

Theory & Cultural Representation: *The Expanse*

Mass Communication Theory

Alex Hughes

Rochester University

This essay will explore how culture and the ideas of reinforcement theory are represented in the American science fiction television show *The Expanse*, and in what ways those elements are used to convey messages to its audience. *The Expanse*'s first episode aired December 14th, 2015 on the SyFy network and is based on James S. A. Corey's novel series that is also titled *The Expanse*. The television series was later picked up by Amazon Prime Video in May, 2018 and is still ongoing to this date. The themes of *The Expanse* heavily center around race, loyalty, group identity, and morality, and the beliefs held by the characters are consistently reinforced by mass communication. These are issues which are current topics of political debate within American society therefore making *The Expanse* a good choice for this analysis.

The Expanse's timeline is focused on a fantasy depiction of what life is like about 300 years in the future. In the year 2342, Humans have colonized the Sol System (the technical name for Earth's solar system) as far out as Uranus, with most of the human population living on Earth, Mars, and The Asteroid Belt. Over 100 years after colonizing, humans have become divided based on which astral body they were born on. People no longer see themselves as colonizing-Earthlings living on other planetary vessels. Generations have grown, had offspring, and died upon these places. Where they are from is their home now. Thus, each group of people (Earthers, Martians, and Belters respectively) have developed their own culture and beliefs, as well as face their own unique struggles--creating their own separate identities. These differences have created long building tensions between each of the factions which only strengthens the divide. As a result, each group has pre-existing ideas about the other groups and looks for evidence (especially within media) to reinforce those beliefs. This concept of reinforcement

occurs many times throughout the series. For that reason, before expanding on the analysis of *The Expanse*, the details of reinforcement theory will be explained.

Reinforcement Theory

Reinforcement theory (also known as phenomenistic theory) can be defined as the, “theory that media are rarely the sole cause of effects and are relatively powerless when compared with other social factors [and as a result] media’s most common effect is reinforcement” (Baran & Davis, 2014, p. 113). Media’s main way of influencing people is by confirming (reinforcing) their already held beliefs and attitudes, as opposed to changing them (Baran & Davis, 2014, p. 114). The most likely factor in influencing behavior and attitudes is direct social interaction with peers and opinion leaders within one’s own group (Wicks, 1996, para. 13). The behavioral notions put forth by reinforcement theory have correlation with the idea of cognitive consistency, as both are considered to be an aspect of limited-effects theory which is the idea that the effect media has is minor and limited (Naveed, 2017). Cognitive consistency is, “the idea that people consciously and unconsciously work to preserve their existing views” (Baran & Davis, 2014, p. 105). This is a possible factor in what causes people to be resistant to media influence. Within the universe of *The Expanse*, there are many instances where characters exhibit such behavior and display how little media is able to influence their already held beliefs, which is strongly linked to their assumed identities. This essay will focus on a specific example of group identity (which can be a factor in establishing one's peers and opinion leaders) and two examples of reinforcement theory that show the correlation between group identity and cognitive consistency--as well as relate them back to American culture and society. The first example is the adopted identity of the Belter population on Ceres as a minority race separate from Earthlings

and their struggles as an oppressed, lower-class, and underserved community. With the second example, reinforcement theory will be examined by using the now understood Ceres population and showing how their general consensus of the inner planets (Earth and Mars) is unfaltering by media and propaganda. A third and final example will be explored from a different angle involving Earth's leaders, specifically U.N. Secretary General Esteban Sorrento-Gillis, portrayed by Jonathan Whittaker, and his undersecretary Sadavir Errinwright, portrayed by Shawn Doyle, and how they use reinforcement theory to win the favor of (and control) Earth's people during times of outrage and fear.

Culture and Theory Representation: Identity

In the first season of *The Expanse*, the Earth colony on Ceres (currently the home of the largest Belter population) is introduced and the audience is given insight into what life is like on the asteroid. The viewer is greeted with a continuous and seamless point-of-view (POV) shot flying around to various locations within the settlement, making it apparent that constant toiling and slave-like conditions are the way of life for the inhabitants all over Ceres. During the opening POV scene of Ceres, a dialogue from a gaunt Belter (portrayed by Kyle Gatehouse) is played. He is finally revealed to be giving a speech to his fellow inhabitants about their unfair existence under the boot of Earth saying,

“We Belters toil and suffer, without hope and without end. And for what? One day, Mars will use its might to wrest control of Ceres from Earth, and Earth will go to war to take it back. It's all the same to us. No matter who controls Ceres, our home, to them, we will always be slaves” (McDonough, 2015).

The Belter onlookers hearing the speech are shown to be nodding and cheering in agreement, an indication to the audience that this is the general consensus held by the Belter population. To create a further separation of identity between humans on Earth and humans in the Belt (and to be true to anatomy) the audience is given a quick lesson on the effects of low gravity in relation to the development of the human body. This is done by Detective Josephus Miller (a Belter native and Ceres police officer portrayed by Thomas Jane) giving a run down on why Belter natives have long-thin limbs, weak bones, and a tall stature to his new partner Detective Dmitri Havelock (an Earth native portrayed by Jay Hernandez). This holds much significance, as Bryan Banker (2019) notes, “In science fiction, bodily difference is often implicitly racial” (p. 87). Banker continues on to reference racial justice scholar Ian F. Haney-López in saying, “Different physical appearances have historically been coded racially [...] because bodily difference marks the ways in which people of color have been treated over time” (as cited in Banker, 2019, p.87). This separation of identity allows the audience of *The Expanse* to understand and relate the struggles to real-life issues, especially to those of the lower class and in underserved communities--which in America those communities are often predominantly populated by people of color (POC) (Semega, J. L., Fontenot K. R., & Kollar M. A., 2016, p. 5, 13). A real life example of such would be the well known issue of the Flint water crisis, which the U.S. Census (2019) lists Flint’s majority population as POC with over 55 percent. The topic of pollution, poor quality, and limited amounts of vital resources in underserved communities brings forth the first example of reinforcement that will be explored in *The Expanse*.

Culture and Theory Representation: Reinforcement and Cognitive Consistency

The Expanse presents a scenario where systematic oppression of a people can create a disruption of trust between said people and their ruling government. In a state of oppression “Political, social, and economic barriers are effectively implemented and maintained not only through the use of force, fear or terror, but also through widely disseminated and largely internalized legitimizing psychological myths concerning the “just nature” of the present state” (Gramsci, 1971; Sidanius, 1993 as cited in Prilleltensky & Gonic, 1996, p. 132). These political, social, and economic barriers soon become the opinions of the people. Changing those opinions by means of mass communication becomes very difficult as media will likely reinforce these beliefs, and cognitive consistency will give them inertia. In *The Expanse* back on Ceres, water and air are considered the most valuable resource and, as a consequence, are heavily rationed. Those in the Belt believe this is done purposely by the system superpowers, Earth and Mars, to control their population and keep Belters oppressed. The government leaders on Ceres are Earthers, and have tried consistently to keep the peace and convince the Belters that their water is rationed for good reason--the would-be “just nature of the present state”. Despite their best efforts, the opinions of the Belters remain unchanged, and instead their beliefs that are already held are strengthened. An example is in season 1, episode 2, when a harsh water ration is put into effect. Water is being controlled so heavily that Detective Miller is not even able to rinse shampoo out of his hair. As tensions among the people of Ceres begin to heighten, a mass media message is delivered in an attempt to quell the outrage. The government of Ceres, which is essentially Earth, attempts to convince its people that water is being rationed because shipments of ice from Saturn have been late (Ceres gets water from melting Saturn’s ice) and not as a form

of oppression. This has little to no effect on the opinion of the people, which is made clear to the audience when Detective Miller walks outside (still wiping the soap from his neck) and encounters a bouillotte dealer (portrayed by Craig Henry) who says, “they’re trying to thirst us out, Earth, Mars. The water shipment’s not late *copain**, they’re holding it back. Water means life. [...] and it’s gonna get worse” (* marks Belter dialect) (McDonough, 2015). Although the truth was that an ice shipment was late, the messages from the media were not powerful enough to change the public opinion. “Instead of disrupting society and creating unexpected social change, media generally serve as agents of the status quo, giving people more reasons to go on believing and acting as they already do” (Baran & Davis, 2014, p. 114). In the unique case of Ceres Station, the status quo is to continue on distrusting the Earth government and view them as oppressors. A disruption in society would be the sudden change in opinion that Earth is good, their rule is for the better of the Belter people, and obedience is best. That is because this is not the status quo, and this idea goes in direct conflict with the beliefs of Belter opinion leaders and their peers. A connection can again be made back to the Flint water crisis as distrust of local and state government began to spread due to their failure to properly follow environmental regulations to keep the water safe (Bernstein & Dennis, 2016). The citizens of Flint were lied to and abandoned by the very people within their own government meant to protect them (Bernstein & Dennis, 2016). With the public opinion now being to distrust the local government, media messages, especially from their own government, will do very little to change that opinion much like the Belters on Ceres.

In the final example, it will be examined how reinforcement theory can be utilized to intentionally keep the status quo, effectively controlling people by having them continue on as

usual. Jumping forward quite a bit in the timeline, in season 3, episode 4 Earth and Mars are now in all out war. In an attempt to get the upper-hand (and due to an underlying conspiracy that would require many pages to fully explain) UN Undersecretary Errinwright proposes a plan for Earth to eliminate Mars's first-strike capabilities before they can fire--essentially Mars's "planet-busting" nuclear arsenal. After deliberation, the plan is executed by U.N. Secretary General Sorrento-Gillis, however, the operation fails to eliminate all missiles at once. The result is a nuclear missile striking Earth in retaliation, resulting in nearly 2 million deaths. To the audience, and any objective viewer, it is obvious that this is the fault of the Earth government and its leaders. Up to this point, the war never reached the inner planets (Earth and Mars) and only occurred far into the reaches of space. Mars never had any intention of using "planet-busting" weaponry, and an assault on a nation's nuclear arsenal is an act of nuclear war. Earth brought war to its own doorstep. This is where *The Expanse* makes its case in regards to reinforcement theory and cognitive consistency. As an observer, the immediate thought is that the people of Earth would be full of outrage and contempt for its government, as one would expect would expect when considering such an event in real-life. This is not the case, though, as Earth and Mars are in a state of war following a century of cold-war, one that initiated from Mars declaring independence. As the media of the event began to circulate, the opinions of the people of Earth in regards to Mars were already so poor, so negative, that their outrage was directed at who they deem the enemy. Wicks (1996) referenced Joseph Klapper on this matter by saying, "individuals generally tend to expose themselves to information that is consistent with their beliefs and will even reconstruct information incorrectly to make it consistent with their beliefs" (para. 11). The people of Earth chose to interpret the information they were given in a way that

fits their view, and their view is that Mars should still be under the rule of Earth. The leaders of Earth understand this, and so following the tragic event a speech is given by Secretary General Sorrento-Gillis. Seeking to reinforce the already held opinions of the people, Sorrento-Gillis states the following,

“The first step, that most necessary and fundamental beginning, is for humanity as a whole to recognize that we are one people. [...] And that, I must tell you with the greatest sorrow, is the truth that Mars has turned away from. Given a chance to transcend our history, Mars has instead insisted on what it calls independence, which is actually no more than a justification for war and violence. They have lost sight of our shared humanity, and so they must be reminded” (Freudenthal, 2018).

The people of Earth react with resounding applause and approval. Their opinions have been reinforced and cognitive consistency has been achieved, thus returning society to its status quo. This only reasserts “that the primary influence of media is to reinforce (not change) existing attitudes and behaviors” (Baran & Davis, 2014, p. 114). The show gives a sense to the viewer just how possible it is to be controlled by one’s own opinions.

The Expanse makes a strong case in how reinforcement theory can have an effect on mass communication’s ability to influence audiences, as well as how group identity and one’s peers can be the deciding factor in forming opinions. Scenarios within the universe of *The Expanse* can be shown to have direct parallels to events occurring in real life, sending a message to viewers by allowing them to make the connections and apply the consequences the character’s face in the show to reality. In terms of how one interprets media, it is important to consider their own identity, beliefs, and what they consider the status quo. It is possible that when receiving

information from the media, as a member of the audience, they too can be incorrectly interpreting information so sustain cognitive consistency. *The Expanse* stands as reminder that reality may not always be as clear as it seems, and the very thing keeping audiences blind is their own opinions.

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