver's consciousness and receiver cannot able to react media message. This theory was proposed by Harold Lasswell during world war 1st. Another name of Magic Bullet Theory of Mass Communication is Hypodermic Needle Theory of Mass Communication.

<sup>2</sup> Pulwama is a district of Jammu & Kashmir State of India where on 14 February, 2019, a convoy of Central Reserve Police Force's personnel (CRPF) of India was attacked by a vehicle-borne suicide bomber at Lethpora in Pulwama district and the attack resulted in the death of forty police personnel's. The Pakistan based Islamic militant group Jaise-e-Mohammed claimed the responsibility of this attack.

killed and scrapping Article-370 on 5 August, 2019 and Article-35A from Indian Constitution, the views of the border area villagers of JK, Punjab, Rajasthan and views of the Kashmiri people regarding the scrapping of Article 370 and Article-35A from the Indian Constitution have been inducted in the present research study. Reaction between Hindu-Muslim Communities of India, terror attack on CRPF convoy as which generated war like tension among the gentry of India-Pak after Indian Air Force's surgical strike on Pakistan base terror camps and then captivation of Indian Air Force's wing commander and then media in its coverage, news, content created fear of war like between India and Pakistan created tension among the gentry of border States of India mostly village border areas' villagers. Some people ignored media messages and some draw their attention to such fearful media messages, some liked and some disliked and some reacted to media messages as per their perceptions, behaviour, knowledge, inter-personal communication, multi-media source or two-step flow sources of social media and different media sources over the advantages, disadvantages, good and bad for them. The study reveals that media messages depend upon the social behaviour of different communities, human behaviour, psychology of human which goes changing on the basis of dissonance and consonance of the different target audiences and according to this perception they react to media messages and media content. The media effects of mass communication are not the same to all target audiences, individuals, society, institutions while Magic Bullet theory of mass communication does not stand at this point of view. The main focus of Magic Bullet Theory/Hypodermic Needle Theory of Communication is that mass media have a direct immediate and powerful effect on its audiences. Though, this theory of communication is one of the earliest theories in the field of mass communication. **Griffin, Davis, McQuail, Defleur, Baron, Lowely, Blumber, Herbert Schuller, Micheal**, etc. were the tenets of **Magic Bullet Theory of Mass communication** after **Lasswall**. They conducted many researches to prove this true. But it is still relevant in some way even in the modern social media/digital media age. This theory reveals that an intended message by mass media is directly received and wholly accepted by the receiver. **But many researchers had rejected it as in the 1940s, decade the communication thinker Lazarsfeld, Griffin and McQuail proved false to the Magic Bullet Theory of Mass Communication/ Hypodermic Needle Model Theory of Mass Communication as they also conducted research study on election campaign of American President under the title 'The People's Choice' and both found the Two-Step Flow Theory<sup>3</sup> of**

<sup>3</sup> Two-Step Flow of mass communication theory was proposed by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet in 1944 in a book entitled "The People's Choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign". They found in their research study that media messages of radio, television and newspapers are not powerful to influence the voting behaviour of the people than to an informal and personal communication

**Mass Communication under which audiences or American voters reacted to media messages through their perceptions, opinions, behaviour, likes and dislikes.** Though, in the same year Griffin and McQuail conducted election research studies in 1944 and 1968 respectively entitled "The People's Choice" and moreover introduced the idea of the Two-Step flow Theory of communication. They also rejected that there is no impression of this theory on audiences neither it was produced by political campaign of American presidential election, however, one linear media of that time was in favor of one political party's campaign but in spite of it could not attain the mandate of the people. Even in the earlier age of one linear media, people used their opinions, decisions and reactions to messages as per their uses and gratifications and social, economic, political behaviour. The present research study comes back to the drawing room to throw light on the relevance of Magic Bullet Theory of Communication again within the context of the social media age/digital media age mustered by the advancement in the information and communication technologies. However, the advent of new information and communication technologies have altered the face of communication process as result these new information technologies have embellished communication patterns and influenced fallouts in diverse ways. It means that early theories like media effects of Magic Bullet Theory of Communication which existed prior to the emergence of new information and communication technologies were rejected by some other theories proposed by the communication thinkers so it require reassessment and research in the modern age to ascertain their relevance as history recalls the same phenomenon sometimes in the present world as well as in the case of India it recalled among various groups and Indian societies as it depends upon the media literacy and gratification of the audiences, social, economic, cultural, political behaviour, etc. All media effects, messages and media contents cannot be one sided neither received by all individuals equally. In Elihu Katz words we can say that media message receiver takes the messages of media as per his/her uses and gratification<sup>4</sup> because aware receiver does not receive or follow the message of media blindly.

#### RESEARCH PROBLEM:

In mass communication field, the Magic Bullet Theory of Mass Communication has been criticized as it does not reach to the right empirical research and right explanations of this between media messages and its receivers or audiences. This theory is still needed to test the accurate results. Mostly, the Magic Bullet Theory of Mass Communication is based on suppositions not based on scientific proofs. Earlier many Western scholars disproved this theory's media effects on the audiences because different audiences' perceptions, inter-personal

which is disseminated by opinion leaders who are generally much famous and mass opinion maker in the society to influence the opinion of the masses from one group to another group.

<sup>4</sup>

communication, choices are different to media messages as modern mass media has shaped the thinking level of the audiences to understand the media messages. Earlier thinkers' opinion was that the Magic Bullet Theory does not allow freedom of choice to the audiences as media effects of magic bullet theory injects on the minds of the audiences with its one way or linear media messages and propaganda about any incident. While others admit that the bullet magic theory of media still effective even in the age of social media or digital media age as its media effects found among the people but to some extent. But it is difficult to reach the right results of the effects of bullet magic theory of mass communication. The effects of this theory are general found in less media literacy population/community as in the case of developing countries like India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, African countries even among the population of developed countries. But it is difficult to percolate this theory in the age of information technology where the audiences have become extraordinary.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF STUDY:**

The basic objective of this study is to examine the relevance of Magic Bullet Theory in the social media age/digital media age.

- Examine the relevance of the Magic Bullet Theory of mass communication in the age of ICT.<sup>5</sup>
- Analyze the arguments against the Magic Bullet Theory of mass communication in perspective of modern revolution of information technology, internet based media.
- Examine the relevance of the Magic Bullet Theory in the social media age and digital media.

#### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE:**

##### **(a) Background of the Magic Bullet Theory of Mass Communication:**

The Magic Bullet Theory of Mass Communication was propounded by Harold Lasswell during World War 1<sup>st</sup>. This theory repeated in 1930 to judge its media effects on the target audiences. During the period of 1930 and 1950, radio was gaining much popularity through its news, messages, views, movies and advertisements which increased quality, quantity effects of media on the behaviour of masses of America and other western countries and masses were seemed to follow the consumerism culture and in some cases masses get frightened over the messages and news in newspapers, radio, advertisements in radio, magazines and newspapers.

<sup>5</sup> ICT-Information and Communication Technology which produced modern multifaceted media tools to the modern masses of the world and now world has become a global village after the advent of this modern technology.

Those days, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's radio speeches and masses were considered unable to react to the messages of the magic bullet theory of mass communication. During those days, many communication thinkers conducted researches on the effects of the media and proved these effects as magic bullet theory or hypodermic needle theory of mass communication influences and found that audiences are not able to react to media messages as their mind thinking and perceptions are bulletted by one way media gun. The old thinkers found how media messages and movies on the horror of war between U.S.A. and Germany influenced the mindset of the masses of the two countries. During American presidential election in 1940, Paul Lazarsfeld rejected this theory of magic bullet under his research theory of Two-Step flow of communication and research on 'People's Choice' that mass media messages have no direct effects on the masses or audiences. He conducted research to judge the voting behaviour and relationship between the media messages and political election campaign of Roosevelt. He found that interpersonal medium of the masses proved more influential than media influence of the election campaign. He concluded that mass media effects indirectly through the opinion leaders who influence the audiences by their opinion and then pass it to the masses and who follow it become followers and next through two steps theory of communication or inter-personal communication and group communication messages are passed to each other. The same thing happens in the modern media age and the age of social media, opinion leaders in media messages become more powerful to influence the mindset or perception of the audiences to follow them but here audiences react to media messages as per their notion, likes and dislikes. These findings reveal that masses can select those which affect them and which don't affect them by media messages. Myriad of modern scholars have rejected the effects of magic bullet theory as there is no relevance of this communication in the age of advanced information technology age.

##### **(b) The Digital Age in Perspective:**

On the other side, the masses of the world have addicted to the different media tools as after the advent of Internet everything is available before us and everything is being digitized. That is why the population of the world is interconnected through media network tools whatever it is social media tools like Face-book, You Tube, LinkedIn, Twitter, wikis. Newspapers, radio, Television, magazines have been digitized and internet publications are being took place day by day. The role of traditional media has changed dramatically in the age of the internet-driven, 24 hour news cycle and the proliferation of social media. The definition of the traditional mass media radio, television, newspapers

and magazines in the digital age has been expanded to include online and social media. Everything has gone sharing among the masses and online websites are growing fast to be one to one communication through smart mobile phones, computers, and laptop.

*(c) Magic Bullet Theory in the Digital Age: A Critical Appraisal:*

Some thinkers after Harold Lasswell, proved that magic bullet theory of mass communication is not prevalent neither its predominant effects on the audiences today because the audiences have more exposure to multi-media in the age of information communication technology. In the words of Herbert Schuller he described in his cultural imperialism theory of communication in 1976 that media, multinational organizations even media, business corporations of developed countries are dominating the habit and perception of the developing countries through vast social media influence. It means Magic Bullet Theory of Mass Communication has its influence on less media-literate. However information communication technology has eliminated the principles of magic bullet theory and Two-Steps theory of mass communication as social sharing and relationships are increasing through internet connection. Now opinion leaders<sup>6</sup> in media messages have no place as people give arguments either reacted to media messages. It is existed because of the relationships among internet, Facebook users, WhatsApp users and other various users of social media. But in some cases that media effects of magic bullet theory of mass communication takes place where people have less access to media and its messages and less media literacy. In such cases like in India such people come under the influence of media effects of magic bullet theory of mass communication. Many media thinkers rejected this theory totally in the age of ICT and social media or digital media age but this theory targets those audiences who are still not media literate or have less access to the truth of media messages. Sometimes even in social media messages people fall prey to the untruth messages of social media messages and less media literate people are not able to argue or react media messages but began to follow such messages which create problems both them and society as well. So the relevance of the Magic Bullet Theory of mass communication cannot be rejected totally. There is more need of research on the relevance of magic bullet theory in the vast emerging flood of mass media tools and social media tools.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

*a) Research Design:*

For present research study design, media coverage, media programmes, editorials, articles the news data of famous TV channels, newspapers, magazines of India, social media posts and defense news coverage from the side of Indian Army of the have been consulted and data have been collected to prove the media effects of magic bullet theory of mass communication over the population of border area villagers of Jammu & Kashmir Union Territory , Rajasthan of India and villagers of Bagha-Attari Border<sup>7</sup> of Lahore of Pakistan, Amritsar of India in the digital age of mass communication. The data collected on the border area villagers where Indian Army and Pakistan Army generally scheduled to struggle daily as Pakistan Army and militants always execute to militancy activities in JK and sometimes war-like position becomes. In such peril environment, the villagers of the border areas frighten over the messages, news report of the media in the context of broking out war. The same position of war fear takes in other border village areas of like Rajasthan and sometimes war fear created by media when both armies involved in a big struggle or big terrorist attack over military. This is a comparative study over two communities of Muslim villager of border area of JK, Hindu villagers of border of Rajasthan and Bagah-Attari border of Lahore and Punjab.

*b) Population and Sample:*

For population and sampling, four villages with population of twenty four villagers from the side of border line from the side of Jammu & Kashmir, the Union Territory of India, twenty villages of border line from the side of State of Rajasthan of India and one village of border line from the side of State of Punjab of India have been inducted in the present research study on the basis of different media coverage. The Quota Sampling is applied to conduct the study to cover equally the views of hundred villagers from both Hindu community and Hindu community.

*c) Tools and Techniques:*

News coverage by different media channels of print media, electronic media and new media/social media channels of India over the war like struggle between Indian Army and Pakistan Army and news over the scrapping Article-370 & Article35-A of Indian Constitution which imparted Jammu & Kashmir as a special status State of India, and before scrapping these Articles, there was the position of fear among the people of Jammu & Kashmir. Different data of the media coverage in this regard collected and

<sup>7</sup> Wagah and Attari are villages located in the zone of Lahore of Pakistan and in the zone of Amritsar district of Punjab State of India. Wagah is on the side of Pakistan while Attari is on the side of India. These are bordering villages between these two countries.

interviewed the hundred villagers dwelling near by the border areas and interviewed fifty persons of Jammu town.

**d) Primary Research and Secondary Research Data:**

For Primary Research data collection regarding the present research, the interview method has been conducted on two hundred villagers of the bordering areas of seven villages Rajpura<sup>8</sup>, Janghad<sup>9</sup>, Shermakadi<sup>10</sup>, Bagha, Rann of Kutch<sup>11</sup>, Longewala<sup>12</sup>, Shamka<sup>13</sup> of Hindus and Muslims. For Secondary Research data collection, twenty five media channels from print media, electronic media and five from social media have been inducted to conduct the present research study.

**e) Analysis of Data:**

After collecting data, the comparative analysis has been inducted to prove the media effects of the magic bullet theory of mass communication even in the social media age because audiences receive media messages as per their perceptions, psychology, social, economic, culture and political environment and these conditions influence audiences react to media messages in the way of passive and active reactions. When situation is not in the favor of the audiences, they go passive and not able to react to the media messages. So in the present study, ninety percent interviewees found passive audiences while ten percent found as active audiences who ignored the media messages.

**f) Testing of Variables:**

For testing and analysis the research collected data, independent variables and dependent variables have been tested which prove the relevance of the magic bullet theory of mass communication in the age of social media or information communication technology. Through variables' study proved that this theory is still relevant as depicted by the survey research on the villagers of border areas of India when India-Pak armies were in war like position and on persons of Jammu town over the scrapping of Article-370 and Article-35A which had created a situation of fear among the people of Jammu & Kashmir. So in this context, independent variables, dependent variable and external variables also influence the effect of media messages.

<sup>8</sup> Rajpura is a bordering village in Jammu & Kashmir Union Territory of India.

<sup>9</sup> Janghad is a bordering village in Jammu & Kashmir (JK) Union Territory of India.

<sup>10</sup> Shermakadi is a bordering village in Jammu & Kashmir Union Territory of India.

<sup>11</sup> Rann of Kutch is a bordering village in Gujarat State of India.

<sup>12</sup> Longewala is a bordering village in Rajasthan State of India.

<sup>13</sup> Shamka is a bordering village in Jammu & Kashmir Union Territory of India.

**Validity:**

Eighty years ago, a research survey was conducted by earlier researchers on the validity of the media effects of magic bullet theory of mass communication. In the age of social media or information communication technology, the media effects of this theory are still prevailed among the present generation of the world.

**Reliability**

After testing the research data and re-test data, it is found that media effects of magic bullet theory of mass communication influences the psychology, perceptions of humans as per their present situation of political, cultural, economic and human behaviour.

**RESULTS OF THE STUDY:**

The research study has adopted the qualitative approach is exploring the following objectives-theory, and examining the basic tenets of the magic bullet theory, analyzing the arguments against the magic bullet theory, and examining the relevance of the media effects theory of magic bullet theory in the age of social media channels or digital channels of mass communication. The analysis has been premised on the media effects of magic bullet theory of mass communication in the context of media messages, social media comments and news on the tension and struggle between Indian military and Pakistan military across the border and war like intimidation from the governments of the two sides of India and Pakistan and war like tension between India and Pakistan after terror attack on CRPF<sup>14</sup> convoy and then air surgical made by Indian Air force on Pakistan base militant camps near by Srinagar border from the side of India Government and Pak army also retaliated by surgical strike and Pak soldiers apprehended wing commander of Indian Air Force during surgical strike against Pakistan projected militant camps at POK<sup>15</sup> area which created the fearful environment scheduled to war between India and Pakistan but villagers dwelling near by the border areas of India and Pakistan when they received messages of the military to get empty the area and media coverage and social media messages. The media messages frightened the villagers to leave their villages to go other remote villages or their relatives living in remote areas from the border areas. Pakistan media, Indian media and social media messages boosted the war like situation. This fear of war was not only among the border areas' villagers of India and Pakistan but also among the rest non-border area citizens. On the other hand, on 5<sup>th</sup> August, 2019, when

<sup>14</sup> CRPF- Central Reserve Police Force. It is a police force of the Central Govt. of India.

<sup>15</sup> POK- Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. This is a thirty percent area of present Kashmir which was occupied by Pakistan army during war of 1948 by deceit.

Government of India was scheduled to scrap Article-370<sup>16</sup> and Article-35A<sup>17</sup> from the Indian Constitution in respect of to remove the special status of Jammu & Kashmir, and before scrapping these Articles, Government of India deployed myriad of armed forces to tackle any run riot in Jammu & Kashmir region by the people. The research study found that the Magic Bullet Theory is still relevant today even in digital social media as the audience react in an 'actively passive' manner to certain media contents but sometimes they are not able to react to media messages as it all depend on the individual difference perspective, consonance, dissonance which come from the human perception, socio-economic, cultural and political factors and influenced by two-step flow of information both by media and opinion leaders. The study recommended further studies on bullet theory using other issues so as to further establish relevance of this theory in the digital age, contrary to postulations that the theory is no longer relevant in the digital social media society but its effect is not found at large level because the nature of media and expansion of today's modern media has expanded more that the content of media is being prepared for each specific classes as media exposure to all not for the general audiences.

#### CONCLUSION:

Deriving from the afore-discussed, the study concludes that the bullet theory still holds significance in the digital age since the audience members actively decide which social media platform to use and, depending on the nature the story, passively react to contents they are exposed to. The bullet theory may not be predominant but should not be completely declared non-existent as the issued used in this studied showed. The social media has also widened the scope of human interaction and make for user generated contents and social presence. This adds to the powerful effect of the media, depending on the issue involved and individual differences perspective, perception, active attention to media messages, passive attention to media messages, social, economic, cultural, political categories perspectives, and two-step flow of information, consonance and dissonance of individual to the media messages.

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<sup>16</sup> Article-370 of Indian Constitution was related to the special status of State of Jammu & Kashmir of India. Now, this Article has been scrapped by present Government of India as this Article was considered a gate of terrorism from the side of Pakistan in Jammu & Kashmir, one way politics by three families, unemployment, and backwardness among the masses of Jammu & Kashmir.

<sup>17</sup> Article-35A was also provided the special provision to the separate constitution of Jammu & Kashmir and its laws and other conveniences were only to the citizens of Jammu & Kashmir but it was considered against the unity of India. So the present Bhartiya Janta Party ruling government scrapped this provision from the Indian Constitution.

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