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# Media Effects in Context

Brian O'Neill

*Dublin Institute of Technology*, [brian.oneill@dit.ie](mailto:brian.oneill@dit.ie)

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## **Media Effects in Context**

**Brian O'Neill**

### **<h1> Introduction**

The media effects tradition of research occupies a hugely influential and dominant role within mainstream communications research. It is unquestionably the longest running tradition within the field of audience studies, spanning nearly its entire history, yet it continues to divide opinion, both methodologically and with regard to its fundamental approach towards the study of media audiences. Its influence extends well beyond the academy, and the powerful influence exerted by its research agenda on public and political understanding of the impact of media is perhaps one of its most significant achievements. The body of research is also voluminous and beyond the scope of any one review for a serious critical appraisal. The media effects research tradition has been extensively reviewed in the literature, and a number of excellent surveys of the field exist (McQuail 1983; Livingstone 1996; McDonald 2004). Accordingly, this chapter confines itself to a contextual discussion of effects research from the point of view of the audience researcher, exploring the diversity of the tradition, and assessing its contribution to an understanding of audience engagement and media-audience relationships.

The entire study of mass communication, according to Denis McQuail, is based on the premise that there are effects from the media' though what precisely these effects are and the means by which they can be identified and measured has been the subject of

extensive debate (McQuail 1983: 175). The foundational position given to the study of effects is present in Lasswell's famous formulation of communications as the study of 'Who says what to whom in which channel and to what *effect*?' (Lasswell 1948). Katz (1980) characterised the history of communications theory as an oscillation between active and passive audiences, between minimal or powerful effects. Later, Lowery and DeFleur (1995) proposed the pre-eminent question of communications research as: 'What do mass communications actually do to us, both individually and collectively?' Their landmark collection, *Milestones in Mass Communication Research: Media Effects*, maps the development of research from the 1920s on, consolidating a tradition and delineating its key historical parameters. At the same time, effects research findings are frequently contested in quite fundamental ways. For long disparagingly referred to as the 'dominant paradigm' (Gitlin 1978), its methods and hypotheses have been subject to extensive critique (Gauntlett 1998; Barker and Petley 2001) and as a tradition it is often associated with a narrow and conservative approach to communications research.

This chapter approaches the subject of effects research somewhat differently. It argues that knowledge of the effects research tradition is important for audience researchers for two main reasons. Firstly, effects research provides a valuable insight into the historical development of central research questions about audiences and media in a way not afforded by any other branch of communications study. As various surveys of the field attest, the history of effects research coincides to a great extent with the history of the discipline of mass communication and media theory, in particular as it became

institutionalized in North America (Schramm 1997). As such, the history of media effects research is important not only for the fact that it consists of an extraordinary range of empirical and theoretical output on all dimensions of media-audience relations, but that it also constitutes a social history of thinking about the media and its impact on society from the early twentieth century to the present. For all audience researchers such knowledge is indispensable to formulating a historically informed approach to media development and audience engagement. A second reason for supporting a wider understanding of the effects tradition is that it provides an insight into how media research and its dissemination can be socially relevant and meaningful. Again, irrespective of the research approach involved, greater accessibility to and public applicability of research findings is centrally important to the research endeavour as a whole. The following discussion, therefore, places the ongoing relevance of effects research in the context of public discourses – popular, political, or policy-oriented – concerning the pervasive impact of media in everyday social processes. This is illustrated through a discussion of thematic issues in media effects research, principally the rise of new media forms and their impact on distinct audience groups such as children and young people. Media effects play a crucial role in emerging debates concerning media literacy and regulation of the new media environment, and in this context audience researchers need to be attuned to the methodological limits and possibilities of new knowledge creation in this tradition.

## <h1> Effects Research in Historical Context

‘Effects research’ is itself a shorthand for research consisting predominantly of

quantitative empirical investigation of measurable behavioural attributes, usually conducted on a large scale, and based on methodological approaches drawn from the physical sciences. Yet, effects studies have also come to characterise an entire domain of communication research which is resolutely empirical, broadly quantitative in nature, interdisciplinary, and with a ‘conspicuous absence of theory’ (Bryant and Cummins 2007: 2). Its combined output over some 70 years of communication scholarship has been widely represented in the form of a historical narrative of the evolution of the discipline as a whole.

## <h2> The received history

Historical perspectives on the foundation and development of communications research have become an important feature of the literature of effects studies, ranging from the ‘natural history’ of media effects research (McQuail 1983), the ‘founding fathers’ mythology (Berelson 1959; Schramm 1997), the ‘milestones’ in the development of the discipline (Lowery and DeFleur 1995), and the more historiographic enquiry in Dennis and Wartella (1996). To some extent, this debate has been confined to the United States and to scholarly discussion within journals and communication departments in North American institutions where questions of curriculum and disciplinary boundary division have been to the fore. It is also, however, despite its often exclusively American frame of reference, a profoundly international issue given the nature of communication research and the global reach of the methodological and theoretical issues involved.

The outlines of this received history typically describe the effects tradition as falling into three distinct historical phases, each coinciding with significant periods of development in mass media communication and representing a paradigm shift in media-audience relations. The first phase in the decades following World War I was the period of perceived powerful media effects illustrated through the widespread use of propaganda in mass society, increasingly sophisticated forms of advertising and public relations, and concern about the lowering of cultural standards through cheapened forms of mass cultural production. The second phase is marked by the beginnings of more formal, scientific investigation of media audiences marked by the establishment of noted university-based research centres. It articulates a view of 'limited' or 'minimal' effects in that fears of brainwashing were seen to be exaggerated, and that opinion-formation was a complex social process in which the media played a constitutive but not determining role (Klapper 1960). A third phase from the 1960s on marks a return to a concept of more powerful mass media and continues to the present dealing with issues of the effects of media violence, functions of the media in socialisation, diffusion and in ideological formation (McQuail 1983: 178). As Carey and others have noted (Rowland 1982; Carey 1996: 24), while there is some truth in the above narratives as a standard history, it is also misleading in a number of important ways, excluding some elements from the narrative. The following discussion, however, focuses less on the completeness of the narrative than on the emergent thinking about the nature of audience experience and how it might be studied.

## <h2> Powerful media effects

Early thinking about the impact of mass media on society is represented in the conventional history by the prevailing view of powerful media, exercising direct, immediate and powerful effects upon relatively powerless and passive audiences. Variousy described as the ‘magic bullet’, ‘stimulus-response’, or ‘hypodermic needle’ model of media effects, it assumed the mass media were so powerful that they could ‘inject’ their messages into the audience, or that advertising messages could be precisely targeted at audiences like a magic bullet. While the accuracy of this representation is disputed (Dennis and Wartella 1996: 169), it is widely understood that the then ‘new’ mass media of communication were seen to have extraordinary powers of persuasion and ideological control on seemingly passive and powerless audiences. Katz and Lazarsfeld, writing in 1955 described this first phase as follows:

“The image of the mass communication process entertained by researchers had been, firstly, one of ‘atomistic mass’ of millions of readers, listeners and movie-goers, prepared to receive the message; and secondly ... every Message was conceived of as a direct and powerful stimulus to action which would elicit immediate response”. (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955: 16)

The ‘powerful media’ effects approach was supported conceptually by mass society theory, imputing the rise of alienating social structures to large scale industrialisation, the division of labour, urbanization, centralization of decision making, and growth of

mass political movements all supported by the rise of sophisticated communications systems (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1982). In a similar vein, the Frankfurt School critique of the culture industry – Adorno’s excoriating critiques of popular music, for instance – portrayed audiences as helpless dupes of industrialized cultural production designed to engender passivity and compliance to a repressive economic regime (Adorno 2001).

The effects of propaganda as studied by the political scientist, Harold Lasswell, to whom the hypodermic needle model of media influence is attributed, are a pivotal element of the powerful media effects paradigm. Lasswell’s study of propaganda techniques during the First World War (Lasswell 1971) provided some of the first modern scientific research on mass persuasion, a central feature of which was the manipulation of a symbol’s multiple associations to engender desired effects, whether “to mobilize hatred against the enemy, to preserve the friendship of allies, to preserve the friendship and, if possible, to procure the co-operation of neutrals and to demoralize the enemy” (Lasswell 1971: 195). The study of propaganda therefore became an investigation of these manipulation efforts. Mass persuasion and the use of psychological, stimulus-response techniques in communication coincided likewise with the rise of advertising as an industry and modern public relations techniques. Mass communication techniques of the inter-war period, whether it was the use of radio and mass media during the Nazi era, Lenin’s use of film as a promotional tool following the Bolshevik revolution, or the use of propaganda techniques to educate the public for democracy as advocated by John Grierson, stemmed from the belief that mass media



had an overwhelming influence on behavioural and attitudinal change. Lasswell's account of the 'garrison state', an imagined future where skilled communicators manipulating information would be immensely powerful, was a further expression of this vision. Conceived again during the dark era of World War II, he argued that experts in technology and symbolic manipulation would in the future be key elements of the apparatus of state-sponsored violence. Accordingly, the role of communication and political science is to identify policy that will avoid the least desirable features of elite-ruled states (Schramm 1997: 38).

While claims for powerful media effects were rarely substantiated by empirical research, a number of studies did emerge to test the approach. The now infamous 1938 broadcast of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* and the attending audience panic stands as the iconic example of the 'powerful media' paradigm. Hadley Cantril, a psychologist then based at Princeton University, used the opportunity to conduct an investigation of the 'mass panic' experienced during and after the broadcast. In collecting audience accounts in the immediate aftermath, he sought to place the events of that night into the context of the larger political and social upheavals of the times (Cantril 1940). While the scale of the panic is known to have been exaggerated (Heyer 2005), Cantril was interested in exploring the variability of listeners' experiences, factors that may have inhibited critical ability for some, and the contradictory accounts, pointing towards how the same information heard by individual listeners was processed in very different ways. Cantril's claim was that neither educational level, nor the circumstances in which the broadcast was heard, were sufficient to explain the

susceptibility to suggestion or the different ‘standards of judgement’ displayed by individuals (Cantril 1940: 68). Rather, he argued that a combination of psychological personality traits – self-confidence, fatalism, or deep religious belief – predisposed individuals to uncritically believe what they were hearing.

Cantril and Allport’s earlier study, *The Psychology of Radio*, published in 1935, was one of the first comprehensive treatments of radio and its effects. Describing the new ‘mental world’ created by radio, a medium that in less than a generation had come to dominate popular entertainment, they developed a systematic behavioural study of radio listening in response to growing concerns about its influence. The most important questions of radio listening, they argued were psychological ones: why do people like to listen for hours on end, what do they like to hear, how much do they understand, what is the most effective way to persuade listeners, are listeners influenced more by what they hear, what they read or what they see on the screen? The clear assumption was that radio had effects. As a medium of communication, ‘it was pre-eminent as a means of social control and epochal in its influence on the mental horizons of men’ (Cantril and Allport 1935: vii). Yet, at the same time, they argued, the purpose of research should be a guide to better regulation and control to ensure radio achieved its greatest social usefulness.

Concern about the negative effects of powerful new media was also expressed in a series of studies about the rise of cinema as a form of mass entertainment. The so-

called Payne Fund studies conducted between 1928 and 1933, adopting a similar social psychological approach, consisted of a series of studies of potential effects of motion pictures particularly on children. Identifying patterns of learned behaviour, researchers documented effects including imitation of both positive and negative role models, and the association of high cinema attendance with what were perceived as declining morals and delinquent behaviour. Concluding that there was no simple cause and effect relationship, the research pointed towards a reciprocal relationship in that high attendance cinema was thought to have negative effects though those attracted were also predisposed by virtue of existing social problems. Despite methodological and theoretical shortcomings, the significance of such research was one of documenting a process of learning that takes place in media consumption and that what is learned has an impact on people's lives (McDonald 2004: 186).

Studies from the era of the powerful effects paradigm retain an intrinsic interest as a social history of thinking about the then 'new media' in a social context. Why the media were accorded such powerful and persuasive influence in this particular historical juncture has been explained in a number of different ways. For one, the rise of new media systems, including the press, radio broadcasting and cinema, applied new technologies and techniques to reach mass audiences on an unprecedented scale (Gurevitch, Bennett et al. 1990: 12). Secondly, it was also the case that the social context in which mass communications technologies flourished was one of significant upheaval, extensive urbanization and industrialization in which individuals appeared to be less rooted, and more open to manipulation and persuasion. Media effects studies,

more generally then, particularly in this North American context, can be seen to reflect a broader consideration of the impact of mass communication systems on the polity and political landscape of early twentieth century society. A diverse range of theorists such as Cooley, Lippman, Dewey and Lasswell, all associated with pioneering political and social thought in the immediate post-war period of the 1920s, were concerned with the function and impact of communications in democracy and how new communications systems were becoming increasingly constitutive of social and political life. Walter Lippmann's highly influential *Public Opinion* (1922), for instance, raised concern about the dangers arising from the 'manufacture of consent' through mass communication and journalistic processes of selection and interpretation, and yet believed the art of persuasion that depended on powerful media influence was necessary to a functioning democracy. Drawing on his insights about propaganda techniques, Lasswell (1971) and other researchers were convinced that communications research required the rigour and discipline of scientific behaviouristic models:

"Modern public opinion and communications research developed in response to a remarkable convergence of favorable conditions. The social sciences were in a spasm of inferiority when they compared themselves with their brothers, sisters, and cousins in the physical and biological sciences. Many of the leading figures were convinced that, unless the specialists on society were able to 'quantify' their propositions, they were doomed to the permanent status of second class citizens in the universe of secular knowledge" (in Schramm 1997: 28).

While powerful, direct and unmediated effects of the kind assumed in this first conceptual formation are often exaggerated, at least in their historical retelling, an important emphasis which is clearly consolidated in the effects paradigm as a whole is the emphasis on message-based studies, that is, an approach which moves from analysis of the content of messages to their effects on audiences. This is an approach which Morley later contrasted with audience-based studies that focus on the ‘social characteristics, environment and, subsequently, needs which audiences derived from, or brought to the message’ (Morley 1992: 62). The tension between these approaches becomes apparent in the next phase of effects research.

## <h2>Limited effects

Against the view that powerful media induce effects on unsuspecting audience members, research in the second phase of communications research lent support for a much more nuanced model of influence, the so-called ‘limited effects’ or ‘indirect effects’ paradigm that dominated research from the 1940s to the 1960s. Klapper (1960), summarising the limited effects position, and claiming that media influence had hitherto been exaggerated, argued as follows: “Mass communication ordinarily does not serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions among and through a nexus of mediating factors and influences” through interpersonal communication, social context and influence of opinion leaders (in Perse 2001: 25). The central contribution to the development of the limited effects perspective was the work of Paul Lazarsfeld at the Bureau for Applied Social Research at Columbia University, encompassing groundbreaking studies into patterns of radio listening and

subsequently media influence in election campaigns, culminating in Katz and Lazarsfeld's landmark *Personal Influence* (1955).

Lazarsfeld is a towering figure in the history of communications research, bridging the European roots of social research with experience of North American media systems. His organisational influence contributed to the consolidation of academy-based research on institutional and media audiences processes (Cole 2004). His legacy is an extraordinary one and occupies a pivotal position in the development of industry techniques of research, as well as incorporating industry and government interests in the formulation of its research agenda (Rowland 1982: 392). A Rockefeller Foundation grant in 1937 initiated the first of a series of large-scale studies of the social effects of radio, examining audiences, radio programming and preferences of radio listeners, the purpose of which was to study 'what radio means in the lives of the listeners'. Research methods employed included secondary data analysis, content analysis, and use of the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer, the device developed with Frank Stanton of CBS for recording the instantaneous likes and dislikes of 'experimental' audiences. Subsequent large-scale studies of the effects of newspapers, magazines, radio, and motion pictures on society, effectively created the field of mass communications research, focussed detailed attention on why messages are introduced into the media and why people attend to them - that is, what gratifications or rewards people get from the media and what functions the media serve in their lives. Among Lazarsfeld's major accomplishments and contributions to the field were the use of sophisticated survey techniques in audience research, at a time when no formal recording of listening was

being undertaken, and extending the reach of the 'opinion poll' to include measurement of the impact of radio upon attitudes. Further, the extensive range of social topics and issues studied – including audience reports and campaign studies – set the agenda for a whole generation of communications scholars in the post-war period.

This sociologically-oriented study of media effects stands in contrast to a different tradition centred around the social psychology of Carl Hovland whose experimental approach to studying media effects became an alternative reference point for the discipline. Hovland's study of the effects of social communication on attitudes, beliefs, and concepts, initially at the U.S. War Department and subsequently at Yale, laid the foundation for numerous studies of persuasion and communication effectiveness.

Between 1942 and 1945, Hovland studied the effectiveness of military training films and information programmes, and especially audience resistance to persuasive communications and methods of overcoming it. This work formed the basis of his influential, *Experiments on Mass Communication* (Hovland, Lumsdaine et al. 1949).

Through controlled field experiments, they assessed differences between channels of communication and sought to generalize effects across media, including motion pictures, radio and newspapers. A widely cited experiment on opinion change tested the effects of a one-sided versus a two-sided presentation of a controversial issue. The results contradicted contentions of totalitarian propagandists who claimed that a communication that presents only one side of the issue will generally be more successful than one that mentions the opposing side of the argument. Following World War II, Hovland developed his research on attitudes further by exploring their capacity

to influence the effectiveness of persuasive communication, selecting issues such as the influence or 'sleeper effect' of the communicator's prestige and the ways prestige effects disappear over time (Hovland, Janis et al. 1953).

However, it was Katz and Lazarsfeld's *Personal Influence* (1955) that did most to introduce and consolidate the new paradigm of 'limited' media effects. Reappraising its significance some 50 years later, Simonson writes: '*Personal Influence* was perhaps the most influential book in mass communication research of the postwar era, and it remains a signal text with historic significance and ongoing reverberations...more than any other single work, it solidified what came to be known as the dominant paradigm in the field' (Simonson 2006). The field study of media influence in the mid-Western community of Decatur, Illinois questioned the ability of radio and print media to directly influence important political or consumer decisions and argued that the media had in fact limited persuasive power. What little influence media did possess operated through leaders in the community who, in turn, influenced their followers. Katz and Lazarsfeld proposed that media's effects are diffused through 'opinion leaders' who explain and diffuse media content to others. Thus, the two-step flow theory of the media's influence arose. This was an approach that placed a new emphasis on human agency in the process of media effects. It argued that between media and audiences lay a series of intervening variables, including selectivity on the part of the audience, on the basis of pre-existing opinions and preferences, as well as interpersonal and small group relations whereby messages are filtered through social networks according to social norms. The two-step flow model of communication, introduced by Katz and



Lazarsfeld, claimed that the impact of the media was limited by key influencers within social networks who mediated the flow of information from media sources. The main impact of the media was thus more likely to be one of reinforcement than direct influence and as a result a research agenda with a focus on the part played by people in the study of mass media effects was instituted.

Reflecting on this work some fifty years later, Katz commented that this research agenda supplanted the 'powerful media' and 'mass persuasion' concerns associated with early radio, with the enduring research question of 'What do people do with the media?' (Katz 2006: xviii), a question shared by diverse approaches to audience study including uses and gratifications research, active audience theory and reception studies. The 'powerful media' effects paradigm, according to Katz, suggested that the audience was undifferentiated, that reception was simultaneous, and otherwise unmediated. In the limited effects model, this was replaced by an understanding that audiences are selective, that they consume media over time, and reception happens in the context of mediating social groups and networks. In this way, the study of media effects became part of a broader sociological investigation of decision making and diffusion of ideas in which the media played an integral though not dominant role. Rescuing the study of effects from a purely psychologistic approach to messages and responses, the emphasis became one of media in a societal context, raising questions of the relationship between the media system and the social system, and how media influence interacts with the persuasive power of interpersonal influence in the transmission of ideas at both the individual level of decision making and at the collective level of diffusion of ideas.

## <h2> A return to powerful effects

There was a contention in the early 1960s that the field of mass communication effects research had effectively run its course and that the key contributions of Lasswell's political-historical and sample-survey research into media effects, Lewin's studies of small group communication, and Hovland's psychological analysis of messages and their effects, had solved the principal issues in effects research (Shafer 1961: 197). In a wide-ranging debate on the future of the field, Berelson famously predicted that the field of communications effects was 'withering away' and that research would revert to more important matters of social and public welfare (Berelson 1959). For Schramm and others in the mainstream tradition, the achievement of limited effects studies was founded upon on 'a more realistic concept of the audience' and a revised notion of the relationship between mass and interpersonal communication (Schramm and Roberts 1971). The resulting research agenda involved programmatic studies of audiences' social knowledge alongside limited and focused research on public information campaigns, and the development of eclectic and varied modeling of the role persuasive messages play in changing people's attitudes or behaviors. This shift coincided with Merton's preference for middle-range theory over grand social theory (Merton 1967) and a generally functionalist emphasis in social research that balanced good and bad effects in a static, value-neutral way within the overall social system (Baran and Davis 2006: 178). Yet, the dominance enjoyed by the 'limited effects' model stood in marked contrast to the rise of dynamic and powerful media institutions and posed obvious dilemmas for researchers and media observers. Wartella framed the dilemma as

follows: “How could media researchers demonstrate the seemingly obvious power of the mass media, in the face of the equally well-demonstrated obstinate audience?” (Wartella and Middlestadt 1991: 209). One dimension of a more powerful media effects paradigm was represented by the work of McCombs and Shaw (1972) who, in the context of research into political communication and voting behaviour, advanced their agenda setting hypothesis of media influence. In the context of United States presidential election campaigns in 1968 and 1972, they examined the role played by newspaper and broadcast journalists and editors in shaping political reality for their readers and viewers. Through the information sources available to them, audiences learn not only about a given issue in a political campaign but also, according to McCombs and Shaw, how much importance to attach to that issue based on the prominence given to it by the media. In this way, the media’s re-presentation of what politicians say during an election may well set the agenda for the campaign by determining what it considers of most importance. As a central issue on research into the relationship between media and society, focussing on the cognitive rather than the behavioural aspects of media effects, agenda setting research has maintained an important position in communications and uniquely one that has arisen from within the media specialisation of journalism rather than from mainstream disciplinary fields like sociology or psychology (Lowery and DeFleur 1995: 288).

The return to a research agenda based on a more powerful and direct version of media effects is largely associated with the changed media environment of the 1960s when renewed public concern about the impact of television and its apparent negative social

influence arose. The rapid and widespread adoption of television in the middle part of the twentieth century was by any standards extraordinary: between 1950 and 1965, television ownership in the U.S. had gone from just 9% of homes to 92.6% (Perse 2001: 21). Television had become the dominant medium, replacing radio listening, cinema attendance and newspapers as the most consumed and trusted medium. In this context, the question was whether selective exposure was feasible in such a television-saturated media environment. The influence of television was studied and debated on competing grounds and with contrasting approaches. For example, one of the first major studies of television in a North American context was an investigation of the impact of the new medium on the lives of children. Schramm, Lyle and Parker's *Television in the Lives of Our Children* consisted of a series of studies from 1958 to 1960, focusing on the functions of television in the lives of children rather than its direct effects, attempting to move away from the idea of 'what television does to children' towards a concept of 'what children do with television'. Thus, they sought to document television's role and function in children's everyday lives, examining data on how and when television was viewed, how it acted as source of both entertainment and information, as well as providing social utility as an event in itself. Responding to widespread popular concerns about the content of television and its possible effects on children, they concluded:

For *some* children, under *some* conditions, *some* television is harmful. For *other* children under the same conditions, or for the same children under *other* conditions it may be beneficial. For *most* children, under *most* conditions, most television is

probably neither harmful more particularly beneficial. (Schramm, Lyle et al. 1961: 13)

In Lowery and DeFleur's reading of the study, the implied or implicit theory (of the middle range) was that television as a medium did not have an overly negative impact on the world of childhood, and that responsible effective parenting provided the required safe social context for television consumption (Lowery and DeFleur 1995: 263). Yet at the same time, Schramm's colleague at Stanford, the psychologist Albert Bandura, was carrying out the now classic experiments 'Bobo doll' experiments to investigate how imitation and social learning might affect aggressive behaviour in children. The laboratory-based experiments suggested that children, boys in particular, were encouraged to imitate aggressive behaviour by viewing role models both in real life and through television. The important question was therefore whether such role models' use of violence was depicted in terms that rewarded or punished the use of violence.

Studies of television and violence have been of central importance within the tradition of media effects. Landmark studies in the 1960s laid the foundations for ongoing empirical investigation into the wide-ranging issues of how media content impacts on society in both direct and indirect ways. The deep divisions of American society during that decade and the media's reflection of a turbulent and troubled period found expression in a series of government-funded studies designed to investigate the role of the media in public affairs more generally, but especially its role in contributing to the

experience of violence and disorder in everyday life (Lowery and DeFleur 1995; Ball-Rokeach 2001). The 1968-69 *Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence*, the so-called Eisenhower Commission, contained an extensive review of research of how audiences are affected by portrayals of violence in the mass media and incorporated a detailed content analysis of mediated violence as well as surveys of public attitudes towards violence as experienced in the real world and through television. The report concluded that TV portrayals of violence had short term effects and were ‘one major contributory factor which must be considered in attempts to explain the many forms of violent behaviour that mark American society today’ (Baker and Ball 1969: 375) and that more generally ‘Exposure to mass media portrayals of violence over a long period of time socializes audiences into the norms, attitudes, and values for violence contained in those portrayals’ (p.376). This, it was noted, was the first time a government inquiry had come off the fence on the media and violence debate and supported a view of television as a potent effects agent (Ball-Rokeach 2001: 11).

The *Violence and the Media* Task Force report laid the foundations for ongoing research and public debate throughout the 1970s interrogating television and its regulation, on the basis of the supposed long term socialisation effects of mediated representations of violence and anti-social behaviour. The Task Force report was quickly followed by a further presidential commission in 1972 of a series of individual studies contained in the Surgeon General’s Report, *Television and Social Behaviour* (Comstock and Rubinstein 1972) and *Television and Growing Up* (Surgeon General

1972), with follow-up studies ten years later (Pearl, Bouthilet et al. 1982). Such studies brought together extensive discussion and evidence of media violence and contributed to a growing consensus among academics and policymakers on the role played by television violence in antisocial behaviour. This was accompanied by further research on the effects of pornography and sexual violence in the media, leading to the conclusion that prolonged exposure to sexual violence also had undesirable effects, including 'emotion desensitization to violence and its victims' (Ball-Rokeach 2001: 13). These research efforts culminated in calls for greater levels of media regulation in the public interest and for media institutions to intervene in positive ways to solve the social problems identified.

An overview of the social cognitive theory of mediated violence was summarised by Bandura in 1994 when he argued that audiences 'acquire lasting attitudes, emotional reactions, and behavioural proclivities towards persons, places, or things that have been associated with modelled emotional experiences' (Bandura 1994: 75). This is not, however, a reinvention of powerful effects and passive audiences; on the contrary, embedded within contemporary approaches to the study of mediated violence or harmful content across diverse media is a shared concept of active viewing and reading in which audiences actively and consciously work to understand content (Baran and Davis 2006: 190). While audience activity is an ongoing and shared emphasis across diverse research traditions, in the context of models of social learning and social cognition, the research subject focuses on the empirical testing of effects on individual audience members and the relationship between media content and acquired behaviours

and attitudes. In such relationships, the question arises as to whether the level of active cognitive engagement of audiences is sufficient to overcome the reactive and passive role induced by exceptionally powerful media influence. This sense of a return to powerful media effects is a familiar feature of some recent studies of new media, particularly those focussing on children's use of new media, gaming technologies and the internet, many of which replicate past research design with different media in a newer technological setting (McDonald 2004).

## <h1> Children and Media Effects

Current research concerning media effects on vulnerable subjects reflects reflects an ongoing public interest on the impact of media and significance of emergent patterns of media consumption and underlines an important illustration of the use of research findings in contributing to and shaping public opinion. Reflecting on the sensitive subject of violent media content, Gentile (2003) offers this summary of some 40 years of research in the field: "A clear and consistent pattern has emerged from over decades of research on the effects of media violence. It is therefore surprising that people still resist the idea that media violence has negative effects" (p. ix). Now classic texts such as Postman (1994) and Elkind (1998) lament the erosion of the distinction between childhood and adulthood brought about by media. Drawing on well established patterns of effects research, evidence is marshaled to support the view that new media and ICTs – whether this means mobile phones, video games consoles, internet use, or new modes of communication through social networking – have a negative impact on family life, on health and lifestyle, on communication, creativity and imagination,



learning, and social development. Some researchers suggest the impact of new media forms video game effects should theoretically be stronger given their interactive and immersive nature (Dill and Dill 1998).

In reality, the research evidence may be more mixed (Sherry 2007) and there are many contrasting and contradictory examples in the literature on topics linking different aspects of children's lives – academic performance, independent mobility, creative expression, aggressive behaviour, and so on – to media use. Barker and Petley (2001) suggest that the claims about the 'possible effects of violent content' are mischievous while Gauntlett (1998) argues that it is a 'circuitous and theoretically undernourished line of enquiry'. Cumberbatch (2004) concludes that 'the real puzzle is that anyone looking at the research evidence in this field could draw any conclusions about the pattern'. Clearly, the role that violence plays in media entertainment and the question of why viewers are drawn to it is a complex, multilayered one that needs to be studied in context.

Children's emotional responses to television, video or computer games and their effects on children's imagination are another important theme in effects studies. Asking whether screen-based media stimulate or constrain children's imaginative responses, their story-making and their ability to create imaginary play worlds, Belton (2001) argues that the ubiquity and ease of access to television and screen content does have implications for the development of children's imaginative capacity by constantly demanding responses to external agendas. Others have argued, however, that new media particularly educational applications using adventure or fantasy role-playing games can foster imagination and encourage children's creative capacities though the

research is incomplete and inconclusive (Valkenburg and Cantor 2001).

An enduring image of the addictive or obsessive dangers posed by new media technology and its effects is that of the *otaku*, the Japanese term for the technology-obsessed ‘stay at home tribe’, typically young males who spend most of their days and nights at home at their computers, and whose virtual, online relationships are more real to them than face to face ones. Building on the notion of virtual reality and cyberculture as a distinct cultural formation, the *otaku* have been described as:

‘This subculture of kids [trading] information, trivia and corporate passwords in their bedrooms via modem while their parents downstairs think they are studying. But they have abandoned schoolwork, sometimes becoming so immersed in the world of computer networks, cracking corporate security codes and analysing algorithms that they can never come back’ (Tobin 1998).

An underlying concern of effects research in relation to children’s media culture, echoing much public concern, is the idea that the media act as a surrogate parent by virtue of the fact that children tend to spend more time each week with media than they do with their parents or teachers. Illustrating how children may be presented with adult images of sex, commercialism, and violence, Steyer (2003) is one of a number of recent texts aimed at educating parents about children’s media experiences and the need to

consider a balanced and 'healthy' media diet. There is widespread concern about the large scale commercial interests involved in the production of toys and their marketing to children. Linn (2004) likens marketing and merchandising to children to the hostile takeover of childhood, underpinned by the resources of a \$15 billion global industry, a view echoed in Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997) criticizing what they call the corporate construction of childhood. Similarly, Kinder (1991) argues that the domination of the children's toy market by multinational corporations with cross media interests represents a dangerous colonization of children, indoctrinating them in the values of consumerism and instilling an illusory sense of empowerment. The underlying theme of the widespread suspicion surrounding the children's marketing industry is that children are seen as helpless victims and that without their consent or that of their parents, the experience of childhood has been transformed into an experience of prefabricated consumerism.

Many researchers in the area of children's media have tended to reject such accounts as giving too little credit to children's critical autonomy or their ability to actively negotiate meaning with the symbolic resources of contemporary culture. Fleming (1996), for example, has argued that toys, branded and otherwise, help children make sense of their worlds and are essential to their development. Unquestionably, toys are increasingly products of a global consumer culture but, he suggests, in children's hands have the capacity to escape the stereotypes of gender and power which they sometimes apparently reproduce. Similarly, Dyson's study of children's story making using superheroes and media characters suggests that these act are a prism in which images of

power and of gender are translated into the child's world, rendering it more complex but helping them deal with the contradictory pressures of growing up in a multicultural society (Dyson 1997). However, what such research does point to is the extensive nature of public engagement in the topic beyond the actual research community, and the important role that may be played by research outcomes in formulating and influencing public policy in the media environment. Seiter (1999) comments how 'lay theories of media effects' play a major role in how parents negotiate and seek to maintain a particular relationship with the broader media environment, echoed by Hoover et al's (2004) study of families' sense of media identity and based on derived notions of media effects discourse and normative positions on contemporary media culture, ranging from the oppositional to fully integrationist.

## <h1> Conclusion: The Uses of Effects Research

Despite the obvious potential for scholarly contribution to public debate, on the whole media effect researchers resist this type of engagement. A longstanding critique of the effects paradigm is that it reinforces a functionalist approach, vigorously maintaining its methodological adherence to quantitative surveying and measurement, and retaining an individualistic rather than societal focus. Effects research has always laboured under the criticism of maintaining an 'administrative' research agenda (Lazarsfeld 1941), reflecting the interests and power structures of the media that it purports to survey and contributing, even unwittingly, to the rational control of the media over individuals. Its concern for short term, predictive media effects, defined and produced in accordance with the priorities of media industries, lacks, according to Gitlin's classic

critique (1978), a structural perspective on the media's role in society and reduces power to discrete behavioural shifts and attitude changes. As the media become ever more pervasive in everyday life, so the dominant paradigm stresses pluralism and variability, 'the recalcitrance of audiences, their resistance to media generated messages, and not their dependency, their acquiescence, their gullibility' (Gitlin 1978: 205). Rowland's 1982 study of the US debates about media violence similarly criticised effects studies for complicity with industry interests, exonerating media of any accountability based on the assumption that their impact is always a function of the social environment, and that media merely reinforce pre-existing dispositions, eschewing any form of causal explanation (Rowland 1982: 388). In the heyday of 'limited' effects studies, Klapper's influential review (Klapper 1960) was, for instance, published when he was Director of Social Research at CBS, and was used by television networks as an argument against any form of regulation (Perse 2001: 21). By contrast, at least within the received historical accounts, 'critical' research traditions have contributed to a ferment in the field (Gerbner 1983; Nordenstreng 2004) breaking with the behavioural focus of effects studies by introducing a more critical reflection on the relations of media and power in society and how research interests served to unwittingly support the needs of industry rather than the public interest.

Additionally, the themes of media effects research circulate widely in popular discourse about media impact on society. In the context of a rapidly changing communications landscape where the impact of media on citizens is to the fore in policy discussions, research findings of the kind produced within the discipline have a value in serving an

evidence-based approach to media regulation (Braman 2003). An exception is that of Elihu Katz, one of the tradition's central figures, and for whom the legitimation of academic research serving policy purposes was an important emphasis (Livingstone 1997). While Katz's first major work *Personal Influence* (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) laid the foundation for empirically-grounded administrative research emphasising media diffusion through interpersonal communication, it is, Livingstone claims, unfairly placed as a programmatic 'administrative' block to an emerging critical perspective in communications research. On the contrary, Katz's career-long objective was to make research available in a form that is accessible and useful for the purposes of informing public debate and shaping policy from a variety of political perspectives. A consideration of this position suggests, as Livingstone argues, a need to move beyond such dualisms as active and passive viewing, powerful effects or less powerful media, and to seek a greater convergence in audience research which synthesises questions of effects within the 'diverse kinds of power relations between media and audiences, the contexts within which the media is influential, and the relation between effects, however reconceived, and pleasure, identity, everyday practices, citizenship' (Livingstone 1997: 15).

Against a background of profound technological and social change, media effects as constituted within mainstream mass communication theory is undoubtedly undergoing substantial reorganization. Charting an evolution from mass communication theory to media theory, Chaffee and Metzger highlight the fact that audiences in new media environments are harder to identify and monitor, and effects studies, as traditionally

conceived, become more problematic when audiences 'are not as well assembled or accessible to researchers as they once were' (Chaffee and Metzger 2001: 371). In this context, the challenge for effects researchers will be to meet policy makers' expectations for straightforward answers with intellectually rigorous policy guidance, while remaining faithful to the real complexity of the subject and the highly varied perspectives on media influence (Livingstone 2007). This may require moving beyond the narrow disciplinary focus that has defined much of the effects tradition and relinquishing the resistance to greater levels of theoretical debate and critical engagement.

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