MEDIA EFFECTS

Defining Media Effects

Most people accept the idea that the media can influence people. But the degree of that influence, as well as who is most-impacted, when, how and why, have been the subjects of great debate among communication scholars for nearly a century. *Media effects* refers to the many ways individuals and society may be influenced by both news and entertainment mass media, including film, television, radio, newspapers, books, magazines, websites, video games, and music.

Searching for Evidence of the Media's Impact

Media effects have been studied by scholars in communication, psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, and education, among other fields. Many early communication models designed to explain the process of message dissemination were simple, one-way, and linear (Shannon & Weaver, 1949), positioning the medium or message as the *cause* and the behavioral, emotional, or psychological response as the *effect* (Bryant & Thompson, 2002, pp. 4–5). Modern conceptualizations, however, typically illustrate a two-way process that is more transactional or interactive in nature, in which the message or the medium affects the recipient(s), but the audience, in turn, influences and shapes the sender(s).

In the early part of the 20th century, concerns about political propaganda, manipulation by the elite and the rising popularity of electronic media led to the so-called "hypodermic needle" or "bullet" theories, which envisaged media messages as strong drugs or potent weapons that would have powerful effects on a helpless audience (Lasswell, 1927; Lippmann, 1922). However, while these theories explained some behavior, they did not account for the different responses individuals may have to the same media source. In the 1950's and 60's, empirical research began to uncover the moderating power of predispositions and peer groups, concluding that the media's impact was small – often referred to as "limited effects" theory (Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). In the 1970's and 80's, prominent scholars began to look more closely again at the media's relationship to knowledge, opinion, attitudes, and levels of violence, concluding that media effects could be significant in some cases, even if not "all powerful." Scholars also came to agree that some vulnerable groups, such as children, may be more heavily influenced by media than others (Bryant & Thompson, 2002; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McLuhan, 1964).

One great difficulty for researchers is how to measure media effects. Media consumption may affect a person's thoughts, emotions, or behaviors in ways that could be direct or indirect, immediate or delayed, fleeting or lasting. It is impossible for scientists to control for all of the mediating factors, from levels of media consumption to demographics such as age, race, and socioeconomic status to harder-to-measure variables like environment, upbringing, values and previous experience. A researcher would not be able to prove, for example, that playing a violent video game caused a person to commit a violent crime, even if an association existed between the two behaviors. Did playing the game lead to the violent behavior, or did a propensity toward violence encourage use of the game? Why didn't all individuals who played the game commit acts of violence? Traditional methods of research such as surveys, experiments, and panel studies cannot adequately solve this cause-and-effect dilemma.

Passive Versus Active Media Consumption

To understand media effects, it is first critical to consider how media are used and for what purposes. Communication scholars have traditionally fallen into two camps – functionalists, who believe the media audience tends to be in control and active, and critical/culturalists who believe the audience has less control and is therefore more passive. The balance may lie somewhere in the middle and may vary from country to country.

Rather than concerning itself with what the media does to people, **Uses and Gratifications Theory** looks at what people do with media (its functions), positing that individuals actively choose the media they use and do so with specific goals in mind (Blumler & Katz, 1974). These goals or gratifications may be different for different people and can include entertainment, information, relief of boredom or escapism, introspection or insight, finding models for behavior, seeking reinforcement for beliefs or values, serving as a basis for conversation and social interaction, helping to either identify with others or to avoid interactions with them, and so on (McQuail, 2005). Functionalists emphasize the audience's cognitions and choices.

Critical/cultural scholars believe Uses and Gratifications Theory fails to account for socio-cultural factors. First, they take issue with the assumption that open and active media choices are available to all individuals. Secondly, they believe the functionalist approach may minimize the impact of the dominant cultural or transnational power(s) in presenting "choices" that serve to reinforce existing elites. An additional concern is that if we accept the idea that people are neither coerced nor manipulated and have full control over their media consumption choices, policy makers may tend to be less attentive to and critical of media content and power (Morley, 2006).

Media Effects and Our View of the World

While discussion of media effects often centers on dramatic issues such as violence or propaganda, scholars have identified a number of more subtle potential effects:

- **Priming** – Media messages may stimulate recall of stored ideas, knowledge, opinions, or experience associated in some way with the message content. For example, a news story about the French presidential election might trigger thoughts about the French economy, memories of a trip to Paris during college, or remind a person to put brie on their grocery list (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

- **Agenda-Setting** – The media may not affect *what* people think, but may affect what they think *about,* through the choice of which topics to cover and what to emphasize. Control of the flow of information is often referred to as "gatekeeping," and is based not only on media professionals' perceptions of what is important, but also on time and space limitations (Cohen, 1963; Lippmann, 1922).

- **Framing** – Frames are the particular treatment or "spin" an individual or organization gives to a message (Gitlin, 1980). While agenda-setting is choosing *which* stories to tell, framing is choosing *how* to tell them. Frames may "promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 54).

- **Cultivation** – Over time, heavy viewers of television may come to believe that the real world is similar to the television world – heavy exposure to the media *cultivates* this belief (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980). For example, based on the proportion among television characters, a heavy user of television might estimate that more than one in ten males hold jobs in law enforcement, when in reality only 1 in 100 do (Dominick, 2005, p. 471). Researchers have been particularly concerned with cultivation's impact on racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes as well as attitudes about violence.

Related to *cultivation,* there are several other important terms in the media effects vocabulary:

- **Mainstreaming** – Heavy television viewers may lose the attitudes, beliefs or customs of their cultures in favor of those they see repetitively on television (Bryant & Thompson, 2002).

- **Disinhibitory effect** – Media's ability to desensitize people to socially unacceptable behavior, making it either acceptable or desirable. The disinhibitory effect may enable people to rationalize or justify

actions that conflict with their internal code of conduct or morality (Bryant & Thompson, 2002). Early research on this effect exposed preschoolers to a film in which adults took out their aggression on an inflatable punching bag clown ("Bobo"); children who saw the film later imitated it and also engaged in other violent behavior not seen on the film (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963).

- **Mean World Syndrome** – Media consumers may become so overwhelmed by negative portrayals of crime and violence that they may begin—either cynically or despondently—to believe the real world is a mean and harsh place (Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978; Wilkinson & Fletcher, 1995).

How the Media Change Attitudes and Opinions

Persuasion is one of the effects usually sought on purpose by the media and lies at the heart of advertising and public information campaigns. Several models have been developed to explain the process (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996):

- **Cognitive Response Theory** argues that in order to experience attitude change a person receiving a persuasive message must *think* about the message, and their thoughts about it are more important than the message itself.

- **The Elaboration Likelihood Model** further explains that this thinking or cognitive processing can either happen centrally and consciously, or peripherally and subconsciously. Central processing of a message takes far more effort for the recipient and has been shown to have longer-lasting effects, while peripheral processing requires little effort and may have more fleeting results. Being persuaded about a political issue covered in the news would likely require more central processing than viewing a soft drink ad that persuades viewers by showing happy people drinking the product. Factors that increase the likelihood of central processing include personal relevance, likeability, credibility of attractiveness of the source, the number of arguments used and the number of people who seem to agree with them. Even the simple use of the word "you" rather than the third person can have a significant impact on the persuasiveness of a message by making it seem more relevant (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1989).

- Persuading people to adopt a new idea or technology typically follows a predictable pattern. According to the **Diffusion of Innovation Theory,** people fall into one of five groups: innovators (2.5%), early adopters (13.5%), early majority (34%), late majority (34%), and the laggards (16%). Often the media first spreads the word about a new idea, but ever-widening interpersonal networks persuade individuals to make the change. Over time, family, friends, social leaders, peers and the community at large adopt the innovation. If it is something the individual feels confident in doing—referred to as self-efficacy—that does not conflict with that individual's deeply held values, they join one of the adoption groups. Finally, adoption of the innovation reaches a critical mass (Rogers, 2003 [1962]).

Negative Outcomes Often Attributed to Media Exposure

Concerns about exposure to violence and sexual content often dominate discussion of media effects, but a key challenge for researchers is determining what constitutes violence and sexual content. For example: Must violence include physical contact or could it be verbal? Is a news report about violence the same as seeing the incident in a film? Is cartoon violence the same as other violence? In some studies, as many as 80% of U.S. network programs contained violent content and as many as 60% of the characters were involved. Measuring the effects of media violence can also be difficult: researchers have identified catharsis, arousal, disinhibition, imitation, and desensitization as possible outcomes (Bryant & Thompson, 2002), but proving a causal relationship is still an elusive goal.

While cultural standards of inappropriate sexual content differ greatly, researchers have shown that repeated exposure to explicit sex may decrease an individual's fulfillment with real life partners or family situations (Zillmann & Bryant, 1988a, , 1988b), shift a person's attitudes about morality, decrease inhibi-

tions, leading to risky or violent sexual behavior (Court, 1984), and generally cause individuals to demonstrate greater aggression (Zillmann, 1978). The most important predictor is the **prevailing tone**, such as whether the scene is treated seriously or trivially, has artistic value or intent, and how necessary the sex scene is to the plot and the context of viewing (Harris, 1994).

Media may also have the negative impact of promoting cultural, racial or gender biases, either through stereotyping roles and behaviors or the under- or over-representation of minority characters. However, some research has also shown that by familiarizing individuals with groups other than themselves, the media may also provide positive learning opportunities that help overcome stereotypes and prejudices (Bryant & Thompson, 2002).

Learning from Media

While the media are often criticized for their harmful effects, media can also be a positive avenue for learning and persuasion. Historically, the influence of publications such as Harriett Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* has changed the way people view the world. Numerous studies from around the world have shown the positive effects programming such as "Sesame Street" can have on children's cognitive and social skills. And every day, public health and safety campaigns save lives.

Some of the factors shown to be associated with effective mass media campaigns include (Bryant & Thompson, 2002):

- Reasonable goals for the campaign

- Understanding the audience's habits, attitudes, and other characteristics

- Selecting the correct media for the audience and the issue (for example, using broadcast media for a target audience with low literacy rates)

- Using a mix of media when possible

- Emphasizing the benefits of the behavior change

- Modeling the desired behavior

- Increasing the audience's self-efficacy through education

- Continual research, evaluation, and modification before and during the campaign, if necessary

Digital Media Effects

Studies on the effect of new media technologies are only just beginning to emerge, but here are some of the most important findings and/or developments (Bryant & Thompson, 2002):

- Media consumers are no longer simply an "audience," but are now "users" – heralding a new era of active consumption

- Communication and media impact are now multi-directional; two-way sender-receiver models are too linear and orderly to represent these interactions

- While some scholars have found high levels of Internet usage correlate with higher levels of loneliness, anxiety and depression, there may also be social benefits for shy or shut-in individuals who go online

- Media fragmentation (the development of many highly-specialized media outlets) makes targeting audiences easier, but may also make mass communication more challenging

- The increased number of media choices may expose children to adult material before they are prepared for it

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CommGAP is funded through a multi-donor trust fund. The founding donor of this trust fund is the UK's Department for International Development (DFID).

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