Historical Trends in Research on Children and the Media: 1900–1960

by Ellen Wartella and Byron Reeves

Similar questions have been asked about "effects" as each new medium appeared on the scene, and precursors of current concerns with developmental and social factors were found in the period of the most research on media and children—the 1930s.

For the past several years, scholars of mass communication have reflected on the history of American media research and found it lacking. Gerbner, for instance (26), has noted that the "received history" of mass communication research "should not be taken literally." Rowland (64) has argued for a revision of early American media research history and a recovery of the cultural studies traditions that predate the era of Paul Lazarsfeld and the Columbia school. And Chaffee and Hochheimer (8) were critical of the dogma that followed from the political communication studies of the 1940s.

This article is an attempt to address questions about the history of mass communication research in the United States by examining a particular research domain, that of media effects on children. Our study is part of a larger ongoing analysis of the history of public controversy about media effects on children and youth.

A major thesis of our project is that the traditional history of media effects research is biased toward considerations of public opinion, propaganda, public affairs, and voting. As embodied in basic textbooks, this history can be outlined as follows. Earliest concerns about the mass media at the turn of the century and through the 1920s and early 1930s took the form of the direct effect or "hypodermic needle" model of media impact. The latter term, coined by political scientist Harold

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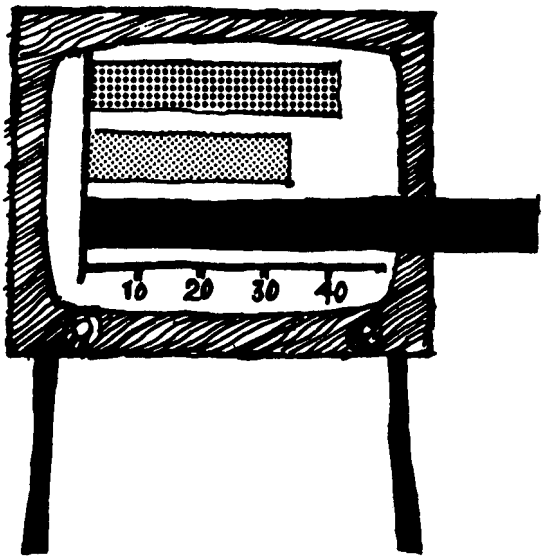

Lasswell during his analysis of World War I propaganda techniques, reflects an assumption that messages have a direct and undifferentiated impact on individuals. In the 1940s, Lasswell's ideas were challenged by studies that questioned the ability of media to influence directly important political decisions. What little influence was found was thought to operate through opinion leaders who in turn influenced others. This idea about indirect effects was crystallized in the "two-step flow" theory and was applied to other areas of media content, most notably fashion, product choices, and movie attendance (38). The research characterized a trend toward practical and applied communication research that looked at immediate short-term effects of messages for the benefit of communication administrators in advertising, public relations, and government information campaigns (39).

There are many contexts in which this history has been recounted (6), although most discussions preface current research in all media effects areas (e.g., 39). Moreover, even scholars who are critical of the mainstream of media effects research, such as Gitlin (27) and Rowland (63), recite essentially the same history, although for the purposes of uncovering the roots of administrative emphasis. Consequently, it is important to examine the accuracy of this received view.

With the development of each modern means of storytelling—books, newspapers, movies, radio, comics, and television—social debates regarding their effects have recurred. A prominent theme in all these debates has been a concern with media's impact on youth, a concern which in fact predates the modern era. Plato's *Republic* (58) warned about storytellers:

> *Children cannot distinguish between what is allegory and what isn't, and opinions formed at that age are usually difficult to*

> *eradicate or change; it is therefore of the utmost importance that the first stories they hear shall aim at producing the right moral effect.*

Davis (16) noted the prominence of issues surrounding the impact of media on children's morality in an analysis of popular arguments about the introduction of film, radio, and television into American society:

> *A major attack on movies, radio and television involved the influence of the media on morality. Both sides (opponents and proponents) agreed that the media exerted a moral influence. The disagreements centered on the direction of that influence. Attackers argued that the media undermined conventional systems of morality, caused children to engage in illicit sexual adventure and were a primary influence in stimulating criminal lessons and might be used to substitute for real life in learning ethical principles* (p. 142).

Although much of the literature has been lost to contemporary students of television effects, the earlier part of the twentieth century was a time of active and substantial research on children and youth. In this article we review this early research and examine how well it fits the received history of mass communication research.

We have three major points. First, the traditional history of American mass communication research, whatever its faults and biases, does not describe scholarship about children and media. The study of media effects on youth has developed independently of the broader media effects tradition. Second, the origin of research about children lies in concern expressed by the public about each medium as it was introduced. Public debate helped shape research agendas—at least with respect to topics—rather than research shaping public concerns or policy. Third, arguments about twentieth-century media have recurred throughout the century. Although the expression of concern highlights novel attributes of each medium, the bases of objections and promises have been similar.

Although the period from 1900 to 1940 has been labeled the "direct effects era," one in which media were thought to have a direct and undifferentiated impact on all audience members, this is not the case for research on children and media.

Some histories suggest that the "direct effects" model derives from learning theory and simple stimulus-response models in behavioristic psychology (39, 40). Yet the best-known research from this era contradicts a direct effects conclusion. The 1933 Payne Fund studies—twelve volumes of research conducted by the most prominent psychologists, sociologists, and educators of the time—represent a detailed look at the effects of film on such diverse topics as sleep patterns, knowledge about foreign cultures, attitudes about violence, and delinquent behavior. These studies have not often been cited in the last 25 years, despite the

fact that they represent a research enterprise comparable to the 1972 Surgeon General's Committee on Television and Violence. But at the time the Payne studies generated significant press attention, academic review, and critical comment, and were the basis of recommendations for government action on what the authors believed were significant social problems.

A major conclusion of the report was that the same film would affect children differently depending on each child's age, sex, predispositions, perceptions, social environment, past experiences, and parental influence. In this sense, the report was similar to the most current summaries of research about children and television. Further, the effects were said to be conditional on whether the criterion concerns were behaviors, attitudes, emotions, or knowledge about people and events. For example, Blumer's study of *Movies, Delinquency and Crime* (5) concluded that the effects of film on criminal behavior may be diametrically opposed, depending on the diversity of themes presented and the social milieu, attitudes, and interests of the observer.

Although Blumer's contingencies were largely sociological, the conclusions of several other researchers involved affective and psychological differences. Dysinger and Ruckmick (19) studied emotional reactions and concluded, based on a physiologic measure, that children varied widely in emotional stimulation. They suggested that age differences in response were caused by varied abilities to comprehend information on the screen. For example, young children tended not to understand the romantic scenes to which adolescents responded enthusiastically.

Cognitive variables received similar attention elsewhere in the Payne Fund volumes. In a study about learning from film, Holoday and Stoddard (33) focused on information retention as a function of grade in school. Not only did they look at individual differences in relation to long- and short-term effects, but they examined retention in relation to specific message content, thereby foreshadowing research to come a half-century later. The authors concluded that action was remembered best when it was about sports, action, and crime, when the information had an emotional component, and when the action occurred in a familiar background such as home or school. Such attention to age differences can be found in research on film attendance conducted prior to the Payne Fund studies, such as a 1917 survey of children's leisure activities (49) and Mitchell's (50) 1929 survey of Chicago children's attendance and reactions to films.

Nor is it true that the logic of this research depended on stimulus-response models. There are several different meanings for the phrase "stimulus-response," each with different theoretical assumptions, but none applies to the research about children. One definition links stimulus-response with a strict behavioristic notion of reinforcement and a scientific philosophy that ignores what cannot be objectively observed—namely, mental concepts. As Katz and Lazarsfeld (38) commented about the scheme with which media research began, this idea was

"that of the omnipotent media, on the one hand, sending forth the message, and the atomized masses, on the other hand, waiting to receive it—and nothing in-between" (p. 20). Even though this conception was not explicitly pro-behaviorist, it still implied that intervening mental processes were irrelevant. Such a conclusion is clearly not applicable to the Payne Fund studies or to writing earlier in the century. In fact, the Blumer studies of movies and criminal behavior were the only research in the Payne series to measure behavior; the remainder of the research dealt with mental concepts assumed to intervene between exposure and effect. The psychologists and educators on the Payne committee studied ideas and factual learning (34), social attitudes (56), emotions (19), sleep patterns (60), and moral development (12).

A cognitive orientation was not new even in 1933, however. An important book by Hugo Munsterberg (52), published in 1916, had also focused on mental processes. The author was one of the first laboratory psychologists and a student of Wilhelm Wundt, the acknowledged father of experimental psychology and an avowed introspectionist. Munsterberg devoted the first half of his book to comments on mental attention, memory, imagination, and emotions.

Nor is it true that the Payne Fund studies were anomalous in the 1930s. Other research of that era similarly was concerned with how children use and are affected by the media. Eisenberg (20), for instance, conducted the first major study of radio's effects on child audiences, surveying over 3,000 New York children and their parents. In addition to examining the frequency of radio listening and children's preferences for radio programs, he assessed the impact of radio on children's factual learning about the world, attitudes, imitation of radio characters' language and behavior, and requests for advertised products.

In short, the pre-1940 period included study of cognitive concepts, attention to developmental differences in children's use of media, and a focus on children's knowledge of the world, their attitudes and values, and their own moral conduct. Although the commentators felt that media effects could be powerful, they also recognized that other factors, such as the child's developmental level or social class, could modify the media's impact. It is difficult to find evidence of the "hypodermic needle" model of media effects in pre-1940 studies of children and media.

Nor, as is commonly assumed, did theorizing about media effects on children in the period 1940–1960 follow an "indirect effects" model.

For example, Herzog's 1941 review of research on children's radio listening habits has a developmental emphasis in demonstrating age differences in children's attraction to and preference for radio programming (31). She also notes evidence of children's direct learning of information and standards of conduct from radio. Later radio studies in the 1940s examined a wide range of "effects," such as the influence of

radio drama in producing differential emotional reactions in children (17, 18), psychological differences in children's abilities to distinguish between reality and fantasy (35), and the influence of radio on children's school performance (31). The commercial nature of radio was noticed as well. Surveys of mothers documented the appeal of radio ads to children (31) and the effects of premium advertising on children's responses to advertising and product requests (29).

The few studies on children and media related to the Columbia Bureau of Applied Social Research did not use an indirect effects model of media impact on youth. For example, studies by Meine (47) and Wolf and Fisk (72) are noteworthy both for what they include—psychological explanations of media effects—and what they do not—the model of "indirect media effects" most identified with the Columbia school that predicts different effects based on sociological ideas about "opinion leadership" or "multiple steps in information dissemination." Meine (47) found a direct relationship between children's consumption of newspaper and radio news and their knowledge of current affairs, even after controlling for age, sex, and intelligence. Similarly, Wolf and Fisk (72) conducted an extensive study of children and comics that previewed many concepts that would be discussed as new ideas in later television research. Children were thought to progress through three qualitatively different stages of sophistication in their ability to read and understand comics. Parental mediation of media experiences was advocated by almost all mothers, yet few actually prohibited their children from reading the comics.

Attention to questions about use and preference for television programs predominated in the literature of the 1950s, when the "indirect effects" model is said to have become "reified" (28, 63) and when the earliest studies of television influence on children were being conducted. Not only were notions of indirect effects not articulated, however; they were not even implied by the authors. A far more common theme in the 1950s, illustrated by Shayon's 1952 book (67), is a concern with gauging the impact of television, widely thought to have enormous influence on children and labeled by Shayon the new "Pied Piper."

If studies about media and children do not follow the received history of media effects research, then how can the research history be described? It is our contention that emphasis on research topics was influenced by public debate about changing media technologies. That is, as public concerns about film gave way to concern about radio and then television, academic research made corresponding shifts.

Has the quantity *of research on a medium changed as popular attention shifted?*

Evidence about the relationship between media research and media popularity comes from two sources: (a) a bibliography, compiled by us, of academic studies published between 1900 and 1960 about the effects

of media on youth, and (b) statistics about the growth of film, radio, and television as popular entertainment. In the bibliography of published studies we included articles and books that meet three criteria. The reference must have addressed the issue of media effects on children and youth, been written for an academic or professional audience, and been published in the United States. Technical reports and research papers were excluded. The bibliography was compiled from printed and on-line bibliographies and published references on media effects (e.g., 3, 53). The final bibliography contains 242 entries from the period between 1900 and 1960—a time frame corresponding to the introduction of film, radio, and television into American life.

Each study was classified by the type of medium addressed: film, radio, television, print (newspapers, comics, magazines, and reading in general), or cross-media issues (any combination of media effects, such as comparison of radio and print or TV and movies). Five studies of print media and 21 cross-media studies were found. The remaining 216 studies were about electronic media.

Figure 1 shows the number of citations to studies about children between 1900 and 1960. There are three identifiable epochs of research,

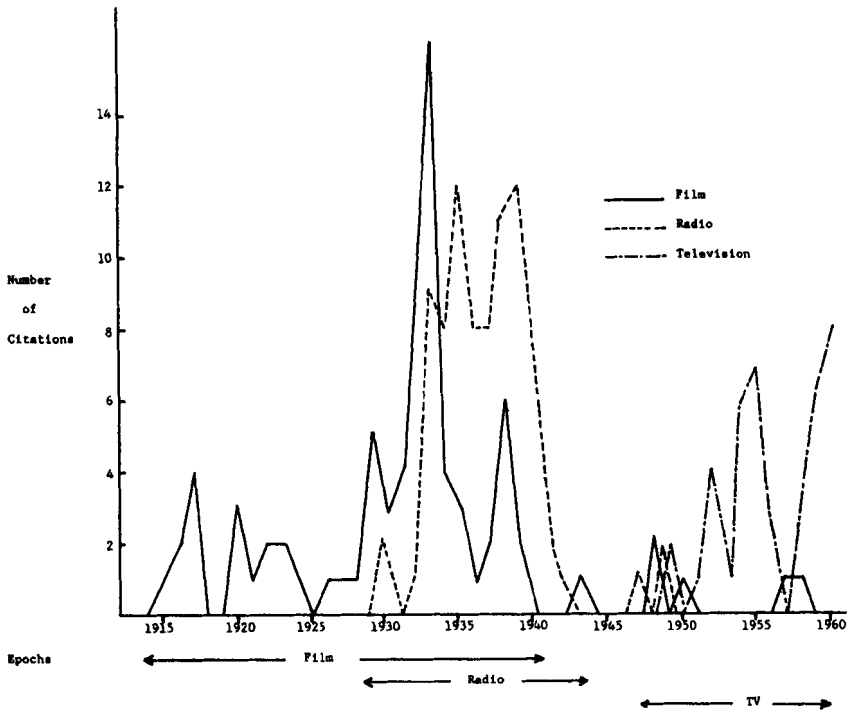

Figure 1: Number of citations about children and film, radio, and television, 1900–1960

one associated with each electronic medium. The film epoch begins in 1904, ends in 1939, and reaches a peak in 1932 during the Payne Fund investigations (9). The radio epoch begins in 1930 and ends just before World War II. There is some overlap in the beginning of the period with the decline of film research. The television epoch, the period most separated from other research, begins in 1949 and builds through 1960, with a one-year lapse in 1957.

Our major emphasis is on variance in research activity *within* each epoch; however, features of the entire distribution are both apparent and counterintuitive. First, the *cumulative* number of studies did not increase monotonically prior to 1960. Most research activity occurred during the 1930s. In fact, two-thirds of the research on children prior to 1960 was completed by 1939. Second, it is clear that the 1940s, a time of active research on politics and persuasion, lacked such activity in the area of children and media.

The three epochs obviously correspond to the introduction and dissemination of the three technologies. The clearest relationship is for television, a medium that came on the market at an identifiable time (about 1948) and diffused rapidly. By 1954, a mere seven years after its introduction, 55 percent of American households had a television set (68). The number of television receivers in use by year is correlated at .82 ($n = 13$, $p < .05$) with the number of studies on television and children published each year. The same relationship for the diffusion of radio receivers and radio research is also positive, but smaller ($r = .55$, $n = 15$, $p < .05$). The smallest correlation is between studies of film effects on children and annual film audience data ($r = .20$, $n = 23$, n.s.).

Figure 2 shows two time series for each medium—one for the number of research citations and one for the rate of diffusion (number of TV sets, number of radio receivers, and average weekly film audience). Cross-correlations between these two series indicate that the relationship between research activity and media popularity is not simultaneous. For the film epoch, the highest correlation between film audience data and film research is .25, with a positive three-year lag. The lag for television is also three years, when the correlation reaches its highest level of .80. On the other hand, the highest lagged correlation between radio receivers in use and research on radio and children (.63) is reached with a negative six-year lag, suggesting that research on children and radio anticipated the rise in radio's growth.

Unlike the television epoch, the film and radio epochs show a decline in research activity, although audience use of the medium continues. In the case of radio, the number of receivers in use actually grows during the late 1940s and 1950s. All of these lagged correlations, however, are positive and they do not show substantial increases over the correlations matched in time. Although the rise in research interest corresponds to the growth of audiences for film, radio, and television,

abatement of the research has no counterpart in diminishing audiences for these media. Rather, the quantity of research shifted as a result of the *growth* of each new medium.

Have researchers addressed the same kinds of questions about the effects of film, radio, and television?

Our review found a progression from early attention to studies of media use to increasing emphasis on issues of physical and emotional harm, and changes in children's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. In addition, studies about violence, sex, and advertising recur.

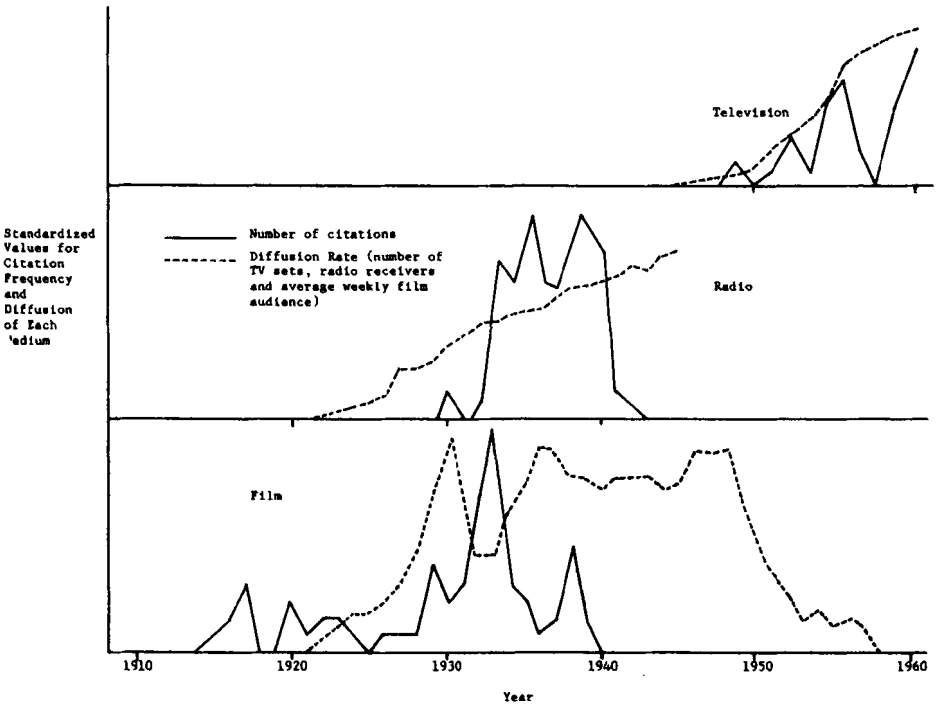

Figure 2: Number of citations about media and youth by diffusion rate for film, radio, and television, 1910–1960

Note: This scale represents the association between citations and diffusion rates. The absolute values cannot be compared because each function represents a different metric, as follows: The number of citations per year ranges from 0 to 16 in 1933 for film, from 0 to 12 in 1935 and 1939 for radio, and from 0 to 8 for television in 1960. The diffusion rate scales for each medium are taken from Sterling and Haight (68). Film audience attendance data begin in 1922, when the average weekly attendance is 40,000 people; it peaks in 1930 and 1946 through 1948, with average weekly attendance at 90,000 people (68, p. 352). Households with radio receivers range from 60,000 in 1922 to a high of 35.9 million in 1947 (68, p. 367). There were 8,000 television sets in use in American homes in 1946; in 1960, 45.7 million homes had TV sets (68, p. 372).

Media use studies are not published exclusively in the earliest part of an epoch, but they are most likely in the years right after a medium's introduction. In the case of film, only a few of the pre-1930 studies in the bibliography (e.g., 25) deal with effects of movies. Most studies are either discussions of the need for children to see wholesome family-oriented programs (e.g., 22, 36, 49, 54, 62, 73) or, beginning in the late 1920s, reports about audience attendance and the type of movies that appeal to children (e.g., 11, 37, 50, 70, 74). Mitchell's (50) examination of children's attendance at Chicago theaters is the best-known early study of children's film use.

Similarly, the earliest studies of radio effects are examinations of children's listening habits and preferences (e.g., 10, 15, 28, 32). Here, too, many of the early studies are catalogues of available radio programs and/or extended discussions (without evidence) of their likely impact on listeners (e.g., 2, 40, 43, 71). A landmark study of children's radio listening and preferences by Eisenberg (20), for which over 3,000 children were surveyed, received the same attention in the subsequent radio literature as the early study of film audiences by Mitchell (50) received in the film literature.

The television literature, too, began with studies of children's use of the medium and preference for different types of programming. The earliest study of television effects in our bibliography (42) is about teenage viewing preferences and is similar to most of the television studies in the early 1950s (e.g., 44, 45, 61, 66). Although what is frequently referenced as the landmark study of the impact of television on children, Schramm, Lyle, and Parker's *Television in the Lives of Our Children* (65), did not appear until 1960, considerable research on TV's impact on knowledge, attitudes, and behavior preceded this study (e.g., 1, 23, 30, 46, 51, 57).

In reviewing these pre-1960 studies, two observations are particularly pertinent. First, there is a surprisingly large scientific literature on children and media, and we continue to discover more, particularly that which precedes the television era. Second, and more important, we are impressed by the overwhelming similarity in the research studies from epoch to epoch, with a new technology substituted as the object of concern. How can we account for these similarities?

One obvious explanation for similarities in research is that earlier studies may have set the agenda for later research.

There is limited evidence that later scientists either attempted to replicate research from an earlier epoch or were at least enough aware of past efforts to cite them in their own work. For instance, radio and film studies may have influenced each other. DeBoer's work on children's emotional responses to radio (17, 18) made frequent reference to the

Dysinger and Ruckmick (19) research on film. Herzog (31), in her review of radio research on children, also cited a number of earlier film studies. The extent to which television research was influenced by the earlier studies of film and radio is far less clear, however. The first studies on television made infrequent reference to earlier media studies on children and youth, and then chiefly to the Payne Fund studies (see, e.g., 65, 66).

There is also evidence from cross-media studies that direct comparison between radio and movie effects on children was a popular topic only in the 1940s (24, 34, 41, 48, 59, 69, 75). Moreover, we found only four people who conducted research that spanned at least two decades and that addressed different media. Rather, the bibliography suggests that *different* scholars conducted the research about each medium and that these people came from diverse disciplines: psychology, sociology, education, communications, and social work.

It may be, however, that earlier research, particularly the Payne Fund studies, set future agendas even though they were not cited. In particular, the strategies for studying media as a social problem that surrounded the Payne Fund may have had an influence on the later efforts of both organized commissions and individual researchers. In order to understand such an influence, we need to locate the Payne Fund studies within their social and cultural milieu and ask why the academics who conducted these studies defined media's influences as they did. As Rowland (63) has pointed out, the Payne Fund researchers chose to study film impact in terms of film content, film use, film's short-term effects, and approaches to teaching children how to use film more selectively. Charters's overview of the studies (9) acknowledges that they ignored questions about the structure of the film industry and the larger institutional arrangements that gave rise to the film culture of the United States in the 1920s. This is not to imply, however, that the Payne Fund researchers were uninterested in changing the film industry. As Charters concludes:

> *Certainly the problem of the movies and children is so important and critical that parents, producers, and the public must willingly and intelligently cooperate to reach some happy solution. The producers occupy the key position. The public at present must take, within the limits of the censorship of the states, whatever pictures are made. . . . The simple obligation rests upon the producers who love children to find a way of making the motion picture a beautiful, fascinating, and kindly servant of childhood* (9, p. 63).

Throughout the 1930s, Charters championed the development of films directed to and intended for the juvenile market (see 14) and addressing the particular needs of youth.

What influenced the Payne Fund approach to studying film effects as a social problem? One possibility is the University of Chicago's program

on communication. As Pecora (55) has noted, seven of the twelve Payne Fund volumes were written by University of Chicago faculty or former students (4, 5, 9, 12, 13, 14, 55). In addition, authors of two other earlier influential studies, Mitchell (50) and DeBoer (17, 18), received Ph.D.s from the same university. Chicago's commitment to scientific research about visible social problems may have encouraged attention to questions of media's impact on youth.

Precisely how and why the studies were conceptualized as they were, however, is not readily explained. Although the University of Chicago approach to communications studies is frequently identified with symbolic interactionism (63), as represented by Blumer's (4) approach to studying film's influence through the use of life histories, the Chicago school had broader definitions of appropriate research methods and definitions of effects. For instance, Peterson and Thurstone's experimental studies of children's attitudes toward ethnic groups (56) employed some of the earliest interval measures of attitude change. The highly quantitative content analysis of film themes and portrayals by Dale (14), and the survey research of Mitchell (50) and Dale (13), also represent methods identified with the University of Chicago.

In locating effects studies at an individual rather than cultural level and in connecting film portrayals to short-term changes, the Payne Fund studies utilized a definition of "effect" that runs throughout U.S. media research. Some critics have mistakenly suggested that such a definition came from Lazarsfeld's administrative research on radio in the 1940s (see 27, esp. p. 79). That such a definition of media effects both predates Lazarsfeld and appears in a literature widely separate from the "received history" of media effects research suggests that we need to look elsewhere to account for its presence. It is far more likely that such definitions of "effects" were responsive to deeper roots in American social science.

Another likely influence of the whole body of research on media and youth is the social reform movement early in the century.

Rowland (63) locates the roots of media violence research in the progressive era of social reform before World War I. Indeed, throughout the literature on children and media, there is a recurring self-professed interest in addressing what scientists perceive to be public concerns. In the early studies within each epoch, scholars introduced their research with self-conscious acknowledgments of widespread public concern about the influence of media on children (see, e.g., 9, 20, 40, 42, 66). For instance, Eisenberg (20) comments:

> *The popularity of this new pastime [radio] among children has increased rapidly. This new invader of the privacy of the home has*

> *brought many a disturbing influence in its wake. Parents have become aware of a puzzling change in the behavior of their children. They are bewildered by a host of new problems, and find themselves unprepared, frightened, resentful, helpless* (pp. 17–18).

It may be that such public concerns were only one part of a group of middle-class progressive reforms. However, an argument can be made that researchers more specifically directed their inquiries to questions posed by an anxious public composed of worried parents. Theorizing about "effects" at the individual level—how children acquire discrete knowledge and perform discrete behaviors—can be seen as responsive to the questions of parents and teachers about media's impact on "their children."

The roots of this paradigm for media research are not as clear as critics of U.S. media effects research would imply. There are a few glaring exceptions of studies that directly try to examine children's media use for market exploitation (e.g., 7, 29), but it is difficult to see how the research is necessarily tied to the administrative interests of media industries.

In sum, we observe a history much different from the received history of U.S. media effects research, one that is characterized by trends in research epochs that focus on different media and recurring topics. The roots of these trends are not easily characterized and probably reside in an understanding of the nature of public controversy about the adoption of new media technology into American life.

We are not the first to note recurrences in the literature. This is more apparent now that we are at the threshold of yet another set of new communication technologies such as cable and computers. Over thirty years ago Mary Seagoe observed:

> *Television is the newest addition to the illustrious family of our mass entertainment enthusiasms. We have had dime novels, movies, radio, comics—and now television. Each time we seem to go through the same stages. We remember the alarm raised soon after the advent of the talking picture, which in time gave rise to the Payne Fund studies, which in turn showed that the same movies might either help or hinder growth, reinforce social standards, or teach the techniques of crime, depending upon the person who saw them and the attitudes he took to the seeing. For a while films seemed designed more for children than adults: then when we had examined the matter and learned how to use movies, the alarm died away. The same thing happened with the widespread use of radio, leading to the studies of Eisenberg and others. The same thing went on in relation to the comics. Now we are starting that cycle with television. Whenever there is a new social invention, there is a feeling of*

strangeness and a distrust of the new until it becomes familiar (66, p. 143).

As we stand at the threshold of research about new technologies, a look back at public controversy and concern about older media is useful both to point out where we have been and to determine how we might proceed in the future. The recurring nature of public concern for and scientific study of media influence on youth thus speaks to our field's responsiveness to the wider social and cultural context of American media.

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