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# A RETROSPECTIVE AND PROSPECTIVE LOOK AT MEDIA EFFECTS

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## ◆ *Roots of Concerns About Communication Effects*

**I**t has been suggested that considerations of communication effects date back at least to ancient Greece, when Socrates was criticized for corrupting the youth of Athens by creatively enhancing the persuasive potency of speech. When such a claim for the antiquity of concern with communication effects is coupled with considerations of Plato's fear that the ascendancy of the written word would surpass and suppress the power of the spoken word, the case could be made that concern with potentially harmful media effects can be traced back to as early as the fifth century BCE (Perloff, 2002).

With the advent of printing (in China around 220 CE), movable type (in China around 1040 CE), metal movable type (in Korea around 1230 CE), and finally the printing press (in Germany around 1450 CE), the technological prerequisites for the earliest forms of mass media were in place. When the spread of literacy began in earnest in the 19th century, the technological revolution in publishing joined with it, and what resulted was the development of newspapers,

novels, and other forms of print media that soon were designed and produced for and disseminated to everyday folk. Thus, mass communication was born. This development spawned our first major communication revolution, which rapidly changed the nature of the communication equation by putting entertainment, information, and commercial content in the hands of the people.

These developments also upped the ante in terms of concerns about seriously harmful media effects. Shadowing Plato's fear, society's elite increasingly recognized the potential social upheaval that could result from widespread exposure to the printed word. Suddenly, critics began to decry the potency of novels that could cause "the entire destruction of the powers of the mind" (Starker, 1989, p. 8), as well as "annuals, brochures, and family newspapers [that can sow] a seed of corruption which will bring disgrace and wretchedness upon thousands, if not lay the foundation of that sensual and selfish spirit which will contaminate the nation at large, and threaten the downfall of its free institutions" ("Pernicious Literature," 1847, p. 46).

Numerous European attempts to thwart the free flow of information emanating from these foundling mass media bear testimony to the desire of those in authority to suppress the written word. For example, in 1559, Pope Paul IV began disseminating an *Index of Prohibited Books*, which included Protestant books, pornography, occult books, and opposition political works. When Martin Luther and his Protestant compatriots defied the pope and found creative ways to use the printing press to spread Reformation literature to the masses, those rebels who used media without authority were often severely punished by those in power, including being imprisoned, beheaded, or burned at the stake. Later, King Henry VIII was so concerned about the impact of the printed word that he formed the Court of the Star

Chamber to prosecute those who printed material hostile to the Crown. He also instituted a licensing system to control the English press (Bryant & Thompson, 2002).

Although the American colonists celebrated their successful fight for independence by incorporating press freedoms into the Bill of Rights of their governing Constitution, a critical look at U.S. history reveals numerous efforts to throttle press freedoms and institute various forms of censorship, again because of obvious fear of media effects. Notable efforts of suppression include the Sedition Act of 1798, designed to muffle pro-French voices in American newspapers during the French Revolution, and the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 during World War I, which made it illegal to publish information critical of the U.S. government or overtly supportive of enemy powers. Implicit in these and other attempts at censorship and suppression, which continued into the present day with the USA Patriot Act of 2001, were models that assume potent effects from giving the press and public unbridled tongues. As Judge Alexander Addison wrote in 1799 in the *Columbian Centinel*, "Give to any set of men the command of the press and you give them the command of the country, for you give them the command of public opinion, which commands everything" (Sloan, 1998, p. 119).

To be candid, media were in part responsible for these efforts at restriction because the popular press often chronicled and irresponsibly sensationalized instances of powerful media effects, fanning the flames of public concern about propaganda, violence, and indecent material. But concern with powerful media effects also was owed, in part, to the development and increased prominence of stimulus-response models in psychology and the other social sciences, which focused attention on the impact of powerful stimuli, including media messages (e.g., Perse, 2001). Even more intense concern was expressed

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#### ♦ Early Scientific Study of Mass Media Effects

The scientific study of mass media effects during World War I was a response to concerns about the spread by the media of anti-Americanism. Critics also expressed fears about what were perceived as the effects of advertising and propaganda, which were being employed by the Allies and often ruthless and uncompromising.

Initially, many scholars focused on the general public's reactions to mass media products (and negative effects) and largely helped to develop and refine models that assumed messages on television were often described as "bullet points." Mass media supporters argued that strong drugs produced "bullet points" and needles. Such points were referred to as "bullet points" in the media. Theories of power and influence have led scholars to focus on models "theories of power and influence" (e.g., Lasswell, 1938).

The traditional approach to research typically focused on these powerful effects and the development of a world of fragmented images and hapless consumers. Several early media scholars, such as Lasswell (1938; Lasswell, 1948), focused on the role of the media in society. In the early 20th century, the concept of mass media effects was developed by the likes of Thorstein Veblen, John Dewey, and George K. Mead, among others. These scholars focused on the role of the media in society and the way they influenced people's behavior and attitudes. They also emphasized the importance of the media in shaping public opinion and the way people think and act. The concept of mass media effects has since become a central topic in communication studies and has been studied extensively by scholars around the world.

because of widespread uncertainty about the social and psychological impact of the earliest generation of those newfangled electronic mass media, especially on children and adolescents.

### ◆ Early Scientific Study of Media Effects

The scientific study of media effects began during World War I, in large part in response to concerns about propaganda spread by the military at home and abroad. Critics also expressed similar concerns about what were perceived to be incredibly potent advertising and public relations efforts being employed by rapidly expanding and often ruthless and inhumane corporations.

Initially, many social scientists, as well as the general public, tended to believe that mass media produced uniformly powerful (and negative) effects on their unsuspecting and largely helpless audiences. This supreme and presumably subversive power of media messages on vulnerable audiences was often described using colorful metaphors: Mass media supposedly fired messages like dangerous bullets, or injected messages like strong drugs propelled through hypodermic needles. Such potent metaphors gave rise to the “bullet” or “hypodermic needle” theories of powerful media effects. Other scholars have labeled these early theoretical models “the theory of uniform media influences” (e.g., Harris, 1994).

The traditional history of media effects research typically attributes the rise of these powerful effects theories to the development of a worldview of a mass society of fragmented individuals who served as the hapless consumers of mass media messages. Several early media theorists (e.g., Brantz, 1938; Lasswell, 1927; Lippmann, 1922) focused on the marked changes taking place in society during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They emphasized the concept of mass behavior, which typically

was attributed to the urbanization and industrialization of society, which, in turn, allegedly was due primarily to the social and economic pressures that uprooted people from their local cultures and familial and peer group settings, which seemingly led to feelings of isolation and increased vulnerability.

Several influential early books on mass media were written with an apparent underlying acceptance of the bullet or hypodermic needle theories. These included Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922), Lasswell's *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927), and Brantz's *Allied Propaganda and the Collapse of the German Empire in 1918* (1938). The powerful effects model also stimulated and helped shape the creation of the influential Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA, 1937–1942), which was devoted to informing the public about propaganda. A collaborative, nonprofit organization of professors at Princeton, Columbia, and several other organizations, but headquartered in New York City, the IPA was one of the first major attempts at “media education,” or, more specifically, in preventing harmful media effects through “inoculation.” The Institute received considerable public attention because of the widespread fear that without critical education about propaganda, citizens of the emerging unstable mass society could not withstand the onslaught of subversive mass media messages.

Journalist Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922) was an especially important catalyst in the history of media effects research. In this classic work, Lippmann relied heavily on his experiences with propaganda during World War I, and he stressed the role of the news media in robustly influencing audiences' perceptions about important issues. Lippmann's poignant prose (e.g., “the world outside and the pictures in our head”) framed public opinion research for future generations of communication scholars, for better or for worse.

The powerful effects model is frequently alleged to have served as the conceptual basis for a series of early empirical media effects investigations into media violence sponsored by the Payne Fund in the 1920s, but in fact those principal investigators routinely considered factors such as age, cognitive abilities, and peer influence that could mitigate potentially powerful media effects. Although these investigators examined the influence of motion pictures on children—and typically found movies to be powerful instruments of education, attitude change, emotional impact, health, and behaviors—such effects were not found to be uniform for all children and youth.

### ◆ A Shift in Effects Models

With few exceptions, the powerful effects model (or theory of uniform media influences) seems to have remained the dominant paradigm of media effects until the mid-1940s, when empirical studies began to suggest that effects from mass media were neither as uniform nor as powerful as originally thought. The prevalent worldview of scholars shifted also. Rather than a society of fragmented souls who received omnipotent messages from mass media, the public began to be viewed as a loose collective of somewhat interconnected individuals who typically were neither alienated nor isolated, and who were active in selecting, discarding, and even resisting media messages. This active audience was perceived as limiting the effects of media messages and as having considerable self-determination and influence.

Moreover, studies by Paul Lazarsfeld and associates at Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research, especially the voting studies reported in *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944/1948), revealed the important role of individual opinion leaders, who discussed and interpreted media messages

for their peers, a process that sometimes mitigated media impact. Other social scientists, such as Carl Hovland, then working for the U.S. War Department, confirmed empirically that mass media had only limited effects on individuals in their audiences. Hovland conducted relatively sophisticated controlled experiments that assessed attitude change among soldiers who viewed training or motivational films. He found that many of the films had little or no effect on the soldiers' attitudes or motivations, and that individual-difference factors were very important in determining who was persuaded and who was not.

The limited effects model received enhanced visibility when Joseph Klapper published *The Effects of Mass Communication* (1960). This classic work reviewed hundreds of media effects studies from the 1920s through the 1950s and offered numerous generalizations and conclusions about mass media effects. Klapper called for a new, "phenomenistic" approach to research in the field, which emphasized several factors that seemingly limited the effects of mass media messages on individuals. In Klapper's view, audience members were typically perceived as selecting and utilizing media messages that reinforced existing opinions, abilities, and beliefs, rendering the role of media more typically that of a sustainer and supporter than an agent of change.

### ◆ Yet Another Shift: Moderate-to-Powerful Effects

In the decades following the 1960s, mass media research thrived. The discipline of mass communication became firmly established at research universities throughout the United States, and it began to gain credibility and a foothold in academic institutions worldwide. As new approaches to studying media effects emerged, especially

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in areas other than public opinion, voting, and marketing, many new theories and research findings did not fit neatly into the limited effects paradigm. Rather quickly, the media effects portfolio was expanded to include new studies that indicated moderate-to-powerful media effects under certain conditions.

Perhaps the most widely discussed theory of the time to assert more robust media effects, although one rarely attempting to demonstrate such empirically, was Marshall McLuhan's sense extension theory, presented in *Understanding Media* (1964). This theory claimed that media effects do not result from exposure to media content per se, but from using the essential form of a medium that is routinely and almost universally consumed. In other words, media effects are often medium specific and may be cultural—rather than essentially individual—in scope. Such medium effects were depicted as altering basic patterns of information processing, perception, and cognition among an entire population of users. As previously suggested, compelling empirical evidence that would support or refute such claims about culturally universal effects of using one medium versus another is largely lacking, but McLuhan's ideas were prominently featured in the popular press, as well as in trade books authored or coauthored by McLuhan, and they captured the public's imagination. Not only did such publicity elevate the public's interests in McLuhan's notions: it also garnered increased attention for other types of media effects research.

For roughly a quarter of a century, from the latter 1960s through the early 1990s, the study of media effects thrived, progressing in a relatively linear manner, and emerging as the dominant perspective for studying the media (Harris, 1994). A number of well-developed theories and models of media uses and effects emerged (e.g., agenda setting, uses and gratifications, excitation transfer) and were tested via

programmatic research efforts, through which they were refined and canonized. In retrospect, this may well have been the Golden Age of media effects research, in which our scholarly journals bulged with increasingly more sophisticated and relatively uniform approaches to theory construction in this popular area of mass communication inquiry. Although some dissenting voices were raised, most notably in the "Ferment in the Field" issue of *Journal of Communication* in 1983, a bird's eye view of this era undoubtedly would reveal a rapidly accumulating and maturing, relatively cohesive body of knowledge about media effects (e.g., Bryant & Miron, 2004).

### ◆ *Conceptualizations of Media Effects*

One of the several issues raised in the "ferment debate" had to do with conceptualizations of media effects. As Perse (2001) noted, "one of the first and most important assumptions of the study of mass communication has been the presumption that media and their content have significant and substantial effects" (p. 3).

#### WHAT ARE MEDIA EFFECTS?

This notion of *media effects* warrants further explication. In general, when scholars talk about media effects, they are considering the social or psychological changes that occur in consumers of media message systems—or in their social milieu or cultural values—as a result of being exposed to, processing, or acting on those mediated messages. Five classes of media effects on individuals are often considered: behavioral, attitudinal, cognitive, emotional, and physiological. *Behavioral* effects result when a media message consumer performs some action presented via media. *Attitudinal*

effects occur when media shape message consumers' opinions, beliefs, and values. *Cognitive* effects are those that result when media change what consumers think or know. *Emotional* effects occur when media produce certain feelings, such as fear, anxiety, or euphoria, in message consumers. And *physiological* effects are those changes in arousal or other physical bodily reactions that are derived from media consumption. Numerous other typologies of media effects (e.g., immediate vs. long-term, beneficial vs. detrimental, intentional vs. accidental) are also employed by scholars who investigate media effects.

### **DETERMINING CAUSALITY WITH MEDIA EFFECTS**

All of these presumptions of effects of various types from consuming media messages transport us into one of the thorniest areas of philosophy: the analysis of cause and effect, or causality. Causality denotes a necessary relationship between one event and another, of which the second event (the effect) is the direct result of the first (the cause). For centuries, this straightforward concept of causality was the foundation of scientific theory. That is, the prevailing notion in science was that a specific event caused a predictable reaction. It was this purview that was the foundling epistemological cradle for the study of media effects. For example, Lippmann (1922) argued that mass media messages created pictures of the world that shaped the images in the minds of message consumers, a classic example of the notion of cause and effect.

However, although such early conceptualizations of media effects were born in the context of this prevailing linear, mechanistic model, soon thereafter, Max Born (1949) shook up the scientific world by introducing the notion that cause and effect could not be determined exactly, only probabilistically. In Born's probabilistic

view, three assumptions reshaped the notion of causality from its deterministic roots: (1) the occurrence of an entity B (the effect) of a certain class depends on the occurrence of an entity A (the cause) of another class; (2) the cause must be prior to, or at least simultaneous with, the effect; and (3) contiguity postulates that cause and effects must be in spatial contact or connected by a chain of intermediate things in contact.

Such reasoning soon became normative in media effects models, although many critics of media effects research continued to identify it with more simplistic, strictly deterministic philosophies. However, the majority view of media effects seems better represented by Perry's (1996) application of the probabilistic-causality perspective to mass communication:

Any discussion of media effects requires a concern with causation. Before a researcher can conclude that one concept is a cause of another, the research must establish three things. First, the presumed cause and the presumed effect must covary, or go together. For example, people who are heavily exposed to mediated violence should tend, on the average, to be either more or less aggressive than those who are less exposed. If aggressiveness increases along with exposure, the two variables are positively correlated or associated. If aggressiveness tends to decline as exposure increases, the two are negatively correlated. Second, the presumed cause must precede the presumed effect. Finally, a researcher must eliminate plausible rival (i.e., third variable) explanations for the observed covariation of the presumed cause and effect. (pp. 25–26)

This interpretation reflects Born's (1949) probabilistic causation, rather than the purely deterministic model, and undoubtedly reflects the epistemological underpinnings of most contemporary media effects research.

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## ◆ Recent Trends

Accompanying this shift in dominant perceptions of causation have been a number of recent trends in media effects research that also rely on evolving epistemological notions. For example, media reception theory emphasized the role of social constraints and audience interpretations of media texts (or message systems), which began to receive widespread credence as mediating or mitigating factors in media effects. Most of this theory and research originated from Europe or Australia during the 1970s and 1980s, but it took more than a decade to receive widespread recognition and limited adoption in the United States, often in the form of critical or cultural studies approaches to the study of media effects (e.g., De Certeau, 1988; Hayward, 2000; Morley, 1980; Staiger, 2002; see also Miller, Chapter 9, this volume).

Another critical change—one that often yielded more pronounced effect sizes than in prior media effects research—was a shift toward examining dimensions of media effects other than their behavioral impact. In fact, studies assessing cognitive, affective, physiological effects often revealed that changes in knowledge, attitude, or affect were important in their own right, even if they did not necessarily lead to immediate and overt changes in behaviors.

Several prominent models of media effects—the so-called stalactite/stalagmite or drip (as opposed to drench) theories—such as the cultivation hypothesis, along with several epidemiological health communication models (e.g., Centerwall, 1989; Eron & Huesmann, 1984; cf. Perry, 2007), proposed that some of the most culturally important media effects could only be observed over time, because they were inherently iterative in nature. Novel research protocols (e.g., long-term treatment, delayed assessment) and statistical models (e.g., path analysis) were adopted

to help guide and interpret findings from such new effects models.

Moreover, in the latter two decades of the 20th century and into the 21st century, many investigators began to focus on the process of effects, including precursors of effects (e.g., selective exposure, attention, comprehension, information acquisition) and reception processes per se (e.g., disposition, empathy). As with the “drip” theories, these new approaches required new theories (e.g., elaboration likelihood model, mood management) and measurement approaches (e.g., physiological research, reaction time), along with refined statistical procedures (e.g., structural equation modeling).

New procedures for aggregating research evidence across numerous studies that had investigated the same topic (e.g., meta-analysis) also helped give communication scholars more accurate and holistic models of media effects (e.g., Preiss, Gayle, Burrell, Allen, & Bryant, 2007). When used in conjunction with more sophisticated longitudinal designs and field experiments, findings often revealed that many of the most robust sorts of media effects accumulate over time and with continued media use (i.e., cumulative effects).

As a result of this burgeoning body of increasingly coherent, cohesive, and consensual evidence, a number of professional associations (e.g., American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association, Parent-Teachers Association) have issued public policy statements regarding the place of media consumption in the personal and public health of societies and their citizens, especially young people. The vast majority of these statements have implicitly or explicitly adopted moderate-to-powerful media effects models and have taken a decidedly negatively valenced view of media effects. A typical resultant statement might be that under certain social and ecological conditions (e.g., media use pattern, family structure, mediation style),

regular and prolonged exposure to certain types of media fare (e.g., violence, pornography, commercials for fast foods) contributes to mental or physical health problems (e.g., increased aggression or hostility, ADHD, obesity), especially among children and adolescents. Such claims for moderate and even powerful negative media effects have often become truisms in postmodern information societies, occasionally influencing public policy. However, in reality many of the most important media effects questions remain unanswered, at least to the satisfaction of many communication scholars, and the numerous studies revealing positive media effects (e.g., Mares & Woodard, 2007) rarely gain the public eye, much less the attention and use of policymakers.

### ◆ The Future

Without question, the nature of today's mediated communication has shifted dramatically. Among many other changes, traditional mass media have become less important in everyday life compared with even the recent past, and they have been replaced in terms of use, perceived value, and credibility by more interactive, personalized, mobile media that allow user agency and even user-generated production of messages. Little, if any, question remains that models and theories of media effects are in for a sea change, if they are to remain viable and veridical.

Moreover, today's new media (e.g., the Internet, video and computer games) undoubtedly will not be tomorrow's new media. For example, one of our oldest forms of media, wireless communication, has been reinvented and repurposed into the early 21st century's media darling and the fastest growing communication technology of all times (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007). With its ascendancy, we are moving into new

phases of "the network society" (Castells, 2000), in which many of the educational, information, social, and entertainment functions of communication, especially for younger, more affluent citizens, are being delivered by mobile communications, creating a "mobile network society" (Castells et al., 2007).

As this new communication revolution alters the fundamental nature of traditional media functions (e.g., news gathering, editorialization, education, entertainment), and as the market adjusts and even newer technologies emerge to better serve media's newer functions (e.g., social networking, user-generated communication), not only will new models and theories of media effects be essential, but the essential nature of our research methodologies must change. Indeed, the fundamental discussion of the nature of media effects must be renegotiated.

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