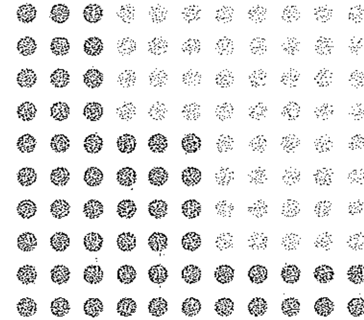

Understanding Media Theory

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Chapter Seven

EFFECTS, WHAT EFFECTS? POWER AND INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA

The question to exercise media theory most is 'What effects do the media have?'. In trying to answer this question the pendulum has swung back and forth over the years from great effects to minimal effects. The power of the media has concerned society since the birth of mass communication. Pearson (1984) documents a long tradition of complaint against the influence of popular media and entertainment forms in Britain. The birth of every new media of mass communication has been accompanied by fears about its corrupting influence on the audience. Not surprisingly theorising media effects, especially relating to sex and violence, is shaped by a highly charged popular debate and sometimes slanted by attempts to blame the media for society's ills. Often it is difficult to untangle perceptions of audience responses from actual facts (Watson, 1998: 61). The early history of media effects research was infused by deeply ingrained assumptions about the negative and anti-social effects of exposure to the media. However, the development of effects research has seen a shift from perspectives stressing the impact of the media on people to what people do with the media. Tudor (1979) traces the different stages of effects research and the shifting ideas of the relationship between the media and their audiences. Within each stage there have been disagreements between those adhering to the direct effects model and those subscribing to a limited effects model but the trend in thinking about the impact of the media has increasingly moved towards ascribing more power to audiences to understand media messages according to their individual attitudes and opinions, and social backgrounds.

Social concerns of media influence

In the 1950s there was an outpouring of concern about the corrupting and depraving influence of American comic book magazines and rock 'n' roll music. In the 1930s the worries were over the cinema, which according to cultural critic F.R. Leavis, involved the 'surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals' (quoted in Pearson, 1984: 93). One psychiatrist could assert in 1938 that '70% of all crimes were first conceived in the cinema'. Earlier, at the turn of the century, the music halls were seen as encouraging lawlessness with their glorification of violence and immorality. The 1840s and 1850s witnessed the 'penny gaff' theatres and 'two penny hop' dancing saloons, singled out for peddling immoral and criminal behaviour amongst the young. An editorial in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1851 stated that

> one powerful agent for the depraving of the boyish classes of our towns and cities is to be found in the cheap shows and theatres, which are so specially opened and arranged for the attraction and ensnaring of the young. When for 3d a boy can procure some hours of vivid enjoyment from exciting scenery, music and acting . . . it is not to be wondered that [he] . . . then becomes rapidly corrupted and demoralised, and seeks to be the doer of infamies which have interested him as a spectator.
>
> (Quoted in Root, 1986: 19)

At the end of the eighteenth century people talked of the harmful impact of newspapers with the depiction and discussion of villainy and depravity in their columns. The emergence of the first newsbook, or *corantos*, at the beginning of the seventeenth century was greeted with hostility by dramatists such as Ben Jonson who referred to them as 'a degradation of the proper function of a writer', and references to the 'contemptible trade' were common in Jacobean drama.

Source: Eldridge *et al.*, 1997: 10–11

EARLY MEDIA EFFECTS

The early twentieth century saw the emergence of the widespread belief that the media exerted considerable influence over people and society. This pessimistic view of media effects was shaped by the mass society theory and its attempts to come to terms with the changes wrought by the advent of modernity (see Chapter 1). Early efforts to examine and assess the influence of the media were the outcome of the political lobbying of groups fearful of the media's impact. These fears were directed at the rise of the popular press in the late nineteenth century. The rise of the popular press for intellectuals was accompanied by cultural debasement – for Nietzsche the 'rabble vomit their bile and call it a newspaper', while T.S. Eliot was more restrained in expressing his view that the effect of Sunday and daily newspapers on their readers was 'to affirm them as a complacent, prejudiced and unthinking mass' (quoted in Carey, 1992: 7). It was the rise of the film indus-

try that turned the concerns of moral entrepreneurs into political action. One of the first enquiries into media effects was conducted in 1917 by the National Council for Public Morals, which represented all of Britain's moral reform groups, from a variety of backgrounds and political persuasions.

The Council set up an enquiry into the harmful impact of the cinema on the young. Held by a commission including figures such as Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scout movement, and Marie Stopes, the campaigner for contraceptive birth control, the enquiry took evidence directly from nearly 50 witnesses, including doctors, policemen, social workers and probation officers, as well as representatives of the film industry and the British Board of Film Censors, and received written submissions from many others (Dewe-Mathews, 1994: 27). The evidence was collated in a 400-page document, comprising nearly a quarter of a million words detailing the views of the witnesses on topics ranging from the educational value of cinema to something ominously referred to as 'the moral dangers of darkness' (Pearson, 1984: 95). Some witnesses expressed their concern about the display of the enlarged view of the face, which emphasised pain, lust, hate and grief (Pearson, 1984: 96). Others linked the rapid spread of the cinema with rising lawlessness and juvenile delinquency. Much of the evidence was anecdotal and for every chief constable who took the opinion that the cinema caused copycat crime, there was another that disagreed. Particularly telling seems to have been the evidence from those who worked in deprived areas with young people. One probation officer from London's East End told the inquiry that the cinema made his job easier by taking children off the street. In his view they learned more about crime at home than they ever did by spending a few hours in the cinema. Such evidence – as well as police statements denying any link between crime and the cinema – led the Council to reject calls for the banning of children from picture houses. The Council concluded on the topic of juvenile crime that 'the problem is far too complex to be solved by laying stress on only one factor and that probably a subordinate one, among all the contributing conditions' (quoted in Dewe-Mathews, 1994: 29). It also stated the cinema does not cause imitative behaviour but 'suggests the form of activity rather than provides the impulse to it'. However, ever since the publication of the Council's report, the finding that the cinema does not have a harmful impact on its audience has been contested.

The findings of the National Council's enquiry were not based on any social-scientific evidence. They represented the impressions and speculations of those directly involved with the problems of juvenile delinquency. Speculation fuelled debate about the impact of the media on the young and 'impressionable'. The view the masses could be manipulated by the media acquired more support as a result of the effects of Allied propaganda in the First World War, and Soviet and Fascist propaganda in the 1930s. The Frankfurt School's argument that mass popular culture pumped out by the media and cultural industries caused a loss of individual freedom and creative thinking was shaped by its members' experience

of the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany. It was in the 1930s that the first social-scientific efforts to investigate the possible effects of the media were undertaken. In 1933 the Payne Fund published the findings of its examination of the effects of film on children. The research found watching films could disturb children's sleep patterns, lead to substantial emotional arousal, and contribute to delinquency and criminality. These findings were qualified by the conclusion the same film would affect children differently depending on their age, sex, predispositions, perceptions and social environment, past experiences and parental influences (Grossberg, 1998: 279), a similar conclusion to that reached by many of the audience reception studies today. Nevertheless the climate of the times focused on findings that supported the media having a strong influence on their audiences. A similar response happened with the research into the impact of Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* broadcast (see Chapter 1). Such research projects could not sway the general belief in the great power of the media that emerged in the inter-war years as a result of the apparent success of propaganda.

DIRECT EFFECTS THEORIES

While never formulated into any systematic theory during the period, the earliest theoretical perspective on media effects has been described as the 'hypodermic needle' theory – it has also been called the 'magic bullet' and 'transmission belt' theory (De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989: 164). Whatever its label, the basic idea is simple: 'media messages are received in a uniform way by every member of the audience and that immediate and direct responses are triggered by such stimuli' (1989: 164). Lasswell (1927) and Hovland *et al.* (1953), in their studies of the effectiveness of propaganda and communication, both subscribe to the view the media could – under the right circumstance – stimulate specific behaviour amongst a target group of people. Today this theory is seen as crude, simplistic and naive. Yet the view of an omnipotent media rested on an understanding of human behaviour common at the time. An individual's behaviour was seen as conditioned by inherited biological mechanisms that were fairly uniform from one person to another. The emotional nature of these mechanisms – as opposed to the rational nature – was stressed and it was only through social pressures that individual behaviour could be shaped. The breakdown of traditional society was seen as weakening these pressures. This view is rooted in behavioural psychology, which gained prominence in the first part of the twentieth century. Behaviourism takes the view that human behaviour is a more sophisticated version of animal behaviour. Human learning is no different in principle from animal learning in that it responds to the stimuli of rewards and punishment. The stimuli-response model is an essential component of the hypodermic needle theory. Curran and Seaton (1997: 262) conclude that 'all of the terms used to describe what the media do have a behaviourist bias, in which a single and external force – the media – have an impact on a single subject – the person'.

The hypodermic needle theory in its pure form no longer survives. Weaknesses in the theory are apparent. It does not address the influences that intervene between the

messages from the media and the opinions and attitudes people hold. It also denies the audience any capacity to interpret, discount or distort the media messages they receive, ignoring that people engage with media messages from their own ideas, prejudices and preconceptions. The theory presents people as passive recipients of media messages, with little or no say in how they interpret them. The message is simply 'injected into' the subject who responds in a simple and observable way. These deficiencies led to serious re-assessment of media effects, which has all but discredited the theory, although contemporary discussion of media effects is haunted by the ghosts of past theories, and the potency of the hypodermic needle theory is apparent today, particularly in political circles and popular culture (Glover, 1984: 4). For example, a junior government minister stated in the British House of Commons in the early 1980s that 'violent films can give way to violent imitative behaviour' (quoted in Root, 1986: 13). Adherence to the view that the media generate copycat behaviour is also implicit in the work of a number of pressure groups that lobby against too much sex and violence on television and in the cinema. The image of the television viewer in popular culture is of a zombie or couch potato glued to his or her television screen while the press continually carry stories about the negative and detrimental impact of television and film on children (see Root, 1986). Contemporary concern with direct effects is largely associated with television and film, and their impact on children – although similar concerns about the advertising industry were voiced in the 1950s and 1960s (see Packard, 1957).

The direct effects theory has not entirely disappeared from the social sciences. Over the years efforts have gone into elaborating and correcting this model (Grossberg *et al.*, 1998: 286). Since its demise in the late 1940s the stimulus-response theory has reappeared albeit in a more sophisticated form, particularly in the field of psychology. Since the early part of the twentieth century psychology has moved away from a simplistic notion of human behaviour. Behaviourists have come to accept that people do not respond in 'a more or less uniform way' to external stimuli (De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989: 165). Social factors are now seen as important determinants of individuals' responses to media messages as mass society theorists' view of society as comprised of isolated, vulnerable individuals with few strong ties was increasingly rejected by social scientists. However, this has not prevented scholars from postulating explanations as to how the media influence behaviour. One such theory is that of social learning, which argues people can learn new behaviour through their observations of the behaviour of others (Grossberg *et al.*, 1998: 287). First articulated in the early 1940s social learning theory postulated imitative behaviour occurs when people are motivated to learn and when such behaviour is reinforced. Early social learning theorists stressed the importance of reinforcement, the rewards associated with performing the learned behaviour, and never applied their ideas to individual actions. The three main ways in which people can learn from observation are through personal experience, interpersonal exchanges and the media. How much and what kind of behaviour people learn from the media became a matter of debate.

In the early 1960s Albert Bandura developed social learning theory to understand media effects. He argued the actors in the media are powerful role models whose actions provide the information on which individuals base their own behaviour (Bandura, 1965). He believed the media were the most efficient means of teaching new ways of behaving, particularly to children and young people. People could learn new behaviour and the solutions to problems more quickly and with less cost through the media than in everyday personal interactions. He stressed the importance of imitative behaviour, which he demonstrated through a number of controlled laboratory experiments. Bandura's Bobo doll studies sought to establish if observing a filmed behaviour could teach children that behaviour and motivate them to be like the film model (Grossberg, 1998: 288). He concluded from his research that new patterns of behaviour could be learned by simply watching filmed portrayals of them. Seeing a film model being punished for exhibiting certain behaviour was found to decrease the chances of that behaviour being imitated, and depictions of a model being rewarded for prohibited behaviour increased the chances of that behaviour being copied. What Bandura labelled inhibitory and disinhibitory effects qualified the capacity of social learning through media representations. Bandura's experiment is considered a classic piece of media research, establishing that behaviour can be learned from the media. Subsequent research has applied his work to testing whether filmed violence results in more aggression in viewers (see Buss, 1961; Berkowitz and Rawlings, 1963). Their laboratory experiments found that certain forms of film violence are imitated and aggression is aroused by the viewing of certain kinds of violence (Newburn and Hagell, 1995). However, such research is heavily contested on the grounds of its methods (see below) and its neglect of the broader social context within which learning takes place.

Bobo doll studies

Bandura's experiment began by showing a group of children between the ages of three and six years of age a film scene in which a man walked up to an adult-size plastic Bobo doll and told it to move aside. After glaring at the non-compliant doll, the man then began a series of physical and verbal assaults on the doll, including putting it on its side, sitting on it and punching its nose while shouting 'Pow, right in the nose, boom, boom', and bashing it on the head with a mallet while saying 'Sockeroo . . . stay down.' This scene was then repeated. For one group of children the film ended there. For another the film went on to show the man being rewarded with soft drinks and sweets for hitting the doll and being told he was a 'champion'. A third group saw a film in which the man was told off by another who told him he was a 'big bully' and should 'quit picking on' the doll.

After the viewing each group was taken into a room with various toys including a Bobo doll like the one in the film, balls, a mallet and other toys children liked to play with. These toys offered the opportunity for the children either to imitate the aggressive behaviour they had seen in the film or start playing with other toys in a non-imitative way. Each child was left alone in this room while they were observed by the researchers from behind a two-way mirror.

The researchers found imitation occurred with those children who had seen the film with no consequences or with the actor being rewarded for his aggressive actions. Boys were more likely to imitate the actor's behaviour than girls. Children who had seen the actor punished were less likely to imitate but when offered a reward for doing so they did.

Source: adapted from Grossberg *et al.*, 1998: 288–9

LIMITED EFFECTS THEORIES

The direct effects theory was superseded by the 'limited effects paradigm', which dominated audience research in the 1960s and 1970s (Gitlin, 1978: 207). Rejecting hypodermic needle theory as unsophisticated and unscientific, the origins of this new way of thinking about media effects lay in the empirical work into attitude change and persuasion undertaken in America during the Second World War. In an attempt to assess different sorts of propaganda on American service personnel, the experiments of researchers such as Hovland and Lasswell gradually eroded the direct effects theory to which they had subscribed. The outcome of these experiments was the recognition that the effect of a particular item or image was not a simple linear consequence of the content of that item or image (Tudor, 1979). Rather perceptions were conditioned by the predispositions of audience members. People were not the passive, isolated and impressionable entities of mass society theory but individuals who could 'interpret what they saw and heard in line with their own already established beliefs' (Tudor, 1979). Above all people exist within groups and their immediate set of social relations was seen as an important determinant of their understanding of media messages.

TWO-STEP MODEL

Research by Paul Lazarsfeld and colleagues into the impact of the media on people's voting behaviour presented the most serious challenge to the hypodermic needle model. In their study, *The People's Choice*, of a presidential election they found the media did not play a significant part in influencing how people voted (Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1948). Social characterisitics such as religion and class were seen as more important factors in determining

voting behaviour, with the media reinforcing existing beliefs rather than changing them. They argued personal influence is significant in changing people's opinions. Some people, however, are more influential than others. They are the 'opinion leaders' whose knowledge and views were particularly respected by voters. They pay more attention to the media and transmit what they learn to others whom they can influence through personal contact. They spend more time consuming the media but the effects of their exposure are not straightforward. The 'two-step flow' of information and influence is from the media to opinion leaders and then from opinion leaders to their less interested friends, workmates and neighbours. Opinion leaders have strong political beliefs, hence they pay closer attention to the media, and are less likely to be influenced by media messages.

Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) developed the notion of opinion leaders in subsequent work on how women made decisions about politics, consumer products, films and fashion. Opinion leaders exercised influence within their narrow spheres of expertise, some only for fashion with others only for kitchen appliances. While the opinion leaders were different for each type of activity what they had in common was a great deal of influence over their peers, playing a critical role in the dissemination of ideas and attitudes from the media to less active or involved sections of the population. These opinion formers are located at many levels of society – some of high status, others of low status. Thus the process of social mediation of media messages was not solely determined by wealth, power or status (see Curran *et al.*, 1982). Such a theory contradicted the view mass society theorists had of people as an 'atomised mass of isolated individuals' (Glover, 1984: 5). The two-step model re-asserted the primacy of group life in shaping social attitudes, emphasising the importance of social relations within the audience in determining responses to media messages.

As a view of media effects the two-step model emphasised the minimal or limited part the media play in shaping individual's decisions about the choices they make, from how to vote to what washing powder to buy. The media's influence, if it had any, was in reinforcing existing attitudes and opinions. The model reinforces a pluralist view of society by identifying opinion leaders as not necessarily being of high status or economically advantaged but as individuals from all walks of life who exercise influence because of their knowledge and the respect they have attained on a particular matter. The strength of the two-step model is to locate media effects in a broader social context. The media were conceptualised as having no direct effect on the audience but as operating within established social relations that shaped not only people's opinions, attitudes and beliefs but also the attention they paid to and use they made of the media. Such thinking had practical consequences in the 1960s when it was applied to the process of modernisation (see Chapter 9). Social scientists became interested in how 'innovations' such as means of birth control or more efficient farming methods could be spread within society. The role of opinion leaders in the diffusion of innovation was identified as being crucial.

Diffusion theory argues innovations in whatever sector of society will spread through a series of stages before being adopted (Rogers, 1962). Initially people will become aware of the innovation through means such as the media. Some – the early adopters – will take up the innovation but will be small in number. Their efforts will lead opinion leaders to try the innovation for themselves and, if they find it produces results, they will encourage their friends and associates to adopt it, and eventually many more people will make the change. The media are assigned a limited role in the diffusion of innovation (see Baran and Davies, 1995: 171–3). Such a theory is a more sophisticated version of the two-step model. The theory became part of the training manual for efforts to get rural communities in the USA and peasants in the developing world to adopt certain agricultural innovations. However, the failure to bring about change in the real world led to a re-evaluation of the basic assumptions of the two-step model. The model was seen as simplifying the process of communication and how influence is exercised. By conceiving influence as the power of one individual over another, the model ignores the power of political and economic institutions, such as big business and government, to exercise influence over the flow of information in society. It also negates the control over ideas – ideological power – that shapes interaction between opinion leaders and others. The nature of interaction between opinion leaders and their followers is unclear. The assumption made is that the choice of a film, a product, a fashion or a political candidate is the outcome of the same process. But is it? Perhaps the media play a more significant role in some decisions than others? The model provides no basis for establishing why some people are opinion leaders – how do people assess the knowledge of opinion leaders and why do they accord these individuals respect? And why is it that only opinion leaders are active? The majority of individuals in the two-step model are still passive, but only now other people directly influence them. There is also no reason why there should not be more than two steps in the flow of information. The model's emphasis on the media reinforcing pre-existing attitudes can also be seen as according with the functionalist perspective of those who held to this theory that society was orderly, unchanging and working for the good of all.

While there is dispute over the nature and impact of the findings and theoretical implications of the work of Lazarsfeld and his colleagues on media research (McLeod *et al.*, 1991: 240–1) the two-step model opened the way for a more complex understanding of media effects. For some it represented the end of the notion of an all-powerful media. As Klapper (1960: 8) concluded, 'mass communications does not ordinarily serve as a necessary or sufficent cause of audience effects, but rather functions through a nexus of mediating factors'. Media influence only operates through a range of other factors including personality characteristics, social situations and the general climate of opinion and culture (Grossberg *et al.*, 1998: 277). Media research and theory became increasingly interested in unravelling the countervailing pressures on the audience and explaining the ways in which people select, reject and assess media information. The limited effects tradition came to underpin the development of media effects research and thinking. The model spawned

'uses and gratifications' theory, which emphasises the range of purposes an individual uses the media for.

USES AND GRATIFICATIONS

Limited effects research in the 1960s abandoned the focus on opinion leaders and concentrated on the uses made by people in general of the media. The uses and gratifications approach to media effects assumed the audience brought their own needs and desires to the process of making sense of media messages. Needs and desires structured how messages are received and understood by the audience. The focus shifted from what the media do to people to what people do with the media. Katz (1959, quoted in McQuail, 1984) provides a mission statement for the approach:

> Such an approach assumes that even the most potent of mass media content cannot ordinarily influence an individual who has no 'use' for it in the social and psychological context in which he lives. The 'uses' approach assumes that people's values, their interests, their associations, their social roles, are pre-potent and that people selectively fashion what they see and hear to these interests.

While there are several versions of the uses and gratifications model, it is possible to identify three basic assumptions on which the approach rests. First, people actively use the media for their own purposes; second, people know what these purposes are and can articulate them, and third, despite the variations between individuals in their use of the media, it is possible to identify some basic patterns in uses and gratifications. Researchers attempted to identify the uses people made of the media in their lives, and in particular how and why different media forms appeal to their audience.

The roots of such research can again be traced back to the war years. Herzog (1944) wanted to know why so many women listened to radio soaps, what were their motivations and what satisfactions did they derive. Drawing on interviews with 100 listeners, Herzog's study went well beyond the categories of being informed, educated and entertained to include the promotion of a sense of belonging, acquiring insight into self and others, providing the opportunity for wishful thinking and experiencing emotional release (Curran, 1996: 127). Nearly three decades later, McQuail, Blumler and Brown (1972) argued soap operas such as *Coronation Street* fulfilled the social need some people had for companionship. From their examination of five types of programme – a radio serial, and from television a soap, a quiz show, the news and two adventure series – they concluded there were four types of uses and gratifications (1972: 155–61). First, the media provide *diversion*. They are able to do this in different ways. They allow people to escape from the constraints of routine that make up everyday life. They can help people to escape from their worries and personal problems, and they can provide emotional release. Second, the

media provide *personal relationships* for some people in the form of companionship. McQuail *et al.* (1972: 157) argue 'the characters may become virtually real, knowable and cherished individuals, and their voices are more than just a comforting background which breaks the silence of an empty house'. The content of the media can also be used as a source of conversational material in people's lives – what the authors label as a 'social utility' for viewers and listeners. Third, the media play a part in the development of *personal identity*. They can act as points of personal reference for individuals, to reflect on aspects of their own lives or personal situations. The content of programmes can provide people with information to develop ideas about the problems they are facing in their lives – a process of 'reality exploration' – as well as reinforce their views and values. Finally, the media offer the opportunity for *surveillance* of what is going on in the world, to keep abreast of issues and events.

Researchers in the years between these studies identified numerous different uses of the media (see McQuail, 1984). They also noted that different programmes or media forms are used in different ways depending on the individual. Ostensibly trivial programmes can be used for serious purposes, for example quiz shows could be used to improve general knowledge and serious programmes can be used for 'unserious' reasons – for example, being interested in what a newscaster is wearing. One of the major findings of this research is the unpredictability of uses and gratifications as people may use a programme in a number of quite unexpected ways. Such research generated a very different picture of media effects. No longer did the media manipulate the public but now viewers, listeners and readers could do what they wanted with the media. The passive dupes of the hypodermic needle model were replaced by 'a new, confident breed who knew what they wanted and how to get it' (Ruddock, 2001: 69).

The strength of the uses and gratifications theory is its focus on the role of individuals in making sense of media messages previously neglected or ignored. Critics, however, argue the approach suffers from a number of serious flaws (see Elliott, 1974; Ang, 1995). The first is the focus on the individual as the unit of analysis. By concentrating on the individual psychological make-up of audience members the approach tends to lose sight of the social dimension altogether. Consuming the media, such as television viewing, can be social activity undertaken with others, such as family members, and making sense of media content is often done in conversation with friends, family and workmates. There is also doubt as to whether it is possible to do no more than speculate about the audience's basic needs. Research has produced a long list of such needs, highlighting there is little agreement over them. To explain the basis of such needs requires a fairly deep, complex and thorough understanding of human experience, which is not evident in the research (Howitt, 1982: 13–14). The model also assumes individuals act with purpose in their viewing, listening and reading but often activities such as watching television are casual and unplanned, and the motive for watching can be due to the reputation of the programme or a lack of sufficient choice rather than the result of any specific need of the individual (Glover, 1984: 8). One way of summing up these criticisms is to say the uses and gratifications model is narrowly psychological and fails to locate the message or the audience in a wider social context. Some say this represents a retreat from the two-step flow approach.

CULTURAL EFFECTS THEORIES

Dissatisfaction with limited effects theories grew out of their focus on the individual psychology of the audience and their failure to locate discussion of media effects in a broader social context. Cultural effects theories started with the social context and worked into understanding the media. While accepting the media have an effect on their audience, these effects are not immediate but the product of a 'cumulative build up of beliefs and values over a long period of time' (Glover, 1984: 10). The 'cultural effects model' is usually seen as Marxist in orientation. In its Marxist version it rests on a number of assumptions: that capitalism creates a class society in which inequality is endemic; that the ruling or dominant class maintains its power through coercion and ideology, and that the media are central to the exercise of power through ideology, helping to win popular consent for their rule (see Chapter 1). However, not all cultural effects theory rests on Marxist assumptions. Early attempts to locate effects within a broader cultural context emerged from within the empirical tradition of American mass communications research.

CULTIVATION ANALYSIS

One of the most influential theories about the cumulative impact of the media is cultivation theory developed by the researcher George Gerbner. Based on empirical research over 20 years Gerbner and his colleagues argue television 'cultivates' a particular view of the world in the minds of the viewers. Regular usage of television over a long period of time can influence people's beliefs and their conduct. According to Gerbner (1992: 100) television viewing 'cultivates a commonality of perspective among otherwise different groups with respect to overarching themes and patterns found in many programmes'. Heavy television viewing over time was found to bring people's views of the world closer to one another. Their exposure results in them internalising the political and social picture of the world presented by television. Television plays a 'homogenising' role by its tendency to erode traditional differences amongst divergent social groups. Gerbner and his colleagues labelled this 'muting' of differences as 'mainstreaming' (Croteau and Hoynes, 1997: 212).

Gerbner's initial work was in the area of TV violence (see below). Those who viewed a great deal of television were found to be more likely to be concerned about crime and violence as the medium tended to report and represent this much more often than it happens in real life. Subsequent work refined and extended this work into many other areas of 'cultivation'. Research found far fewer old people on television than in society and heavy

television viewers tended to underestimate the number of old people in society. Not only did they 'misrecognise facts' but extrapolated these facts into a set of beliefs about the powerlessness of older people (Ruddock, 2001: 102). It is also argued television cultivation tended to push political beliefs in a more conservative direction (Gerbner *et al.*, 1982; 1984). Later writers took up the theme of cultivation in the area of political opinion, arguing media coverage of politics is responsible for the growing cynicism, alienation and apathy amongst the American electorate. Postman (1985: 144) believes television alienates viewers from the political process by presenting 'information in a form that renders it simplistic, non-substantive, non-historical and non-contextual'. He also argues the medium has a detrimental impact on viewers' education by reducing their attention span, emphasising entertainment over information and by inhibiting people's ability and capacity to read. For Postman (1985: 155) 'television viewing does not significantly increase learning' and 'is inferior to and less likely than print to cultivate higher-order inferential thinking'. Others have referred to the consumerist logic of television whereby corporate power and television images cultivate the view that the more individuals consume the happier they will be (Morgan, 1989).

The strength of cultivation analysis is the emphasis on continued exposure to the content of television over a long period rather than the selective exposure to individual programmes or films. The approach rejects behaviourism but does not argue the effects of the media are limited or minimal. Gerbner and his colleagues draw attention to the role of media messages in the maintenance of social structures over time. The aim of media messages is not to change beliefs and behaviours but 'to ensure the longevity of an existing social structure based on a particular set of beliefs and values' (Ruddock, 2001: 106). It is the cultivation of particular beliefs about the real world that is crucial. Cultivation analysis is interested in the ideological effects of the media and seeks to develop empirical means to assess them. Critics argue cultivation analysis fails to move beyond the 'conventional wisdom' of the direct effects paradigm. The viewer is still the passive dupe, unable and incapable of resisting media messages (see Gauntlett, 1998; Wober, 1998). They criticise the assumption in cultivation analysis that there is homogeneity in how people watch television and how they respond to the picture of the world it promotes. Viewing patterns and the meanings people take from television can vary. Barker (1998) comes to the defence of the 'heavy viewer' who is seen in cultivation analysis as 'accumulating deposits of message fat', which eventually submerge him or her in the media's worldview. From his work on comic and sci-fi fans Barker argues heavy viewers are more involved in the process of media consumption and more likely to critically engage with media content than the casual viewer, listener or reader. They are more inclined to express their views about media messages. Other critics express misgivings about the methods employed by Gerbner and his colleagues, which fail to establish clear categories for what constitutes heavy, moderate and light viewing (Ruddock, 2001: 108). Attempts to replicate the research have not generated data to support the claim television shapes people's perceptions of the world around them (De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989: 263). Limitations of method – as well as the failure to explain how cultivation occurs – cast doubt over the theory but in spite of these controversies cultivation analysis helped to broaden the debate about media effects.

AGENDA SETTING

The problem of assessing the effects of the media on people and society led some scholars to emphasise the media's power to determine what people should think about. Cohen (1963: 13) in a study of the media and foreign policy in the United States claimed the news 'may not be successful in telling people what to think but it is stunningly successful in telling them what to think about'. The power to push people into thinking about certain kinds of issues became known as 'agenda setting'. Agenda setting research was a response to growing disenchantment amongst American scholars 'with attitudes and opinions as dependent variables and with the limited effects model as an adequate intellectual summary' (McCombs, 1981: 121). It was another attempt to 'overcome the limited effects findings' by questioning the 'prevailing wisdom that the media have little, if any, influence on voters' (quoted in Rogers and Dearing, 1988: 560). McCombs and Shaw (1972) developed the hypothesis in researchable form in their examination of the news coverage of the 1968 US presidential election campaign. They examined the content of the political news of the campaign in the press, news magazines and on television, and conducted a survey of people's views of the importance of particular issues covered in the media. They found a 'high level of correspondence between the amount of attention given to a particular issue in the media and the level of importance assigned to that issue by people in the community who were exposed to the media' (De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989: 264). While there was a strong correlation between the issues that appeared on the media's agenda and the salience and importance attached to issues by voters, it was not clear whether the media influences the public or the public sets the media's agenda. McCombs and Shaw initially assumed the media influenced their audiences, but others argue the media simply respond to the public, including many working in the media who see themselves as giving the people what they want. Subsequent agenda setting research has tried to resolve in which direction influence operates.

The struggle to set the agenda in elections across the world, as well as in relation to a number of issues, has concerned scholars (see Iyengar and Reeves, 1997: Part IV). One crucial piece of work by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) attempted to overcome the limitations of earlier research through a series of experiments (see also Iyengar *et al.*, 1982). They sought to test whether the issues that gained prominence in the national news became the problems the viewing public regarded as the nation's most important. Under laboratory conditions individuals were asked to view newscasts over a period of a week, some of which were altered to place more emphasis on certain issues. At the beginning of the week they were asked to rank in order of importance a number of issues, an activity they

repeated at the end of the week. They found people shown television broadcasts doctored to focus attention on a particular problem assigned greater importance to that problem. These people attached more importance than they did before the experiment as well as in comparison to people in control groups in which other, different problems were emphasised (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987: 112). Iyengar and Kinder (1987: 114) introduced the concept of 'priming' to describe how the media could go beyond telling people what to think about and shape the criteria used by individuals to judge the merits of their political leaders and the pressing political issues. Priming presumes that when evaluating political phenomena, people do not take into account all they know – even if they wanted to, time often prevents them. Instead people rely on what comes to mind, 'those bits and pieces of political memory that are accessible'. Iyengar and Kinder found evidence to support the claim that 'television news was a powerful determinant of what springs to mind and what is forgotten or ignored'. It helps to shape the standards by which the performance of politicians are measured and by which political choices are made. For Iyengar and Kinder (1987: 117) the power of the media does not rest in persuasion but in 'commanding the public's attention (agenda setting) and defining criteria underlying the public's judgements (priming)'.

Despite the flourishing of agenda setting research, the concept is criticised for a number of shortcomings (Perry 1996: 151). Lang and Lang (1981) draw attention to the problem of identifying what an issue is. They argue 'without a clear definition, the concept of agenda-setting becomes so all embracing as to be rendered practically meaningless' (1981: 450). Agenda setting research has focused on a range of 'issues' from general topics such as inflation to more specific events such as natural disasters. The confusion between happenings constrained by time and place and broader cumulative happenings is further confused by the media locating particular events within a broader category (Rogers and Dearing, 1988: 566). As Rogers and Dearing (1988: 567) point out, different issues may influence the agenda setting process in different ways. It is possible to distinguish between 'rapid onset news events' such as the US bombing of Libya in 1986 and 'slow onset' items such as the 1984–85 famine in Ethiopia, as well as a 'high salience, short duration' issue such as the hijacking of a TWA airline in 1985 and a 'low salience' issue such as the rise and fall of US employment figures. While agenda setting research shows a correlation between the media agenda and the policy and public agendas, there is limited conceptualisation of how and why this might happen. Despite all the research we do not have a clear understanding of the process of agenda setting, of what happens when the issues of importance on the media's agenda are transferred to the minds of the public or policy makers. Is this a short-run or long-run process? Research into how long it takes for the public to take up the media's agenda has generated different and inconclusive answers (Severin and Tankard, 1988: 278–9). To what extent is agenda setting a conscious or unconscious process? How far do certain cues (such as headlines, visuals or position of item in a newscast) suggest the importance of an issue? How do people store information

about the importance of an issue? These – and other – questions about the processing of information from the media's agenda are largely ignored in agenda setting research. Only in recent years have researchers acknowledged that the media's agenda is shaped by others. Research into who sets the media's agenda has highlighted the interplay between interest groups, government officials, citizens and politicians amongst others in trying to influence what the media reports as important. The complexity of the process by which issues become important in policy-making circles and public debate led the Langs (1983) to develop the notion of 'agenda building', which suggests the process of putting an issue on to the public and policy-making agenda takes time and goes through several stages. From their study of the media's reporting of the Watergate crisis they identified a number of key variables in determining whether an issue is taken up. The language the media use to describe the importance of an issue, the way in which the media frame the issue, and the role of credible, well-known people in articulating the importance of an issue are deemed crucial (see Severin and Tankard, 1988; 279–80). While agenda setting has been 'one of the major concepts in media effects theory since the 1970s' (Severin and Tankard, 1988: 282) – particularly in the area of political effects – there are doubts about the exact nature of the impact on the public of the media's agenda.

MEDIA AND VIOLENCE

The issue of television and violence has dominated the media effects debate. In popular circles watching violent television and films is a cause of violence in society. Children, as young, impressionable and innocent, are seen as especially vulnerable. High-profile murder cases have evoked the power of the visual media to explain the behaviour of offenders. In the 1993 trial of the two young boys who killed the infant James Bulger the judge stated his belief that 'exposure to violent films may in part be an explanation' (quoted in Jones, 1997). In America defence lawyers in some cases have argued viewing violent films influenced the actions of their young clients. Supporting evidence for the 'copycat' violence being learned from the media is provided by a number of official government reports. In 1972 the US Surgeon General concluded from his interpretation of a vast amount of data put before him that 'a causal relationship has been shown between violence viewing and aggression' (quoted in Schorr, 1985: 160). In Britain the Newson Report in 1994 came to the same conclusion on less evidence (see Barker, 2001). The outcome has been legislation restricting access to violent material, one of the most recent being the introduction of the V-chip into television sets, which allows parents to censor what appears on their screens. Such actions have not curtailed the debate about media violence as more recently concerns have been expressed about children and teenagers downloading violent images from the Internet (see Craig and Petley, 2001).

This highly charged debate about media violence provides a case study for examining the issues and problems that have beset theoretical approaches to understanding media effects. In examining media violence there is a clear problem of distinguishing *what kind* of effect

of *what* on *whom*. Effects research is often confused by bracketing together different kinds of behaviour. The media violence debate puts sex and violence together as if they are a natural couplet (see Root, 1986). Moral guardians such as the late Mrs Whitehouse in Britain, and her pressure group the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVLA), lump media representation of sex and violence together because of their moral disapproval of both. Some feminist scholars associate pornography with 'violence against women'. Andrea Dworkin (1981) sees pornography as the cause of rape in society. There may be an occasional convergence between sex and violence in the media, with some of the more distasteful forms of pornography involving violence, but there is no reason to assume sexual behaviour and violent behaviour is the same. Different kinds of behaviour can be seen as similar if we accept the stimulus-response model. However, as we have seen, there are limitations with this model, and the attempt to generalise about behaviour across a range of walks of life is problematic.

The media violence debate is also clouded by a conception of the audience that focuses primarily on young people and children. Barker and Petley (1997: 5) argue media effects studies generally are biased in their understanding of whom the media is supposed to effect – they do not usually examine 'the "educated" and "cultured" middle classes, who either don't watch such rubbish, or else are fully able to deal with it if they do'. It is, for example, the young, the uneducated, the 'heavy viewer' and the working class who are seen as susceptible (Gauntlett, 2001: 57). There is also the question of what is meant by 'violence' both on the screen and in the behaviour of audience members. Research and popular debate do not provide a clear-cut definition of violence. Media portrayals of violence range from violent behaviour in cartoons to news footage from the world's war zones. It can

> encompass anything from cartoons (ten-ton blocks dropped on Tom's head by Jerry, Wily Coyote plummeting down yet another mile-deep canyon); children's action adventure films (the dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park* alongside playground scuffles from *Grange Hill* and the last-reel shoot-outs in westerns); news footage from Rwanda and Bosnia; documentary footage showing the police attacking Rodney King in Los Angeles . . . etc. etc.

which, for Barker (2001: 42), represents a 'useless conflation of wholly different things'. Violence in real life can vary enormously, from anti-social behaviour to aggressive actions and, in certain contexts, aggressive behaviour can be deemed acceptable or at worst understandable. There is, then, a basic difficulty of defining violence. Thus what appears an obvious discussion requires careful consideration and clear definitions.

The direct, limited and cultural effects models have been applied to the question of media violence in different ways. The direct effects approach has basically sought to measure

how behaviour is influenced by exposure to violence on film and television screens. Experiments have been the primary way in which such research is conducted. While there is a variety of ways in which laboratory experiments on media violence have been done, it is possible to identify the same basic design (see Murdock and McCron, 1978). Researchers usually select a violent episode from the content of the media and show it to a group of subjects. These subjects are then frustrated in a particular way and provided with an opportunity to act out their response to the film and the experience of frustration. These responses are observed and measured, and then compared with those of a control group who did not see the extract. Both groups are usually selected to have the same basic composition – whether it is to include an equal number of women and men or introverts and extroverts. If those in the group who saw the extract react more violently or aggressively, this can be attributed to the effect of the media. A range of techniques has been used to assess the effects, from charting physiological change during viewing (such as an increase in blood pressure or sweating) or by observing whether social behaviour has changed afterwards. The main conclusion of such laboratory research is that exposure to violent media material can cause violent responses. Thus certain forms of filmed violence are seen as imitative and aggression can be aroused by the viewing of certain types of violent episode (Newburn and Hagell, 1995). Bandura's work is seen as a typical example of the laboratory experiments on media violence. Such work has the aura of 'scientific authenticity'. The laboratory is central to popular conceptions of science as the place where discoveries are made and hypotheses are subjected to rigorous testing (Murdock, 2001: 164). For others they are places staffed by 'mad scientists and numerical charlatans' in which the researcher's 'myopic allegiance to experimental methodologies' produces findings that are 'hopelessly divorced' from reality (Ruddock, 2001: 38).

Laboratory experiments into media violence are criticised for 'taking place under extremely artificial conditions which are unlikely to occur very frequently in other circumstances' (Newburn and Hagell, 1995). It is doubtful as to how much a subject's behaviour in a laboratory can be applied to the outside world. Other factors in the 'real' world, such as peer group pressure or family environment, militate against certain forms of action or behaviour being taken. There is also a problem of distinguishing the media from the range of other factors or stimuli that could account for violent behaviour. Producing the controlled experiment that makes it possible to identify one single stimulus to account for a person's behaviour is problematic. Subjects in laboratory experiments often provide responses they believe the researcher wants. The stimuli in such experiments – the film extract – often only reflect the researchers' interests and are viewed by subjects in highly contrived conditions. Samples are often seen as unsatisfactory as they do not represent the population at large. Thus laboratory experiments that take people out of their social context are seen as producing artificial behaviour in strange, atypical surroundings and providing little concrete evidence to judge what real people would do in the real world.

Dissatisfaction with method – as well as reservations about the simplistic conception of human behaviour – led to attempts to understand the effects of media violence in their 'natural' environment. As one researcher put it: 'do we want to know with certainty what will happen in a highly specific set of circumstances, or do we want to know what is more or less likely to happen when media violence is seen in "natural everyday viewing situations"?' (Noble, 1975: 153). Researchers observe and question people in their natural habitat by means of the field study. For example, Noble (1975) examined teenage boys in an Irish boarding school. He argued there are too many variables in the process of watching television for us to be certain an effect can be attributed to the medium. He also suggested that some media violence may be cathartic, a release mechanism for aggressive impulses that could otherwise be acted out in real life. Such a finding is reinforced by other field studies, in particular that of Feshbach and Singer (1971) who examined teenage boys in American private and care homes. Noble's conclusions were that the effects of media violence depend on the degree to which viewers recognise or identify with the perpetrators or victims of the violence. In other words, they are limited or mediated by the disposition or attitudes of the audience. This is in keeping with the uses and gratifications approach. Noble also distinguished between factual and fictional violence, arguing the boys he studied were more disturbed by 'real' violence on the news than by violence in the context of fictional programming.

Halloran *et al.* (1970) stressed the role of the audience in an examination of television and juvenile delinquency. The viewing habits of delinquent children were compared with those of non-delinquents. The former watched slightly more television overall and a few more 'violent' programmes. Halloran *et al.* concluded children did not become delinquent because they watched a lot of television but they watched a lot of television because they were delinquent. The heavier viewing was attributed to the deprived backgrounds from which such children generally came. Deprivation resulted in increased television viewing because such children lived in families where the TV set was always on, in neighbourhoods in which alternative leisure activities were absent and they found personal relationship difficult, and television became a substitute. Halloran *et al.* (1970: 178) concluded

> the whole weight of research and theory in the juvenile delinquency field would suggest that the mass media, except just possibly in the case of a very small number of pathological individuals, are never the sole cause of delinquent behaviour. At most they play a contributory role and that a minor one.

Both Noble and Halloran avoid the problems of direct effects research and its emphasis on laboratory experiments and simplistic learning models. They recognise and examine different styles of violence, noting the importance of how violence is presented in the media. However, their focus on the nature of media violence and the way in which the

audience uses it ignores or downplays the cultural context within which media violence operates. At the simplest level a number of variables such as age, sex and ethnicity are neglected in uses and gratifications approaches to media violence.

The cultural effects model is less concerned with the impact of media violence on the individual than with how media violence affects society's ideas and views of violence. For Murdock (1982b) effects theories usually start from the wrong point. Instead of asking whether the media causes violence we should ask what causes violence and then examine the role the media play. Murdock's starting point is society, not the media. He points out that research into delinquent subcultures provides a good deal of material about the social background and attitudes of delinquent teenagers, their schooling, work and unemployment, group behaviour and social attitudes. The real problem is delinquency, which is the product of a set of social circumstances and can result in violence. By focusing on television, Murdock argues, we are using the medium as a scapegoat for our social problems and blinding us to other more deep-rooted social causes. Gerbner (1992) argues the obsession with the effects of television on violent behaviour has distracted from more important questions about the impact of television violence on how dangerous and violent audiences believe society is. He tested his belief that television affects people's feeling about violence in society by surveying a group of students, first ascertaining their viewing habits then asking them a number of questions about violence in society. Students who were heavy television viewers saw society, the streets and the police as more violent and people less trustworthy than light viewers. People who believe the world is more violent than it is and who are more fearful of becoming victims are more likely to favour law and order policies. This is the cultural effect of television on society.

Cultural effects theories do locate media violence in a wider cultural context, drawing attention to questions other theories marginalise as well as the political dimension of the debate. They also raise questions about how we define and think about the problem of violence in the media. Murdock (1982b: 87) states, 'it is not enough to provide different answers to the dominant questions, we need to ask other kinds of questions and to work our way towards more plausible answers'. However, as with other theories, the empirical evidence to support the cultural effects model is far from clear-cut. Gerbner's studies can be criticised on several grounds. Using students is problematic, as they do not represent a cross-section of the population. People's views of violence in society are shaped not only by television viewing but also by other variables, including their social circumstance such as where they live, their age and gender. There is also the possibility that people watch a lot of television because they are afraid of going out. Demonstrating the cultural effects of media violence is problematic.

The debate on media violence highlights the more general limitations of the thinking about media effects. Conclusions as to the impact of media violence on behaviour are

extremely weak. There is little empirical evidence to support the views that the media has a powerful or a marginal impact on people's behaviour. There is also little support for the position that the media foster particular views of violence in society. Often the debate about media violence rests on moral and aesthetic considerations rather than any solid evidence. What is clear is that discussion of media violence often isolates the media from other social factors. The media are one factor in explaining violence in society. Other factors are as, if not more, important. For example, most acts of violence are committed by men so perhaps we should focus our attention on masculinity rather than television or the media. Focusing on the effects of media violence on behaviour prevents us from understanding either violence in society or the media in society.

SUMMARY

The history of understanding media effects is characterised by a number of key periods in which the conceptualisation of media effects has been distinctive. Early effects theory and research was shaped by ideas, which highlighted the negative and anti-social impact of the media on those who consumed them. Notions of an all-powerful media with simple and straightforward effects on their audiences prevailed. The process of mass communication was 'a one-way hypodermic injection in to the veins of the body politic. Whoever they were, wherever they were, the media of mass communication affected all its uncritical consumers equally' (Tudor, 1979: 176). Gradually the all-embracing view of direct and clear-cut media effects gave way to a notion of selective perception, whereby individuals interpreted what they saw, heard and read in the media according to their own pre-dispositions. The two-step model of media effects emphasised that people were not simply 'faces in the crowd', individuals isolated from society, but part of groups and networks that enabled them to make sense of media messages. The variety of ways in which people use the media to gratify their particular needs came to dominate media effects research. The emphasis now was on what people do with the media rather than on what the media do to them. The context within which individuals consume the media became important as the pendulum swung toward understanding of media effects as minimal or limited. However, the focus on individuals and their social context was increasingly seen as a narrow way of understanding the effects of the media. For many researchers traditional effects approaches were asking the wrong questions (see, for example, Murdock, 1982a). Cultural effects theories seek to understand the broader impact of the media, on what we think about, how we understand society and how we collectively think. This represents a shift from examining the media as sources of individual effects to understanding them as 'articulators of our cultures' (Tudor, 1979).

The outcome of this history is far from conclusive. Four decades of media effects research have delivered inconsistent and contradictory results. Which model of media effects – direct, limited or cultural – is the most viable is a matter of conjecture. Academic debate throughout these decades has tended to see each model as being mutually exclusive. Social

scientists are a disputatious community and prefer one model, seeing it as incompatible with others. This has been reinforced by a difference between scholars as to what is meant by an 'effect'. There are today signs of a growing convergence between the different model of media effects as researchers start to ask similar questions as a result of a more sophisticated conceptualisation of the audience, which is the subject of the next chapter.