Communication Effects

Theories about communication and the social effects of mass media generally are categorized into three historical eras. These theories are grouped and named according to the paradigm through which they were approached – powerful effects, minimum effects, cumulative effects.

Powerful-Effects Paradigm

The earliest investigation into media effects, begun in the early 1900s, were based more on observations about the enormous popularity of the media rather than on formal scientific study. The observations led to the conclusion that the media are very powerful in people’s lives, having immediate and direct effects. Metaphorically called the magic bullet theory or the hypodermic needle theory, this paradigm asserted that the media acted strongly and predictably on audiences in much the way a bullet or hypodermic needle would.

The presumption was that media messages cause people to think and act in certain predictable ways. It also presumes that people in a mass audience are affected similarly and that communication produces identical results that can be pinpointed and direct. The examples pointed to were the use of commercial advertising and military propaganda, both of which were thought to be strong influencers over public opinion, though researchers were unable to explain how the influence occurred.
Two leading scholars were associated with this paradigm. Walter Lippmann observed that people see a world shaped primarily by the media. Harold Lasswell defined the classic linear explanation that communication involves who says what, in which channel, to whom and with what effect.

**Limited-Effects Paradigm**

Further research dispelled the fears or hopes associated with the previous model and instead presented a minimalist model. Newer research had shown that the media are not very powerful, and that studies of topics such as voting behavior showed little direct or immediate power by the media. Instead, the media operated in secondary ways.

Research by Carl Hovland of Yale University, for example, found that audiences generally do not act in unison and that the media often fail to change people’s minds. Another researcher, Paul Lazarsfeld, articulated the two-step flow of communication theory in which the media are seen to operate in stages. His observations were that the media effect opinion leaders (about 20 percent of the population), who in turn influence the masses. So while the media have little direct influence, indirectly they are very influential.

Another approach within the limited-effects paradigm is the status conferral theory, which suggests that the media create prominence for issues and people.

Because the limited-effects paradigm emphasized the gaps in media effects, researchers began looking at other influences to fill in those gaps. Much of their attention turned to social relationships and psychological processes within individuals, and they began to study how people react individually to media messages.

Joseph Klapper studied the categories of change that are effected by the media, particularly conversion, minor change and reinforcement. He identified several specific different media-induced change possibilities:

- The media may cause change within the audience as intended by the communicator, a result called conversion.
- The media may cause unintended change within an audience.
- The media may cause change that is only minor in form, intensity or duration.
- The media may facilitate change (intended or not) that is actually caused by other social factors.
- The media may support the status quo, sustaining an audience in its beliefs or behavior rather than causing change. This is known as reinforcement.
- Finally, the media may prevent change, often through the propagandistic use of one-sided information aimed at an audience that would otherwise embrace change if it had all of the relevant information.

The last two “no change” categories have been heavily studied, since there are so many examples of what seem to be ineffective media when, despite media activity, the intended change did not occur.

**Cumulative-Effects Paradigm**

Contemporary research since the 1970s is seeing the pendulum swing back to some of the earlier conclusions about the powerful influence of the media. One reason for this is the growing presence and popularity of television; recent research also has looked at the pervasiveness of films (particularly on videocassette) and the Internet.
The current assumption is that the media should not be dismissed as having little influence. Rather, they have a powerful but long-term cumulative and collective effect.

George Gerbner articulated the cultivation theory to serve as the “grand theory” to explain a wide range of media influences. Cultivation theory noted the pervasiveness of television and its ability to seduce viewers who were relatively unaware of message content. It also noted television’s ability to blur distinctions between news and entertainment, or more deeply between reality and fiction. The theory rests on the notion that television (in both news and information models) distorts reality. Subsequent observers have noted that television similarly overstates crime and violence, exaggerates the role of sexuality in relationships, and minimizes faith and family. It should be noted that the media themselves do not claim to be representing average audiences; indeed the nature of both news and entertainment is to seek the unusual, highlight the unlikely, and focus on what is different from the mundane daily life of audiences.

Much of the current theorizing about the influence of mass media is trying to deal with some assumptions about human behavior that have been studied by the behavioral sciences:

- That human behavioral influence is difficult to measure, in part because it is difficult to isolate media influences from the myriad of other influences in a person’s life.
- That other influences, particularly those more personal and cultural, play a primary role in the early formation of a person’s value system and set of interests, leaving the media to support or undermine those pre-existing values.
- That human beings are marvelously complex creatures who operate in many different individual ways, so that the same media message may have differing effects on different people.
- That humans are reflective and capable of both recognizing and moderating influences in their lives.

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann articulated several theories relevant to this approach. One, called the cumulative-effects theory, notes that the media are ubiquitous, with constant and redundant messages.

She also has presented the third-person effect theory, observing that we tend to over-estimate media impact on other people and minimize it on ourselves, holding ourselves immune from the negative influence that we believe the media has on others.

Noelle-Neumann’s most well known observation is the spiral of silence theory, which observes that persons holding what they know to be minority viewpoints often are intimidated into silence and obscurity. Sometimes this is done under the guise of politeness (don’t argue with somebody in his house, or don’t argue with everybody else at a party). But Noelle-Neumann’s observation is that the media identify what seem to be the commonly held opinions, and persons who hold differing opinions often avoid expressing themselves because they already known (or think they know) that they are out of step with mainstream thought.

► Uses and Gratifications Research

Over the years, scholars have taken many different approaches to communication research. Instead of focusing on media effects, some researchers have tired to describe how and why people use the media.
Communication scholars observe that people use the media for different reasons, and one area of media research focuses on uses and gratifications studies, originally formulated by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch. Such studies have identified three main reasons that people use the media: surveillance, socialization, and diversion.

- The **surveillance function** is rooted in the media’s ability to provide information about what is happening in places or about topics of interest to the individual. This may be news about activities in one’s home town, or it may deal with politics, current events or other topics of particular interest happening around the world.

- The **socialization function** observes that the media help people know what is expected of them and how they can fit into society. Newspapers and magazines, television and film, radio and the internet all send constant (though often conflicting) signals about social roles: How to act in a business situation, what to expect when visiting a certain city or country, how to relate with people of a different ethnic background, and so on.

- Finally, the **diversion function** of the media focuses on the ability of the various mass media to entertain. Such entertainment may involve stimulation of the senses, for example by use of music. Another type of entertainment focuses on relaxation, with the media offering verbal, visual or musical assistance in calmness and tranquility. The third aspect of entertainment is called release, in which the media provide a means for getting rid of tensions, hostilities or fears.

► **Individual Selectivity**

A category for communication research generally known as attitude change research has focused on the phenomenon that different individuals may receive the same message but act on it quite differently. This research groups under the heading of **selectivity**. The studies of American researcher Carl Hovland in particular concluded that people are very selective in how they use media, in the topics they expose themselves to, in how they interpret information, and in how they retain information obtained through the media.

Here is a look at some of the most important aspects of selectivity. Prominent among them are the theories of selective exposure, selective perception and selective retention.

- **Selective exposure theory** observes that people will seek out not only topics of interest to them but more importantly viewpoints with which they expect to agree. Thus they use to the media to reinforce existing biases. On occasions when people seek out opposing points of view, they often do so not with an open mind but rather for the purpose of hearing what the other side has to say so they can refute it later.

- **Selective perception theory** observes that people often interpret facts to suit their existing biases. People hear what they want to hear and what they expect to hear. Thus the same information may carry different meaning for different people, particularly people with differing political, religious, cultural, ethnic, national or other substantial differences.

- **Selective retention theory** notes that people remember messages that support their opinion longer than they remember opposing messages, which often unconsciously are forgotten and set aside. As with selective exposure and selective perception, selective retention is likely to reinforce existing beliefs and attitudes. Such tendencies make it less likely that the media can play a solo role in changing attitudes and behavior.
If one way of dealing with unpleasant information is to avoid, reinterpret or forget it, another way is to seek consonance and consistency between personal beliefs and observations about the world. Leon Festinger addressed this in his cognitive dissonance theory. This theory holds that information inconsistent with a person's existing beliefs and attitudes will create psychological dissonance that must be resolved. Festinger's studies observed two ways to resolve the inconsistency: to modify the belief or attitude, or to reinterpret or dismiss the information as an exception to the rule. The latter is an easier and more common occurrence.

► Socialization Role of the Media

A body of research focuses on how the media offers guidance on how to fit into society.

The media's initiating role focuses on the transmission of social values. Children growing up in a media-saturated society receive many messages about what is socially acceptable and desirable. New immigrants to a country likewise receive a barrage of messages via television and newspapers, advertising, film and other media sources that seem to portray the values, interests and priorities of the new society. While much of the media information is conflicting, each person must make sense of it, ideally within the context of family and culture.

Role modeling is a similar socializing function of the media, highlighting people with whom audiences can identify and imitate. Another term for this is identification. These role models may be political or religious leaders seeking to influence others, or they may be sports or entertainment figures without even a personal interest in being a role model. But the nature of role models is not that they seek influence but that others bestow on them an admiration that leads to imitation and emulation.

Another aspect of role modeling is the imitation that is inspired by various media, but film and television in particular. Advertising relies on such imitation, hoping to seduce consumers into purchasing certain products. Some of the imitation is intended, such as writers’ and producers’ decisions to model the use of seat belts, safety helmets, and a variety of other beneficial products and practices. But imitation also is sometimes unintended, such as accidents caused by imitating the apparent violence of a video game or staged wrestling performances. Or worse, copy-cat violence caused by playing out in real life violent scenes from movies or even from news reports.

The media also play a role in stereotyping, which earlier units noted uses generalities to facilitate story-telling and quick communication.

► Media and Public Opinion

Another category of research looks at the role between information and public opinion.

In the belief-sharing model, a function of the media is to support the common beliefs and attitudes of the public. This can be quite effective in a homogenous society in which most people share the same values and beliefs. It even can work in a more complex society undergoing social stress that pulls people together, such as common resolve in the face of a military attack or a natural disaster. But in a heterogeneous and diverse society absent the common resolve, the media are likely to adopt a role of representing a variety of opinion.
Another useful theory to understand the role of media in public opinion is the agenda-setting theory articulated by Bernard Cohen. This theory observes that the media create an agenda, a list of topics that the public is expected to think about and perhaps act on. Thus the media create awareness, establish priorities and perpetuate issues. Similarly, the media determine when issues are passé and no longer of public interest.

One aspect of the agenda-setting theory is the notion of herd mentality, more formally called inter-media agenda setting. According to this phenomenon, the media often take their leads from each other as to what news stories follow. Reporters from one television station pursue a news story simply because other reporters are pursuing the same story. Conversely, one newspaper avoids covering a particular topic because nobody else is covering it.

Another observation on the role of media in the process of public opinion is on the phenomenon of priming. The media call attention to particular topics, priming audiences to be attentive to those topics. At the same time, the media ignore other topics.

Similar to agenda setting and priming is the concept of framing, in which the media are seen to present a set of expectations that audiences use to make sense of situations and establish subtle but persistent norms for status and social or political desirability. For example, if the media are focusing on a particular political campaign issue such as the domestic economy, then audiences are likely to use that frame (economy) as a reference on which political candidates should be addressed.

► Media-Depicted Violence

Much attention has been given to the influence of media that frequently depict violence, whether for journalistic or entertainment purposes. While most of the observed influences are negative, a few are neutral. One even shows a positive social value to media-depicted violence. The mere proliferation of many different observations and theories about the effect of media violence attests to the complexity not only of the issue but also of the social and psychological make-up of individuals and societies.

One neutral theory identifies with observational learning points out that people learn behavior by seeing it, either in real life or in media depictions. But most theories go further, concluding the social effect of media violence.

A theory presents a positive effect of media violence. According to the cathartic-effect theory, violence in the media provides people with a socially acceptable release for their violent impulses. Seeing destruction and mayhem portrayed through the media allows some people to release their own violent urges without actually acting on them.

But more researchers conclude that media violence has largely negative effects. The aggressive-stimulation theory observes that some people are inspired to violence from media depictions. Parents, teachers, and in more extreme instances law-enforcement officers report that children often imitate violence they have seen on television or in films. Such violence sometimes leads to injury, even death.

The related catalytic theory suggests that media violence is among the factors that sometimes contribute to real-life violence, often by people who are emotionally unstable. The difficulty in finding a common influence by the media is that not all, not even most, people react negatively to
media-depicted violence. But the catalytic theory suggests that, for people predisposed to violence behavior, the media can serve as a catalyst for action.

Researcher George Gerbner articulated the mean-world theory, observing that people who watch a lot of media violence tend to view the world as hostile and dangerous. They are more suspicious and fearful than people who watch less media violence. He noted that viewing a high volume of media-depicted violence often leads to an increase in fear and intimidation, which in turn often leads to self-imposed social isolation.

Educators and developmental psychologists also have identified the desensitizing theory, observing that people who are exposed to high levels of media-depicted violence often have a higher-than-average tolerance for real-life violence. The explanation is that the media can make violence seem normal.

Media-depicted sex, soft core as well as pornography, shows similar patterns in terms of catharsis, stimulation, catalysm and desensitization. Promiscuity, sexual behavior, marital infidelity, and related issues often show statistical and anecdotal relationships with how these behaviors are portrayed in media that people frequently read, hear or watch. Though somewhat less studied, the effects of media portrayal of topics other than violence are similar. Prejudice, intolerance, ethnic hostility and related antisocial behaviors often are linked with media depictions of relevant attitudes and actions.

Media-Induced Anxiety and Apathy

A final category of communication research leads scholars to focus on some of the long-term social effects of over-use of the media.

Information pollution or information overload is a phenomenon associated with the media deluge of news, commentary, current events and related information generally presented in no order and with no priority. Audiences, particularly so-called “news junkies” who read or view a large amount of such information, often develop attitudes of helplessness in the face of overwhelming problems in the world around them. One reason for this is that typically the news media focus on problems but seldom stay with the story long enough or intensely enough to learn the background context, explore options, and achieve solutions.

Another phenomenon is media-induced passivity, in which people are seduced by the media so much so that they turn away from social involvement in the real world. The so-called “couch potato” suffers not only from physical inactivity but from lack of social interaction with other people, perhaps one of the worst influences of the media.

Educators, psychologists and other communication researchers also have identified the problem of well-informed futility. This is the observation that the media allow people to feel involved in the world when actually they are only informed. While knowledge is important, it is barren if it fails to lead to action.
APPENDIX TO UNIT 11

► Relevant Web Sites
www.icahdq.org – International Communication Association, with links to research in the mass communication division
www.gsu.edu/~wwwcom/content – Academic site devoted to content analysis of media messages
ct.oupjournals.org/ – Communication Theory journal

► Relevant Books

► Unit Quiz
Define role modeling.
Identify the three functions of the media, according to uses and gratifications research.
Define the concept of framing.
Identify one of the contributions of George Gerbner to media research.
Identify one of the contributions of Elizabeth Noelle-Newmann to media research.
Identify the three aspects of selectivity.
► **Freewrite and Discussion**

Discuss the difference between the **cathartic** and the **catalytic** models as they relate to media violence.

Give an example of **selective perception** as it relates to a current national, regional or international news event.

Discuss the difference between the **powerful-effects model** and the **limited-effects model**.

Explain the **spiral of silence theory**.

Give an example of the **two-step flow of communication theory**.

► **Exercises**

Ask students to watch news reports from three different television sources or to read three different newspapers. Then write a brief report on what they conclude concerning the concepts of either **agenda-setting** or **framing**.