Mass Media

Media Effects

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The Effect of the Media on Society

This final section addresses how - and in what ways - audiences are affected by the media they consume by outlining three models of media effects that can also be linked to and explained in terms of, different types of theoretical explanation.

Direct Media Effects

These types of effect are called often called **mediacentric** or **transmission** models because they focus on the role of the media and argue they have a **strong**, usually **negative**, **direct** influence on audiences. This general model has a relatively long history, with older iterations suggesting a relatively *simple, direct and effective* relationship between the media and their audiences:

Hypodermic…

The *hypodermic syringe* (or *magic bullet*) model argues media messages are like a drug injected into the body; the media transmit messages that are picked-up and acted upon by the audience (*receivers*) in ways that change or reinforce their behaviour in line with whatever message is being pushed and promoted. The general argument here is that media messages *determine* how audiences see and understand the world in a directly measurable *causal* way.

The media (*cause*) transmits information and the audience reacts (*effect*) in a *broadly predictable* way that is **immediate** and directly attributable to the message received. Audiences, in this respect, are characterised as **passive receivers** rather than **active interpreters** of media messages.

Transmission..

These models, initially developed by **Shannon** and **Weaver** (1949), suggest the **transmission process** of media messages is split into two parts;

1. The **information source** (such as a government announcement)

2. The **transmission source** (such as a newspaper or television report of the announcement).

Media messages, therefore, can have different sources:

- **direct reporting** might involve a newspaper printing a speech made by a government minister.

- **indirect reporting** involves the speech being selectively quoted to support a particular story.

Transmission models, while still suggesting media effects are direct and immediate, are an advance on the basic hypodermic model in the sense that the source of the message significantly affects (or *mediates*) how it is received by an audience.

In this variation it's also possible for audiences to be *indirectly* affected by a media message through their **interaction** with people who are *directly* affected - people, for example, who pass on media messages, through their everyday conversation, to those who haven't personally experienced them.

This type of indirect media transmission is particularly applicable to something like social media where an original direct media message is picked-up, modified, amplified, criticised and so forth on platforms like Twitter, Reddit, Facebook and the like.

THE HYPODERMIC NEEDLE THEORY

- DEVELOPED IN THE 1920s AND 1930s
- LINEAR COMMUNICATION THEORY
- PASSIVE AUDIENCE
- NO INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCE

A by-product of this form of direct-indirect transmission is the addition of a further layer of interpretation by introducing concepts of *noise* and *interference* - defined as anything that distracts from or interferes with the transmission of a message. Conventional media, such as newspapers, can introduce noise through *selective reporting*, while audiences may receive the same message in different ways - some directly, others indirectly.

Evaluation

In terms of media effects, the basic Hypodermic model has a relatively long history - one that, not uncoincidentally, is tied into technological changes in how media are delivered (from the print media of the 19th century, through the development of radio and television in the 20th century, to the Internet in the 21st century). Each technological development has, in its different way, given rise to a resurgence in interest - particularly in the popular imagination - in this model.

This is partly because the model is particularly simple and easy to understand - a new and powerful medium develops that seems to exert an undue influence on relatively unprepared audiences - and this makes it particularly easy to grasp. When presented, for example, with a new and powerful medium of communication that comes to dominate the lives of many millions it's not difficult to see why people would be both concerned about the possible effect of such media and looking for explanations to justify such concerns.

It's also, therefore, partly because of what we might term "the shock of the new". When a new medium develops and is taken-up by large numbers of people it ripples normative expectations. It creates, in other words, a certain level of confusion - a mildly-anomic condition - over how the new medium might impact on social behaviour.

And it's also partly because, in the early - mid 20th century, the apparent success of political propaganda techniques - British, German, American and Russian - lends the model a certain credibility. State propaganda, for example, particularly but not exclusively during the 1st and 2nd world wars, seemed to exert a powerful, almost hypnotic, influence over the behaviour of many millions of disparate individuals.

We also need to be aware that the kinds of societies in which *modern* forms of mass media developed were quite different in scope to the kinds of late / post modern society that have developed in the late-20th - early-21st centuries.

The former were, for example, much more rigidly-stratified in terms of media ownership: the mass of the population had little or no access to the production of media messages (production was in the hands of governments, hugely-powerful individuals ("media barons") and large-scale corporations. In such a situation, therefore, it's not difficult to see why audiences were generally considered uncritical, gullible, passive and receptive individuals easily influenced and led by whatever they read, saw or heard in the media.

One piece of evidence often cited to support the idea of uncritical audiences and the power of the hypodermic model is the actor / director **Orson Welles**' infamous *War of the Worlds* broadcast (1938), a radio play cleverly designed to simulate a Martian attack (yes, really…) using the news broadcasting techniques of the time. The received wisdom here is that many Americans believed they were hearing about a real invasion and panicked in a variety of ways; the evidence for this 'mass hysteria' is, however, actually very thin (it is, to co-opt a currently-popular phrase "fake news").

From an audience of around 6 million, *some* people clearly did feel unsettled by what they heard (a police station in the area of the supposed invasion answered around 50 calls from worried residents), but accounts of people 'fleeing to the hills' have been grossly exaggerated over the years. The remarkable thing about this story is not so much people believed what they were hearing, but that the behaviour of the vast majority of listeners was not influenced or changed in any appreciable way.

As we've seen with the development of the Internet - and social media in particular - once the media was opened-up to "the masses" this audience characterisation couldn't be convincingly sustained in the face of critical, questioning and highly-active audiences.

The fact some contemporary audiences do appear to be uncritical, gullible and hugely-receptive to media messages simply adds to the sense of explanatory confusion surrounding the hypodermic model - something that, at least in recent times, has led to attempts to square this circle by modifying the basic model to focus on "vulnerable audiences". That is, the idea that while "most people" are largely immune to media messages "some groups" (such as children, the mentally ill and the elderly) are much more prone to the uncritical reception of media messages.

In relation to children, for example, the basic argument here is their lack of social experience and a tendency to copy behaviour makes them more amenable to direct media effects (and copy-cat violence in particular) than adults. Actual evidence for direct effects, however, tends to be anecdotal - the media claim, rather than prove, a relationship between, for example, violent behaviour and violent play.

While **Anderson et al's** (2003) review of "direct effects research' argues there is "*unequivocal evidence media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behaviour*", **Cumberbatch** (2003) argues that "*If this analysis was a car, the door would fall off in your hand and the thing would collapse half way up the street*". **Gauntlett** (1995) also demonstrates how even very young children may be media literate - they have an understanding about the media and how it works; most children, for example, can distinguish between fictional and factual representations of violence.

In relation to the elderly, a recent study by **Guess et al** (2019) found they were much more likely to share "fake news" on Facebook: "On average, users over 65 shared nearly seven times as many articles from fake news domains as the youngest age group".

They do, however, qualify this statement by noting that "First and foremost, we find that sharing this content was a relatively rare activity".

While transmission models are a more-sophisticated explanation of media effects than their hypodermic counterpart - although they suggest some form of direct effects, these can be mediated through different channels and sources, which makes it more difficult to measure the exact effect of the media on audiences - **Gauntlett** (1998), among many others, suggests the **empirical evidence** for direct media effects is weak, partly because most research has taken place under **artificial conditions**, such as a laboratory, that inadequately represent the real situations in which people use the media.

Bandura et al's (1961) 'Bo-Bo doll' experiment for example, is frequently cited as evidence that watching televised violence produces violence in children. One of the (many) weaknesses of the study was that the children were 'rated for violence' by adult assessors, which raises questions about research objectivity. **Belson** (1978) is also cited as evidence that prolonged exposure to media violence produces violent behaviour in young males. **Hagell and Newburn** (1994), however, found a general lack of interest in television among young offenders.

Cumulation theory, a more-recent modification of direct effect models, suggests media effects are **cumulative**, rather than immediate; prolonged exposure to violent films or computer games can result in both changed behaviour and **desensitisation**; the more someone is exposed to media violence, for example, the less likely to be moved, shocked or appalled by real violence.

Applying Direct Effects Models: The Frankfurt School

A major problem for traditional Marxism has been the general failure of the working classes to develop a sense of **class consciousness** that would enable it to become a **"class for itself"'** to challenge and replace a capitalist system through which it was systematically oppressed, exploited and impoverished.

One explanation for this "failure" looked to the emerging mass media in the early part of the 20th century, understanding its role as a cultural support system for a **dominant ideology** of capitalism and as a source of **false class consciousness** - a way of preventing the working class understanding the true nature of its oppression, through things like entertainment and misrepresentations of the social world.

The **Frankfurt School**, for example, developed **manipulation theory** to explain how the media directly attempts to influence audience perceptions; in a **mass society** characterised by social isolation and alienation the media becomes a source of **mass culture** through the agency of what **Adorno and Horkheimer** (1944) term a **"culture industry"**. With few links to wider social networks providing alternative sources of information and interpretation, audiences are uniquely receptive to whatever the media transmits.

The media mirrors other forms of **industrial production** in capitalist society by creating various elements of a **popular culture** - film, magazines, comics, newspapers and so forth - consumed uncritically and passively by the masses. Through control of the culture industry a ruling class controls the means of mental production and populations, as **Schor** (1999) puts it are "manipulated into participating in a dumbed-down, artificial consumer culture, which yields few true human satisfactions".

Indirect Media Effects

An alternative argument, sometimes called a **cultural effects** model, is that while effects are still strong, they are **slow**, **cumulative** and operate through the media's ability to embed itself in the cultural background of the society in which it operates. The media, in this respect, plays an *hegemonic role* in people's everyday interaction - and the heavier the consumption, the greater the media's long-term influence.

Cultivation theory, for example, suggests television, in particular, cultivates what **Gerbner** (1973) calls distinctive attitudes and orientations in its audience over time, rather than directly determining behaviour.
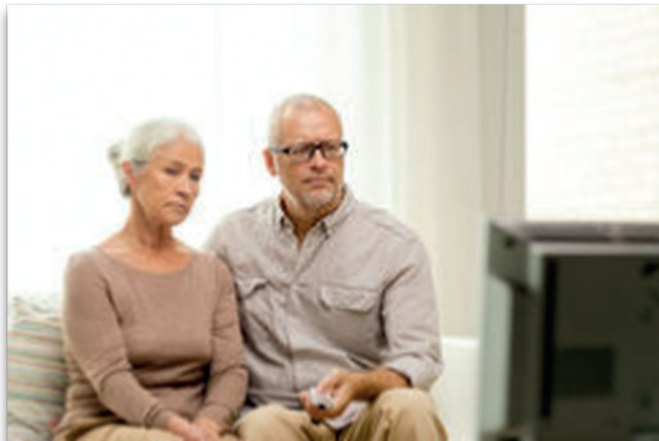
Those aged 65+ watch the most television in both Britain and America.

People who watch a lot of television, for example, gradually take on board the beliefs and attitudes to which they're exposed; where crime is a constant television staple, audiences become fearful of crime in ways that are out of all proportion to their risk of victimisation or personal experience.

Gerber called this "**mean world syndrome**", the idea that constant exposure to violent media content - both physical and verbal - leads individuals and groups to conclude that the world is much more dangerous, violent and *meaner* place than it actually is.

For Gerber, therefore, a significant media effect is the cultivation of attitudes about the world that then translate into real-world behaviours. While this doesn't simply mean that exposure to media violence makes individuals more violent, as hypodermic models tend to claim, it does mean that people approach their wider social relationships - both primary and particularly secondary - with a mindset that sees others as potentially aggressive and violent.

The *cultivation of meanness through media*, therefore, suggests that where some people approach their relationships with others "prepared for the worst" it makes real-world aggression much more-likely.

For **Chandler** (1995), the media '"induces a general mindset" around particular areas of social life (such as crime), taking-on a **hegemonic** role where some beliefs are encouraged and others discouraged. Attitudes and behaviour don't change overnight - media effects are gradual, long-term and build slowly over time - the result of a range of influencing techniques that include:

1. The consistent **promotion** of one set of ideas to the exclusion of others. These become the *dominant discourse* when a particular issue is discussed in the media. This discourse shapes the debate and demands to be addressed by all involved.

One example here is the dominant discourse over the past 30 or so years about Britain's membership of the European Community. The debate is continually shaped by questions of *immigration* - both legal and illegal.

Another is the issue of *knife crime* and the recent rise in fatal stabbings, particularly, but not exclusively, in London. This issue is most-commonly framed in the mass media as a problem of "gang culture" and any discussion of knife crime is predominantly framed by this narrative: how to combat gangs, how to prevent "vulnerable youth" joining gangs and so forth.

As **Irwin-Rogers** (2018) puts it "*During (my) many meetings, roundtables and conferences on youth violence, I have been struck by people's fixation on gangs whenever the issue of youth violence arises*".

When **Irwin-Rogers** looked at the knife crime statistics produced by the Metropolitan Police, however, he discovered that the reality of knife crime seemed far-removed from the media-fuelled discourse: "*In 2016, just 3.8% of knife crime with injury (fatal, serious, moderate and minor) had been flagged by the Metropolitan Police as gang-related*".

2. The **marginalisation** of dissenting views: ideas that deviate from the "*accepted media consensus*" rarely, if ever, appear in mainstream mass media.

Applying Indirect Effects Models: Neo-Marxism

For neo-Marxism, there is no automatic relationship between economic ownership and control over the means of mental production. The relationship between a ruling class and the media is both *indirect* and *ambivalent*. **Curren** (2002), for example, argues 'The conviction the media are important agencies of influence is broadly correct. However, the ways the media exert influence are complex and contingent'.

Cultural effects theories, therefore, see the media as a powerful influence: overwhelmingly supportive of the *status quo* and *core capitalist values*, but also capable of asking important and difficult questions. The primary role of the media is **cultural reproduction:** to promote and police cultural values since, as **Newbold** (1995) puts it, the media is embedded in social relationships and works "to produce and reflect powerful interests and social structures' - ideas that reflect an **hegemonic** dimension to media effects and social controls; one that allows alternative views and interpretations to develop.

Hall's (1980) use of **reception theory**, for example, involves the idea media messages always have a range of possible meanings and interpretations, some intended by the sender and others read by the audience. This involves two processes:

● **encoding**, or the intended message.
● **decoding** - how the audience interprets the message. The latter depends on a variety of factors, including class, age, gender and ethnicity, and is significant because the receptiveness of an audience determines how the message is understood and, by extension, its effectiveness

Audiences are seen as **relatively autonomous**: although people have the ability to accept, reject and modify media messages, this is always influenced by class, age, gender and ethnic factors. Someone who can't afford a personal jet, for example, is unlikely to be swayed by an advert to buy one. Relative autonomy means media messages can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the background characteristics of the receiver. **Hall**, for example, suggests three main readings:

• **Hegemonic**: The audience shares the assumptions and interpretations of the author and reads the message in the way it was intended.

• **Negotiated**: The audience broadly shares the author's views, but may modify their interpretation in the light of their own particular feelings, beliefs or abilities.

• **Oppositional**: The audience holds views and values opposed to the author and rejects the message.

The relationship between media and audience is, in these terms, **reflexive** - the one influences and modifies the other in a circular fashion. This means the media has to work harder and more subtly to attract, retain and influence an audience,. Contemporary advertising tries to establish a *brand* with which an audience identifies, rather than simply repeating the words "Buy me!". In this respect the media attempt to establish hegemonic control through **agenda setting**; they repeatedly try, according to **Severin and Tankard** (2001), to put certain ideas and issues in the public sphere at the expense of others.

However, as **McCombs and Estrada** (1997) note, being told *what* to think about doesn't guarantee an audience will think about it in a particular way, which is why **framing** is an important aspect of agenda setting; ideas are presented in ways that suggest to audiences how they should be interpreted (as with the related idea of preferred readings). **Simon and Xenos** (2000) argue framing primes audiences to understand issues in terms of 'elite discourses'; how dominant media groups - a ruling class, men, whites... - encourage audiences to understand an issue. In this way, the media create mythical realities for audiences - especially those heavily immersed in media - that construct the world in terms favourable to ruling elites.

Alternative viewpoints and interpretations to the dominant media discourse are either not reported or are the subject of intense questioning and criticism.

3. The **repetition** of dominant ideas until they assume a **taken-for-granted** status. Between 1995 and 2015, for example, "everyone knew" (because that was the dominant media discourse) that "crime was rising" - when both official police crime statistics and evidence from sources such as the British Crime Survey showed that, overall, crime had declined significantly over this period.

The media, from this viewpoint, lead people in certain directions, towards particular ideas and ways of thinking about the world.

As **Gerbner et al** (1986) put it "*the continual repetition of patterns (myths, ideologies, 'facts', relationships, etc.) serve to define the world and legitimize the social order*".

Evaluation

Cultural effects theories involve **methodological** problems related to *measuring* effects that are slow, cumulative, indirect and long term - such as how to measure attitude or behavioural changes in an audience that are the result of media, as opposed to some other, effects.

More fundamental problems relate to the definition and tracking of media effects, since just about *anything* can be advanced as evidence to support the theory.

- If an effect is identified, this demonstrates the media's hegemonic role.

- An inability to identify effects, however, doesn't, disprove the theory since "oppositional readings" may explain why there are no effects.

Cultural effect models have also been criticised on **conceptual** grounds.

- **Corner** (1983), for example, argues it is difficult to show *empirically* which, if any, reading is a *preferred* one in a situation where there are always many possible readings of a text. This situation has, if anything, become even more complicated with the development of the Internet and social media.

- **Myers** (1983) also argues it is in an advertiser's interest to create a *range of preferred readings*, so their product will appeal to a wide and differentiated audience. In other words, effective advertising, in a similar way to effective news reporting, depends on the ability to create a range of possible readings of a particular product.

A single preferred reading is an important part of neo-Marxist arguments because it explains how dominant groups exercise hegemonic control; if there can be many different readings embedded in a text, this makes the concept - and the theory it supports - more problematic.

A further problem is the use of **semiological analysis** to disentangle deeper cultural meanings from the everyday "surface reality" of media messages. Quiz shows, for example, can be interpreted as harmless escapism or as indicative of capitalist values of greed, consumerism and individualism - with no empirical way of deciding between the two.

In relation to **cultivation theories / mean world syndrome** there is also the problem of *causality*: those who, for whatever reason, distrust the world may be much more-likely to consume (violent) media that fits their preferred view of that world. Rather than the media causing distrust, mean-minded people simply consume media, such as violent films and games, that fits their view of the world.

Limited Media Effects

A third general approach, sometimes called **audiocentric** or **diffusion** theories because they focus on how audiences *use the media* to satisfy their own particular needs, suggest few, if any, measurable effects directly attributable to the media.

Diffusion theories focus on how media messages spread throughout an audience, based on a trickle-down effect; although messages originate with media producers, they are received by an audience both directly - such as personally viewing a news broadcast - and **indirectly**, through interaction with those who directly received the message, other media sources reporting the original message, social media and so forth. **Katz and Lazarfield**'s (1955) **two-step flow** model, for example, argues messages flow:

1. From the media to opinion formers - people who directly receive the original message.

2. Through them to people in their social network - people who receive the original message in a **mediated** form. That is, they recei*ve an edited, condensed or embellished* version of the original message.
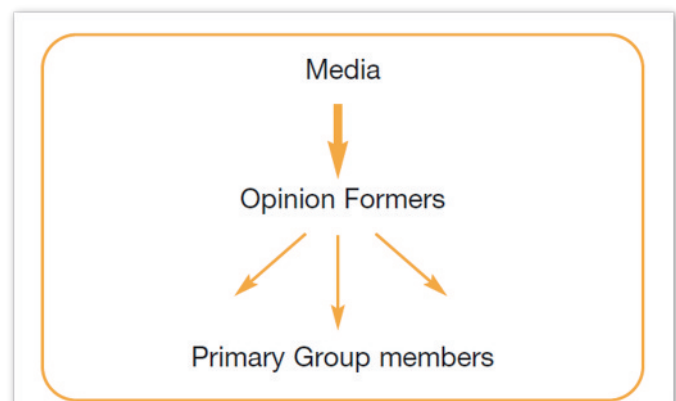

Two-Step Flow Model

These "informal, interpersonal relations" - at the time **Katz and Lazarfield** were writing this mainly involved direct face-to-face interaction and communication (family, school, friends, work colleagues…) but this can be easily extended to encompass the kinds of social interaction currently found on social media sites - were and arguably remain the key to understanding how mass audiences responded to media messages.

The basic argument here is that any behavioural changes in an audience are the result of how messages are interpreted, discussed and reinterpreted within **primary groups** (groups whose membership we value) rather than from any direct media influence.

This version of *diffusion theory*, therefore, has three main elements:

• **Primary social groups** are a more significant influence than the media.

• **Interpersonal sources** of information are significant influences on how people receive and respond to media messages.

• **Limited direct effects**: Behavioural changes are likely to result from the way media messages are interpreted, discussed and reinterpreted within primary groups, rather than from any direct media influence.
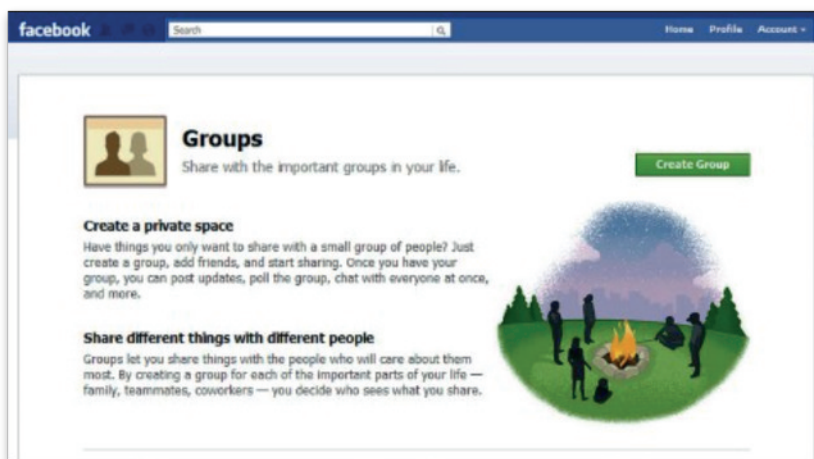
Online primary groups?

Diffusion theories, although originally developed 50-odd years ago, actually translate quite easily into contemporary audiences and their relationship with social media - particularly those, like Facebook or Twitter, that aim to develop communities of like-minded individuals who share common interests and ideas.

In contemporary societies, therefore, electronic communities may constitute *primary groups* for an increasing number of people and their interaction blurs the line between "the media" and "the audience" - an idea compounded by **Shannon** and **Weaver's** (1949) concept of **noise**; the original message easily becomes lost, over-simplified and misrepresented when mediated through social interactions.

On this basis, contemporary mass communications function in highly selective ways, in terms of:

● **Perception:** people notice some messages but not others.

● **Exposure:** people choose media messages consistent with their beliefs.

● **Expression:** people listen to the opinions of people important to them both offline and, increasingly perhaps, online.

● **Retention:** people remember things that fit with their beliefs and forget those that don't.

● **Selection:** some messages are never relayed and never reach their intended audience.

The implications here are that while "the media" may have an unknown effect on people's lives and perceptions we should stop thinking about "media" and "audience" as distinct and separate.

We should also stop thinking about "media effects" in terms of something "the media" does to "an audience". In an increasingly important sense, the media *is* the audience: information is picked-up, changed, adapted, transmitted and retransmitted *by* an audience *to* an audience with little or no input from conventional media sources such as television and newsprint.

Uses and gratifications takes the separation between media and audience a step further by arguing consumers 'pick-and-choose' both media and messages: they use the media to satisfy a range of gratifications, such as *four primary uses* suggested by **McQuail et al** (1972):

1. Entertainment – as a diversion from everyday life, to relax, for mental stimulation and so forth.

2. Social solidarity: Talking about a shared experience, such as seeing the same film or television programme, serves an **integrating function**; people feel they have things in common with each other.

3. Identity - to create or maintain a sense of 'who we are'. It is a resource - from reading lifestyle magazines to maintaining a Facebook presence - used to construct a sense of self.

4. Surveillance - providing news and information about an increasingly complex world.

Severin and **Tankard** (2001) suggested a further use - *companionship* - when they found the heaviest media users were those who were lonely and / or socially isolated.

Are audiences taking on the role of media?

Evaluation

Although the idea of *active audiences* is an important dimension of our understanding of media effects, its significance is *overstated*.

Choice, for example, may be extensive in terms of different publications, but in limited by ideological similarities. While different newspapers, for example, may offer different specific political viewpoints, all conform to very similar *core values* (no major UK newspaper, for example, offers a critical analysis of capitalist economics).

Stam (2000) goes further by claiming limited effects models **essentialise the audience** - to the relative exclusion of all other possible influences - by giving them an unwarranted and unsupported primary significance in terms of how media messages are interpreted.

Diffusion models broadly suggest the media has few, if any, effects - yet billions of pounds are spent each year by **advertisers** precisely because the media does have clear and measurable effects; these may not be simple or clear-cut, but the principle remains strong.

On the other hand, it's not hard to find evidence to support the claim that "media effects" are overstated.

Over the past 20 years, for example, UK media have regularly transmitted messages about the possible dangers of mobile phone use (from brain cancer to memory loss and sleeping disorders) - yet despite the possible dangers, mobile phone use hasn't declined, let alone stopped.

While one reason for this might be a general belief such warnings are either untrue or exaggerated, another way of looking at this is through **Festinger**'s (1957) concepts of:

• **Cognitive assonance**: In broad terms, if a message *fits* with our personal and social (primary group) beliefs we are more likely to consider it favourably.

• **Cognitive dissonance** involves the reverse idea.

If the message *doesn't fit* with what we want to hear, we respond in a variety of ways: by questioning it, dismissing it, ignoring it or working out a way to twist it to fit with what we already believe. We find, in other words, some way to rationalise - and effectively neutralise - the dissonance we experience.

Applying Limited Effects Models: Interpretivism

For Interpretivists the key to understanding media is how people receive and interpret messages, rather than how or why these messages are transmitted. This follows, as **Hallahan** (1997) argues, because *"people can look at the same message and focus on different aspects to draw different conclusions about the message's meaning"*. Unlike Marxist models where the focus is on the producer of media messages, for Interpretivists the focus is on *understanding audiences*.

Where **transmission models** argue the media creates the audience, either directly (*hypodermic*) or indirectly (*hegemony*), Interpretivism argues *audiences create the media in their image*, through their *consumption choices*; popular media flourishes, unpopular media fails.

Diffusion models in this respect reverse the causality; where hypodermic models, for example, argue the media can cause an audience to become violent, the former argues those who *like violence* seek-out and use violent media to satisfy their needs.

This is an argument reflected in **reinforcement theory**; people seek out media that *reinforces* rather than challenges their worldview.

While primary groups (such as family and friends) fundamentally shape people's beliefs and behaviours, *secondary groups*, such as the media, merely reinforce these beliefs.

What this suggests, therefore, is that the relationship between the media and audiences is a complex one; a relationship that can't be easily characterised in a simple "either / or" way: either the media has an impact on audience beliefs or it doesn't.

Postmodernism

Postmodern approaches offer a fundamentally different type of explanation for media effects, initially in terms of ethnographic analyses of audiences. These move the effects debate away from an analysis of 'the media' and onto a cultural analysis of audiences and how they interact with different media.

An important dimension here is a move away from the notion of mass audiences, in terms of their actions and reactions, to audiences differentiated by age, gender and ethnicity as well as by more individualised categories such as cultural and technological competence. Whereas 40 or 50 years ago the "mass media audience" was largely homogeneous (relatively undifferentiated) in terms of tastes, general beliefs, identities and so forth, audiences today are much more fragmented.

This methodological shift - to focus on audiences rather than media - reflects a postmodern concern with how and why media are used in the construction of personal and social identities, an important component of which is how we understand and use media technologies. This, more-specifically, involves examining how media spaces - from print to television and the Internet - are structured.

To do this we need to understand both relatively simple issues - "Who uses what media in what contexts and for what purposes?" - to more complex issues about control and ownership of technology and how our media use fits into the general flow of social behaviour.

A further postmodernist strand focuses on exploring cultural competence - how different audiences bring different levels of literacy to their media use. In this respect, how people use the media - and what they take from it - depends on their familiarity with that media and this extends from things like understanding the conventions of films (how, for example, they manipulate our emotions), through the expectations we have for different media (what can and can't it do?), to the ability to master new and different technologies.

Another dimension to postmodern understanding is to consider how we engage with technology - the hardware and software that increasingly surrounds us. Forty years ago, for example, UK audiences had to cope with two television channels. Now, we are surrounded by technology, from 100's of television channels to smartphones, tablets, wearable computers and the "Internet of Things" - how various consumer goods, from televisions to fridges and microwaves, are connected through the Internet.

While this suggests far higher levels of contemporary technological engagement - we not only use more devices, they are also more-deeply embedded in our personal lives (think, for example, about how you'd feel if you had no access to a smartphone, tablet or desktop) - the main question here is the extent to which audience fragmentation, allied to an increased understanding of "how the media works", has altered or limited our ability to be manipulated in some way by mass media.

Consuming while creating?

Post-effects

Postmodernism, in this respect, embodies a different theoretical approach to understanding possible "media effects"; one that challenges conventional relationships seen in terms of media, in the sense of content producers, and audiences (content consumers).

It suggests the kinds of conventional media effects theories we've reviewed here no-longer have much currency. To try to apply them to contemporary forms of media and audiences would merely be to look for the wrong things in the wrong places in the wrong ways.

This follows because, despite their differences, conventional effects theories all assume a relatively hard-and-fast distinction can be made between media producers and consumers.

● For *traditional Marxism* the relationship is clear and separate (producers are the dominant partner).

● For *neo-Marxism* the relationship is more ambivalent (producers dominate in some respects, but consumers have a significant interpretative role).

● For *interpretivists* the dominant role is played by consumers who are able to pick and choose various forms of media consumption that meet their particular needs and purposes.

Where postmodernism differs from most other sociological perspectives is in the characterisation of information structures. Whereas modernist approaches, such as Marxism or Pluralism, view information hierarchically (the flow is from producers at the top to consumers at the bottom), **Castells** (1996) suggests postmodernists characterise societies in terms of networks that have "*become the dominant form of social organization*".

For this reason, power (in terms of control over the production and distribution of information), is no longer concentrated within institutions (media organisations, governments and so forth) but within social networks where information is both produced and consumed by the same people.

Flat, non-hierarchical information networks…

Information, therefore, flows between different points (people) within a network in such a way as to make it impossible to distinguish between producer and consumer (because they are, effectively, one and the same). **Tuomi** (2002), for example, identifies the characteristic features of postmodern media in terms of:

• *User as producer* - they are, as just suggested, the same people.

• *Backstage is frontstage*: This reflects **Goffman's** (1969) idea of social interaction as a performance; just like an actor in a play, we prepare and evaluate our public (or frontstage) performances "backstage" - in private, as it were. **Tuomi** adapts this idea to argue that with something like social media there is no backstage - all interaction is played out within the confines of the medium (**Meyrowitz,** 1994).

• *Content reflects interpretation*: In other words, the way different people in the network interpret information contributes to the development of the media - a reversal and rebuttal of the Marxist idea of a preferred reading.

The main implication here is that we have to discard (modernist) concepts such as truth or falsity when thinking about the ideological role of the media. All knowledge, from this perspective, is ideological - which makes it a fairly pointless exercise trying to argue some forms of information are more (or indeed less) ideological than any other form.

This consequently means it is no-longer possible to think about "how the media affects people" in the ways conventionally proposed by (modernist) effects models.

Probably not the most reliable and valid way to test media (lack of) effects

Perverse Spectators

One reason for this is the postmodern focus on the concept of meaning; where conventional media effects theories assume various levels of separation between 'the media' and 'the audience' Staiger (2000) argues the media have no immanent meaning (one that is fixed and unchanging).

Audiences, she argues, are perverse spectators; they use media in their own way - and for whatever purpose - through "**activated meanings**".

These are meanings created through the ways an audience interacts with media. In other words, the meaning of a soap opera, drama, news broadcast or whatever, is created and expressed in numerous different ways by whatever each viewer brings to their consumption and enjoyment of the programme; the meaning of EastEnders or a news broadcast changes each and every time it is viewed by different individuals.

This makes it impossible to quantify 'media effects' in any meaningful or coherent way since any 'effect' is changed each time it is identified. This idea holds true for both:

● the present - the meaning of a media text is changed immediately it is consumed.

● the past; horror films, for example, that were once considered shocking are now more likely to elicit laughter than fear.

These ideas lead to a couple of different ways of looking at "media effects" in post-effects society.

Audience as media

The first way of looking at "effects" in postmodernity is to think about the changing nature of the relationship between audience and media that has been brought about through changes in media technology and use.

Rather than being separated, as most conventional effects theories argue, the development of new media - from personal websites through blogs to massive social networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in Europe and America and WeChat in China - has led to a situation, as Tuomi argues, in which the audience can be both the producer and consumer of media texts.

The audience, in this respect, is the media and the media is the audience - the two are interchangeable and indistinguishable. One is simply a reflection of the other.

The exception that proves the rule? Psycho (1960) still makes me nervous about taking a shower…

for media research and effects theories. Although a producer may have some idea about how they would like an audience to receive and understand their texts, each reader interprets that text in terms of their own ideas, beliefs, cultural and technological backgrounds.

If, as **Basulto** (2011) argues, social media is a force "obliterating the distinction between the producers and consumers of culture" and **Napoli** (2016) contends that "audiences are both consumers and (increasingly) producers or creators of media products", this raises important questions about "media effects": not just in terms of conventional ideas about how "the media" influences "an audience" (if, indeed, we can talk about such things) but also in terms of a more radical reappraisal of the idea of "media effects" *per se.*

Media as audience

1. The fragmentation of potential audiences.

2. The development of new political and cultural identities and allegiances among these fragmented audiences.

The basic idea here is that postmodern societies become decentred, they fragment into smaller groupings focused around their different claims to particular political and cultural identities.

This creates a problem, of sorts, for media producers because they can no-longer reply on their content, print or electronic, routinely reaching a "mass audience". Rather, media producers are forced to target content at niche markets - small, but highly active and keenly interested groups with quite specific interests.

This general idea, although shot through with debates about media literacies, competencies and the uneven spread of technological development both within and between societies, is significant because it suggests a different direction

To be fair, it's not always easy to tell…

There has, of course, always been an element of media producers modifying their output for particular audiences.

●UK newspapers, for example, have always been targeted at particular audience demographics. The Daily Star, for example, tailors its output (it's difficult to actually classify it as "news") to a working class demographic while The Times looks to an entirely different, far more affluent and up-market, audience.

●Special interest magazines have similarly targeted particular demographics - from sport, through motor vehicles to fashion.

What makes the producer-consumer relationship different in postmodernity is the idea that changes to the audience produce changes in the media.

Audience fragmentation means competition for audience share intensifies among competing producers as they each strive to create content that appeals to a specific audience demographic. Media organisations, in other words, focus content on appealing to *niche audiences* - but the major difference between niche programming in the past and *nouveau niche programming* is that rather than produce content that then seeks to attract an audience, some - but not necessarily all - media companies *identify an audience and explicitly tailor their content to what that audience wants*.

In some instances this simply translates into the kinds of conventional niche marketing we've just noted. In others, such as how news is selected, represented and presented, there is a dependence on what the target audience demands - something that reverses the conventional relationship between media and audience. In this situation media producers effectively become "the audience"; they create content that directly reflects whatever view of the world their particular consumers hold - a level of understanding achieved by the kinds of sophisticated audience surveillance made-possible by the Internet and social media: the willingness, knowingly or otherwise, of individuals to disclose massive amounts of information about themselves in exchange for "free access" to a media platform such as Facebook.

In basic terms, an "audience" is the source of a particular set of ideas and interpretations about the world that their preferred media simply shapes and reflects back at them. The media - a contemporary example of which might be something like the cable-channel Fox News in America, a "producer" that channels a highly-particular worldview demanded by its predominantly elderly, white, male and conservative consumers - becomes the audience for whatever worldview is held by consumers.

Nouveau niche?

For this approach, it's no-longer possible to talk about "media effects" in the way we've conventionally theorised them here. Rather, the main effect in postmodernity is the impact audiences have on media producers: there are few, if any, conventional "media effects" because the conventional relationship between media and audience no-longer exists.

Evaluation

While critics of these approaches to understanding the role and effects of the media in late / postmodernity have acknowledged the changing nature of both media and audiences, there's a strong argument that claims about the dissolving relationship between media producers and media consumers have been overstated. There is, for example, little or no evidence to support the claim of some commentators that "Social media has completely deconstructed the traditional channels of media and human communication".

What is critically clear, however, is that the social and media landscape today is quite different to 40 or 50 years ago (or even pre-Internet) and one important consequence of this change is the audience voice; that is, the ability of individuals to express their thoughts, hopes, fears and so forth through a wide variety of media channels that didn't exist pre-Internet.

A major aspect of the changing media landscape is the rise of "platform media": corporations, such as Facebook, who provide a platform for audiences to "create media" through the expression and exchange of their views, much of it in real time. Such Corporations, while not being conventional media organisations who produce and distribute their own content are, however, increasingly coming to resemble the types of organisation they are supposedly replacing "in postmodernity".

Fox News:
Telling it like it isn't?

Facebook, for example, increasingly selects and presents news content across its platform in ways that ape conventional news organisations and it acts to "censor" content (such as hate speech) by banning users where it decides such content infringes its rules.

While such platforms have led to a re-evaluation of what we mean by media producers and consumers, it's not true to say they have replaced conventional media organisations. There are, for example, a wide variety of national and global media corporations that continue to successfully produce content that is simply consumed by an audience.

While such audiences may not be as overtly passive as in the past (Game of Thrones and Star Wars fans, for example, have been extremely vocal in their criticism of the latest content produced by the global media corporations behind their production), there's no real sense in which these audiences are anything more than media consumers.

In terms of media effects, therefore, while powerful and potentially influential media organisations exist - from conventional "old style" media companies like News International to less-conventional evolving "media carriers" like Facebook, WeChat or Twitter - relatively powerful audiences also exist, although the power of the latter is less concrete, more-ephemeral, ill-defined and constantly changing than that of their corporate media counterparts.

This suggests, at the very least, we need to examine both of these elements - media organisations and media audiences - if we are to understand both media effects and the media landscapes in which they are played out.

While postmodernism questions the possibility of mass media through "unsustainable distinctions" between media producers and media consumers - the two eventually become indistinguishable - an alternative view is that regardless of how, in late / postmodernity, we actually define media "producers" and "consumers" the effects of their behaviour are real, tangible and can be both theorised and measured.

We could, for example, quite happily apply something like **cultivation theory** to understand the effects of audience interactions on social media.

Effects of the Media on Wider Society

As we've seen, debates over media effects polarise around two opposing interpretations:

- those (traditional and neo-Marxism) who see the media as having significant effects.

- those (Interpretivists and Postmodernists) who, for differing reasons, see the conventional idea of media effects as limited at best.

While these debates tend to focus on *individuals and groups with society* (differentiated in various ways by class, age, gender and ethnicity) there is a *broader debate* about the role and *effects of media in society as a whole*.

Unsurprisingly, these debates also polarise between those who see the role of the media positively, as a force for liberation and freedom and those who see it more negatively - as a force for oppression and control.

Before we outline examples of these positions it's important to note that the debate has moved-on in recent years, with the development of new media forms that both challenge and complement old media. As recently as a generation ago the debate was framed in terms of national borders and the impact of state controls on media that operated within a broadly national context (with obvious exceptions, such as Hollywood and the American film industry).

Presently the debate is increasingly framed around **globalisation**, its implications and tendencies. Cultural institutions such as the media, in a similar way to economic institutions and, to a lesser extent, political institutions, increasingly operate on a global scale and this has important implications for the role of the media across both national and international borders

Positive Effects

Both Pluralists and Postmodernists point to a range of ideas to support the argument that the media has a number of beneficial effects, one of the most significant being *choice*; the diversity of available media reflects every viewpoint and no viewpoint - an apparent contradiction resolved by observing that as media becomes more diverse it comes to represent and reflect a range of competing worldviews rather than a single worldview.

No single discourse is able to dominate.

Culturally, choice and diversity has a knock-on effect across a range of institutions and behaviours. Gender and age groups, for example, find themselves *empowered* by greater freedom of personal expression and a less restrictive moral order, as reflected in the media.

Butler (1990), for example, argues *gender scripts* are no-longer limited and restrictive, but many and varied; there are now more ways to "perform gender". The same holds broadly true for categories such as class, age and ethnicity.

More generally, a significant media effect is the creation of a greater *global awareness* of:

- economic trends (such as the development of areas like China and India as important production centres),

- political developments - events surrounding the 2011 Arab Spring, for example, were extensively reported through Twitter in the absence of more traditional media.

- cultural exchanges involving a greater exposure to and understanding of cultural differences.

Politically, media choice and diversity brings with it a greater questioning of "authority". **Lyotard** (1984), for example, argues a defining feature of postmodernity is its '*incredulity towards grand narratives*' - the "*big stories*", such as religion, science or political philosophies, that claim to explain "*everything about something*".

Postmodernity also involves a scepticism towards claims of "truth" as an *objective category* - truth and falsity can only be distinguished *subjectively*, on the basis of our values. Such incredulity towards **metanarratives** means the media is less likely to influence behaviour in the way it might once have done in the past.

This scepticism may, of course, have it's downsides. The emergence of a globalised "anti-vaccination" movement, whose ideas are spread through social media, has led, for example, to the re-emergence of diseases, such as measles, that are relatively easily controlled through cheap and efficient vaccinations.

Postmodern approaches, as we've suggested, offer fundamentally different types of explanation for media effects, particularly in terms of the detailed ethnographic analyses of audiences that seeks to understand under what circumstances and why people use different media in different ways.

These approaches, in other words, move the effects debate away from an analysis of 'the media' to a cultural analysis of audiences and how they interact with different media.

One important dimension here is a move away from the notion of *mass audiences*, in terms of their actions and reactions, to audiences differentiated by age, gender and ethnicity as well as by more individualised categories such as cultural and technological understanding and competence.

This methodological shift reflects a general concern with how and why media are used in the construction of personal and social identities, an important component of which is how we understand and use media technologies.

Ethnographic approaches, in this respect, explore media use in terms of ideas like social space and how different media are integrated into different spaces, particularly the private space of the home, but also given the uptake of mobile technologies over the past 10 - 15 years, public spaces such as the workplace, schools, leisure spaces and so forth.

A further political dimension facilitated by the development of new media is the changing nature of *political representation* - the public can not only interact directly with elected politicians, through email and social networks, they can organise quickly and easily around political issues to put pressure on politicians to act in particular ways.

New media opens-up greater opportunities for discussion and self-expression, with voices being heard that in the past went heard. This, in turn, has a significant impact on how we understand the deviance of political leaders or large-scale transnational corporations; both, for example, are under increasing *sousveillance* - surveillance "from below".

Negative Effects

Those who argue for the media having a generally negative effect point to a different set of ideas.

Economically, global processes of *concentration and conglomeration* have accelerated, with giant media corporations dividing-up global markets and operating as an oligarchy that prevents entrance to media markets, restricts competition and limits consumer choice.

Rather than media *diversity*, **Lechner** (2001) argues there is a tendency towards *homogenisation*; the global reach of transnational media corporations creates a particular kind of "consumerist culture, in which standard commodities are promoted by global marketing campaigns to create similar lifestyles".
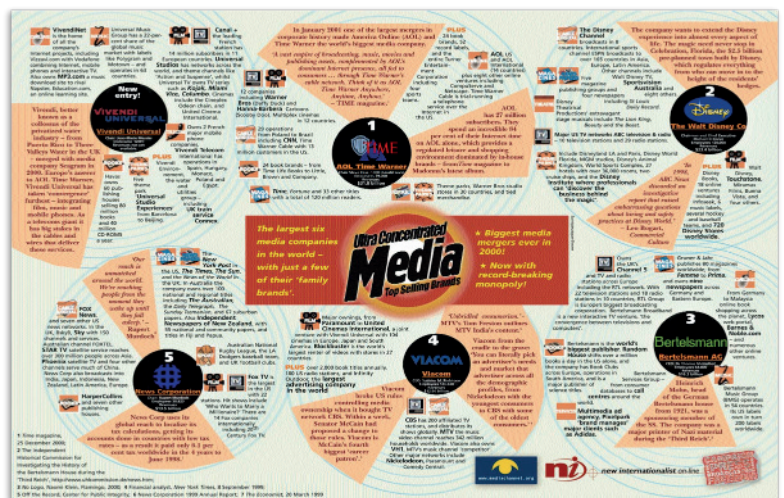
The development of peer-to-peer networks has led to the exponential rise of intellectual property theft ("piracy") which, while a problem for mega-corporations, may be economically disastrous for small production companies.

On a national level the ease with which media can be duplicated has lead to widespread disregard for copyright and patent rights, plus the state-sponsored hacking of commercial secrets In 2018, for example, the American government claimed the theft of copyrights and patents by China remained at "unacceptable levels".

The development of computer networks has presented problems for media industries whose products are easy to copy and distribute, with no loss of quality thanks to digital reproduction. Global media conglomerates have responded in a range of ways, such as:

● legal prosecutions of individual offenders and attempts to shut-down illegal providers (such as Napster in the past and Megaupload more recently).

● the development of new economic models. "Freemium" models, for example, provide a service (such as software or a game) for free but users then pay for "added extras". Hugely popular Facebook games, such as Farmville, have successfully applied this model.

Politically, global media corporations have tended to cooperate with oppressive regimes rather than challenge their legitimacy.

In China, for example, state censorship of both traditional and new media remains the norm with both indigenous and Western media companies; Yahoo, for example, censors its Chinese search results to exclude information banned by the Chinese government.

While Western democracies don't operate the same type and level of media censorship as countries like China (with their "Great Firewall" that blocks access to banned sites and web pages), control and surveillance has been extended through new technology and new media.

Social networking sites, for example, collect, store and sell massive amounts of personal information about users, while mobile phone technology can be used to both track individuals and monitor their contacts. The lack of new media regulation allows for the expression of all kinds of racist, sexist and homophobic ideas that would be unacceptable - and probably illegal - in old media.

Culturally, global media are instrumental in fostering *cultural hegemony*, whereby local / national cultures are colonised by the products and lifestyles of dominant cultures. The global domination of the American film industry is a good example here.

Global media corporations have encouraged the spread of a particular form of neo-liberal economic ideology based around individualism and the "*fetishism of the self*" (*because we're worth it*...). Instagram, for example, has been colonised by "social media influencers" acting as "cool ambassadors" for a wide range of global products.

The development of "open admission technologies", such as the Internet, is also changing how we see the relationship between age categories like childhood and adulthood. Where the Internet can't differentiate between adults and children the latter are exposed to contgent (sex, violence, news and so forth) that diminish our ability to decide where childhood ends and adulthood begins: children become more like adults in terms of their general behaviour, sexuality, dress and language while adults become more "childlike" in their equation of youthfulness with health, vitality and excitement.

One major effect of globalised media, therefore, is the promotion of a *consumption culture* where the consumption of goods and services - from mobile phones to social networks funded by advertising - is simply seen as an end in itself.

Some of the categories Facebook records about individual users that is made available to advertisers who want to target specific demographics…

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