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On Understanding and Misunderstanding Media Effects

*Jack M. McLeod, Gerald M. Kosicki and
Zhongdang Pan*

Viewing the landscape of media studies or its alternative title, mass communication research, is apt to leave the observer in a confused state. One might 'read' the scene as a very strange war; armed camps wearing ill-fitting uniforms with odd labels (e.g. 'media effects', 'critical', 'cultural') ostensibly engaged in a common enterprise yet each warring with other camps and even bickering among themselves. Viewed more optimistically, the acrimony might be interpreted merely as symptoms of enthusiasm and energy in a growing and dynamic intellectual field.

The disarray means that a scholar wishing to enter the field and make sense of the enterprise will need a map that provides a reasonably accurate and undistorted picture of the location and activity of the various intellectual camps. Our purpose here is to examine how the media effects approach, sometimes called the 'dominant paradigm' of the field, can be understood and sometimes misunderstood by observers of the media studies field. We will begin by trying to identify what seems to be common to that which could be called the media effects research perspective.

Definition of the media effects perspective is a task made difficult by the great diversity in theoretical styles, research questions and methods of gathering evidence and making inferences. Our definition of the approach will capture within it the work of many scholars who would be uncomfortable with the label, and many more for whom it would not fit as their primary identification. As will be discussed later, part of the discomfort may stem from the pejorative meaning that has been assigned to the label by its critics working from other perspectives. Our goal is to clarify contemporary approaches to media effects, not to provide an exhaustive literature review of the area. More extensive reviews are available (e.g. Roberts and Maccoby 1985; Bryant and Zillmann 1986).

What is the Media Effects Approach?

The most obvious common characteristic is that the primary focus is on *audiences*. The term audiences is to be understood at various levels, as individuals, in their social surroundings, and as part of societal or cultural institutions. Audiences may be viewed as collective masses or publics, but the focus also may be on the reactions of audience members as incumbents in certain specialized roles; e.g. economic and political elite decision makers.

The second characteristic is the specification of *influence*, either in terms of changes or prevention of changes in the audiences among the units of analysis at varying levels of abstraction. This influence may take many forms, as variation in physiological response, as changes in attitudes, cognition and behavior of individual audience members, or as various types of collective change (e.g. increased homogeneity in a community, political instability in a society). Not all changes at the various social system levels have their direct counterparts in changes at the level of the individual audience member (e.g. homogeneity). Media effects researchers attempt to build theory at various levels of analysis from macrosocietal to individual and even to the level of physiological responses. It may also include research seeking to establish connections between these levels (i.e. cross-level influences).

The third characteristic is the attribution of the source of influence or effect to a particular aspect, form or content, of a *media* message system, medium, type of content, or individual message. The media of concern may be mass (e.g. broadcast, newspapers) but also more specialized media such as direct mail and the new technology. There is a clear theoretical commitment, symbolized by the term 'effect' itself, to a predominant flow of influence from the media and messages to the audience. This does *not* imply, however, a unidirectional flow of influence leaving the audience as a passive recipient. The term 'effect', particularly in recent theorizing, by no means denies and in fact accentuates the contributions of prior orientations of the audience in directing the form and content of media influences (e.g. Bauer 1964; Kline, Miller and Morrison 1974; Rosengren, Wenner and Palmgreen 1985; Levy and Windahl 1985; Hawkins and Pingree 1986).

Two other tendencies are common to this approach. The terminology of *variables* (e.g. independent, dependent, intervening) with varying notions of causality is used to describe the process and conditions under which such effects are most likely. Finally, there is a tendency to formulate propositions about effects in ways accessible to *empirical testing*, broadly conceived. Empirical is used in two senses: the key variables can be observed (not necessarily quantified, although quantification and statistical analyses are seen as strong forms of evidence) and the propositions are capable of being tested, that is, they can be shown to be wrong.

Media effects research is quite heterogeneous in both theoretical concerns and methods and has limited common characteristics. It is therefore pre-emptuous to declare it a 'paradigm'. The minority position of mass media research in the field of 'communication science' (Berger and Chaffee 1987) raises further doubts as to whether it could be called dominant over other perspectives.

Images of Media Effects as Seen by its Critics

In contrast to our view of its diversity, media effects research is viewed as much more homogeneous by its critics. At the risk of over-simplification, we will summarize three of these images. Later, in evaluating these critiques, we will argue that many of their features have considerable merit in illustrating the problems and limitations of media effects research. We will also contend, however, that in certain essential ways these images are oversimplified and distorted, particularly in being dated and overly narrow.

The Critical Studies Critique

The critique emanating from the various branches of the critical studies perspective most often assumes that media effects research is based on a stimulus-response learning theory that is confined to two variables (media stimulus and effect) without mediation. Further, effects research is seen as overly individualistic in orientation and as flawed in its methodological reductionism that implicitly places blame on individuals for their lack of knowledge and participation (Golding 1974). These and other effects research tendencies are viewed as ideological biases revealing the falsity of the claim of objectivity and ethical neutrality (Gitlin 1978).

Media effects research is said to be overly restrictive in studying only one type of effect: persuasion. Other types of effects are said to be largely ignored. Further, effects are confined to those intended by the 'sender' i.e. the manipulative intent of the administrator. The media effects perspective thus lacks theoretical ties to the production of messages as embedded in the power relations of society. Media effects research is said to take messages as neutral and as non-problematic given whose limited variations are the only source of causality and to be overly simplistic in dimensions of messages selected for study (Althusser 1971; Golding and Murdock 1978; Golding 1981).

Most fundamentally, media effects research is seen as exclusively administrative in character and intent (Gitlin 1978). That is, its practitioners are highly dependent upon corporate media and the government establishment for their funding and, consequently, for the legitimacy of research questions to be tied to the marketplace and government policy. Lost is a commitment to either theoretical development or to the improvement of the human condition.

Ironically, according to the critical critique, the media effects approach belies its name in understating effects of the mass media. As a consequence of its limitations, media effects research fails to explore the cumulative, delayed, long-term and unintended effects including those which stabilize the status quo (Golding and Murdock 1978). Consideration of these variants of effects would revise upward estimates of the strength of media impact.

The Cultural Studies Critique

The critique by cultural studies adds more objections of its own to the above list. The most fundamental of these is the charge that the media effects approach uses inappropriate terminology and causal apparatus in speaking of

ed to reflect the 'behavioral mainstream hegemony' (Hall 1982), in being constrained by an outmoded positivist philosophy. The alleged focus on physical observable properties, invariant relationships and empirical science verification are seen as fatal flaws of effects research and social science more generally.

The effects tradition, by focusing on limited variations in isolated individuals, is said to segment and dehumanize the audience and to separate persons from their cultures. By attempting to formulate general laws of human behavior, effects research overlooks important cultural variation in the way people respond to the media (Hall 1982). According to the cultural critique, the media effects approach understates the activity of the audience in constructing meaning from messages. At worst, it is charged with treating audience members as dupes. Effects research is seen as overly message-driven and implicitly overstates media effects to the extent we can speak of effects. What is ignored is the constructive process of meaning production within the fabric of culture (Hall 1980; Carey 1989). In simplifying media messages by treating them as concrete psychological stimuli and by focusing on their manifest easily-manipulated features, effects research is as reductionistic towards content as it is to the audience. The quantification used in effects research ignores important qualitative differences in messages and meaning in audience reception.

The Behavioral Science Critique

One of the strongest criticism of the media effects approach comes from those who might be presumed to be more hospitable among behavioral scientists. The argument is that the empirical results of effects research do not support its claims of powerful media effects. According to a leading proponent of this critique (McGuire 1986), this tacit acceptance of media power results from a kind of silent conspiracy of media effects researchers with two quite different types of bed-fellows: critical theorists and applied practitioners in advertising and public relations who justify their existence and salaries by claiming strong effects. Also contributing to this alleged overstatement of media effects, according to this argument, is the commitment among academic researchers to finding effects – journals seldom publish null findings and young scholars are required to publish.

A second point of this 'friendly fire' attack is the attribution of cause to the media. In some cases, the medium may have been acting simply as a vehicle for carrying the message of some other source, the advertiser or the newsmaker, and yet this is termed a media effect. Added to this is the problem with nonexperimental effects research where the causal direction is ambiguous – the 'effect' actually may be selectively seeking out the media 'cause'. More generally, the result of attributing influence to media by effects researchers is seen as being scientifically imprecise and atheoretical in moving away from specifying what particular features of a message have what particular effects. The 'media-centric' conceptions of effects researchers, according to the behavioral critique, also results in theoretical incoherence by mixing macro conceptions of the production process with micro concepts of effect (cf.,

lacking in specification of the stimulus which leads us away from the fundamental objective of building a behavioral science of human behavior.

Various methodological criticisms are added to the critique in the form of complaints about weaknesses in research design, the lack of national samples and non-optimal statistical procedures. These disconfirm further the claims to legitimacy of effects research in the eyes of some behavioral scientists and affirm its marginality.

Some Notes on the History of Media Effects Research

Although space limits preclude an extensive historical treatment, it may be useful to summarize five points of apparent and common misunderstanding of media effects research history.

First, we should note that the history of concern with media effects began long before Paul Lazarsfeld and the Columbia University voting and campaign studies in the 1940s, as it is often assumed. In the pre-empirical era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was considerable concern about the effects of the press among the theorists and observers of society. Notable among these were Max Weber (1910), Walter Lippmann (1922), John Dewey (1927), and Robert Ezra Park (1940). Weber in particular had plans, unfortunately never fulfilled, of a study of press impact, very much empirical as we define it. A founder of American journalism education, Willard Bleyer (1924), included questions of press effects among his concerns. It is important to note that these observers tended to approach the press as *reformers* of journalism and of the larger society, not as proponents of administrative views.

Second, empirical work on media effects extending to the decade before Lazarsfeld shows no sign of using a simple stimulus-response model of universal effects as supposed by its critics. Simple models and assumptions of powerful effects may (Lowery and DeFleur 1983) or may not (Chaffee and Hochheimer 1985; Wartella and Reeves 1985) have characterized public fears, practitioners claims and some research of the 1930s, but these were certainly not reflected in the research sponsored by the Payne Fund studies of the effects of motion pictures on children (Charters 1933). Their research design and results indicate the impact of personal and contextual factors altering the effects of messages and their summation of these complex effects did not add up to being called powerful. Similarly, findings from the best example of strong media effects, the Orson Welles' 'War of the Worlds' radio play, showed that some groups were more likely than others to believe and react to the broadcast (Cantril 1940). The research on attitude change by Carl Hovland and his associates begun in World War II (Hovland, Lumsdaine and Sheffield 1949) and continued at Yale University also used relatively complex models, examining a host of psychological conditions altering media effects.

Third, the phrase administrative research coined by Lazarsfeld (1941) is quite inadequate as a description of the history of media effects. This is especially so when 'administrative' is taken to mean research devoted to the financial gain of commercial media or to maintaining the status-quo of government policy. As mentioned, early concern with effects of the press was

concern over the effectiveness of Hitler's propaganda machine in the 1930s was very much an applied concern, but the development of materials devoted to teaching young Americans how to recognize the techniques of propagandists (e.g. glittering generalities, card-stacking) (Lee and Lee 1939) was motivated by reformist democratic ideals not by an attempt to make propaganda more effective. The thirties also marked the start of applied research on the size and composition of radio and magazine audiences. It was clearly administrative and not used academics as experts. With the advent of television 20 years later, however, audience research became highly profitable and commercial and academic ties were largely severed.

The term administrative, used broadly in terms of its connection with applied research, does fairly characterize much of American media effects research of the forties through the sixties. Lazarsfeld's Bureau did carry the title of 'applied' and Hovland's wartime work was devoted to persuasion (e.g. messages to sell the importance of the war to the armed forces) although it soon shifted from narrowly applied concerns to general principles. After the war, some media researchers sought funding from military, security and other governmental agencies with sometimes questionable goals. Even during this period, however, the bulk of published effects studies were still reformist and at least by implication critical of media practices. Then, and even more today, media managers see effects research along with other media research as irrelevant or at most harmful to their purposes.

Fourth, it appears that various observers have focused too much on Paul Lazarsfeld in making him almost synonymous with their problems with media effects research. His work and that of his associates can be considered the most valuable in the history of the effects tradition: the voting studies of the 1940 and 48 election campaigns (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954); commentaries on media campaigns (Hyman and Sheatsley 1947; Star and Hughes 1950); and the study of personal influence (Lazarsfeld and Lazarsfeld 1955) most notably. These studies asserted: that the most likely effect of the mass media was to reinforce pre-existing views and secondarily to mobilize the undecided to move toward their demographic 'prepositions'; that media persuasive campaigns are ineffective and reach mainly those already reached; and that personal influence predominates over media influence via a two-step flow where opinion leaders use media information to influence other people.

One might see a hegemonic thrust to minimizing effects in such conclusions, but a close reading of the Columbia research reveals ample numbers of cautionary notes about the limitations of their findings and recommendations for future research and a host of interesting findings actually showing media effects. In fact, the highly negative reactions of Todd Gitlin (1978) might well have been directed instead to Lazarsfeld's colleague Bernard Berelson (1959) for prematurely burying communication research and to Lazarsfeld's student, Joseph Klapper (1960) for his greatly exaggerating the weakness of media impact into the 'limited effects' model which in the ensuing years has been seen as the heart of the 'dominant paradigm'.

Although Klapper's view of limited media effects influenced how such effects were regarded for more than a decade, this minimalist view of media

Lang (1959), Key (1961), Blumler (1964) and Halloran (1964) – during this period viewed media as having stronger effects (McQuail 1987). Research on media and national development (Lerner 1958; Rogers 1962; Schramm 1964) was also optimistic and naively so about the possibilities of media to play an interactive role as multiplier in social change.

Finally, there is a history of media effects research after Lazarsfeld. From about 1970 onward, there has been a marked growth in media studies in the US, Western Europe and in parts of Asia manifested in terms of numbers of students, amount of research, and general visibility in academic and public circles. Doubtless much of the rise in popularity stems from the growth of television as the dominant entertainment and news medium. A possible consequence of this was the sudden increase in congressional interest in the effects of televised violence on children. This translated into substantial support for research under the auspices of the US Surgeon General (Comstock and Rubinstein 1972). The studies in the Surgeon General's report constituted a mixture of administrative mandate (i.e. did violence cause aggression?) and basic theoretical work.

As the field grew, stronger trans-Atlantic connections emerged including growing American awareness of Western European work including critical and cultural scholarship. Unfortunately, on all sides this was framed less as an opportunity and more as a war as witnessed by *Ferment in the Field* (Gerbner 1983). Along with influences of the European concerns with macrosocial and production processes, media effects research has changed in many other ways in recent years.

With the exception of the Surgeon General's research funding of 20 years ago, opportunities for funding from either government or media institutions has been largely lacking for academic researchers. Although this has restricted temptation to do narrow administrative research, it has also lead to localized and scattered independent research. Applied media research goes its own way via Los Angeles *Times* and CBS-New York *Times* polls. Vast amounts are spent on proprietary research evaluating effects of advertising and public relations campaigns largely independent of academic research. Most media managers see academic media research as too abstract to be useful and too negative to be considered seriously for its policy implications. Certain concepts, e.g. agenda-setting do seep through and achieve managerial legitimacy, not as useful ideas but rather as iron laws.

Among the most noticeable trends of contemporary media effects research is the heightened concern with theory rather than simply with empirical findings. There is particular attention paid to building theories of media effects that deal with specific communication phenomena not subsumable under concepts from behavioral social psychology and other fields of human behavior (e.g. Tichenor, Donohue and Olien 1970; McCombs and Shaw 1972; McLeod and Chaffee 1972; Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976; Noelle-Neumann 1984). Further, more complex models of media effects and more sophisticated statistical methods are being explored and used to connect previously isolated communication processes.

Contemporary Views of Media Effects

The past twenty years have seen a considerable evolution in the study of mass media effects. Rather than attempting to summarize recent literature in the short space allotted, we can suggest five distinctive directions effects research has taken in recent years: expansion of effects; elaboration of media content; simulations of media production; conceptions of audience activity; and process models and levels of analysis. Taken together, they reveal an understanding of media effects as a multi-level process connecting media production with outcomes of active reception by audiences.

Expansion of Effects

Dramatic expansion of the range of effects investigated is one the most distinctive features of recent media effects research. These proposed effects go well beyond persuasion and attitude change that so dominated as criteria thirty years ago. This expansion is the direct result of the infusion into communication research of diverse theoretical perspectives ranging from psychological (e.g. Zillmann 1982; Reeves, Thorson and Schleuder 1986) to cognitive social psychological (e.g. Reeves, Chaffee and Tims 1982; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Graber 1988) to cultural anthropological (e.g. Dayan, Katz and Kerns 1984; Liebes and Katz 1986).

McLeod and Reeves (1980) suggested seven dimensions that might be used to conceptualize media effects. The first four listed below are forms of media effects, the fifth represents content domains of effect, the sixth reflects the locus of media influence responsible for effects, while the final dimension concerns conceptual and methodological distinctions among such effects. We will examine the first five dimensions in this section; the last two dimensions will be dealt with later in the paper.

- micro vs. macro
- alteration vs. stabilization
- cumulative vs. non-cumulative
- long-term vs. short-term
- attitudinal vs. cognitive vs. behavioral
- diffuse-general vs. content-specific
- direct vs. conditional

When in combination, these seven dimensions used as simple dichotomies (or a trichotomy in the case of the fifth dimension) would form a matrix of 192 different conceptual types of media effects. Chaffee (1977) has made a similar point about the diverse possibilities for effects. Of course, other dimensions are possible. The point is nonetheless that media effects may take different forms, involve distinctive processes, and require assessment in varied ways. As will be seen, progress has been made in broadening the study of media effects, but there is more to be done in expanding the reach of effects while at the same time integrating what is learned in a more comprehensive fashion. One thing that the history of the field makes clear is that neither the search for universal generalizations about media effects nor their repudiation on the basis of a

limited set of effects is apt to lead to fruitful research and understanding the relationship between media and their audiences.

Micro vs. Macro

Individual audience members have been the predominant unit of analysis for the past half century of media effects research. The choice of such 'micro' units reflects the social psychological theories of attitude and the experimental methods that were most salient in the postwar era. Quite often, however, the theoretical and policy issues require generalization to more macro units of analysis. As a result, macro inferences about the larger society are frequently made on the basis of simple summation of micro data gathered from individual audience members (e.g. Gerbner et al. 1986). There are problems with moving across levels of analysis by such simple aggregation procedures (Pan and McLeod 1991). Societal consequences cannot be inferred solely from the estimates of averaged individual change. What is functional for individuals may be problematic for the society and vice-versa. The knowledge gap hypothesis, for example, asserts that although the media may succeed in conveying information to a population, they may do so in differing degrees to various status groups (Tichenor et al. 1970; Robinson 1972). The media may thus contribute to a 'knowledge gap' between the more advantaged and less advantaged groups depending on the relative gain in information at each status level.

Scholars interested in media effects in recent years have become more sensitive to impact on various types of social systems – on families, communities, social movements, organizations, societies and the international community (e.g. Tichenor et al. 1980; Gitlin 1980; Blumler, Dayan and Wolton 1990). Effects are today conceived of and studied at each of these levels, although the most common unit is still the micro individual. Conversely, conceptions of the production of media content are largely formulated at the macro level (e.g. Donohue, Tichenor and Olien 1972; Gerbner 1973; Turow 1984; Herman and Chomsky 1988). Our point is not that any of these units is inherently a 'correct' choice and that research at other levels should be abandoned. Rather, the point is that understanding of media not only needs theory and research at various micro and macro levels but also that it requires connections between production and audiences as well as cross-level conceptual connections (Pan and McLeod 1991).

Alteration vs. Stabilization

Another variation in the form of media effects is that they may either facilitate change in the audience or they may prevent change or stabilize an existing situation. Most effects research has dealt with change, largely because change attributable to media influence is easier to observe than is lack of change. Charges that the media act to enhance the status quo are more common as suppositions than as research findings. Research on stabilization is by no means absent, however. In the 1960s, there was a substantial amount of experimental work on immunizing against persuasive messages (McGuire 1964; Tannenbaum 1967). One of strongest conclusions of the Columbia voting studies noted earlier was that the dominant effect of the media is to 'reinforce' preexisting

tely, their measurement of reinforcement was highly questionable; a voter said to have been reinforced if her/his voting preference was the same near election day as it had been early in the campaign. There is some evidence that during the Watergate scandal the media may have deflected change in the political system by emphasizing that 'the system works' and attributing blame to Richard Nixon as the 'bad apple in the barrel' (McLeod et al. 1977). But more destabilizing changes (e.g. voter volatility) also have been identified (Packer, McCombs and McLeod 1975; Blumler and McLeod 1974).

Cumulative vs. Non-cumulative

Another difference in the form of effects is between changes which accumulate over long periods of time from multiple messages and those which are the result of exposure to a single media message. Although both types of effects are possible, the two imply rather different processes to achieve their impact. In the Liberman et al. (1986) cultivation research, the impact of television on the heavy viewers' social reality judgements is conceptualized as the product of the frequency of messages on prime-time entertainment television, not from any one television program or message. Cultivation effects thus are cumulative with repeated exposure over time. Messages have their effects in part because they appear as a natural part of television culture rather than from their unusual qualities.

Non-cumulative messages, on the other hand, achieve their effects from their ability to capture attention from the distinctive features of the message, whether the feature has visual, thematic or verbal appeal (e.g. Anderson, Gerbner and Lorch 1977; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). This form of media effect is best likely to be studied in experimental situations where the content features of specific messages are varied (but see Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach and Grube 1984). Non-cumulative effects are not incompatible with cumulative effects, but they are not likely to be examined within the same research designs.

Long-term vs. Short-term

Most experimental studies of media effects deal with immediate relatively short-term effects following exposure to a message. Most such designs do not include another form of effect, the long-term consequences of such exposure. Ordinarily, we might expect short-term reactions to media to dissipate after a period of time (e.g. excitation effects, Zillmann 1982; and priming effects, Liberman and Rogers 1986 and Iyengar and Kinder 1987). This does not mean that immediate responses are unimportant; for example, an aggressive act immediately triggered by a sadistic sexual episode on television may have as serious consequences as an identical act somewhat delayed after media exposure.

Long-term effects may be manifested in a variety of ways. First, the response elicited by exposure may simply persist over time. Alternatively, the appearance of the effect may depend on a number of other conditions: additional exposure to similar media messages (the cumulative effect discussed above), appropriate environmental conditions conducive to enacting the effect, or strengthening of the response from social support of the effect. In these cases, the effect is likely to be evidenced only after a lapse of time following exposure. It may be missed by research designs measuring only short-term reactions.

For example, decisions about who won televised presidential debates in 1976 seemed to have been delayed until impressions could be confirmed later by media 'experts' and discussions with other people (Sears and Chaffee 1979) and their most important influences on vote turnout and knowledge were indirect through increased interpersonal discussion and interest in the campaign (McLeod, Bybee and Durall 1979).

Attitudinal vs. Cognitive vs. Behavioral

Although the traditional distinction between attitudinal, cognitive and behavioral (conative) effects is appropriate only to the individual as the unit of analysis, this distinction does serve to capture much of media effects research and to provide an organizational scheme for examining it.

Attitudinal Effects

For much of its early period, it could almost be said that the history of media effects research was the history of attitude change research. After a brief period of decline reflecting the disenchantment of social psychology with attitude research, considerable new research has appeared that emphasizes persuasive outcomes. Two models have particularly helped revitalize this area: the cognitive Elaboration Likelihood model of persuasion (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) and the Reasoned Action model linking attitudes, perceived social norms and behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). But these models so far have generated only limited applications in voting and communication campaign effect studies (e.g. O'Keefe 1985; Fazio and Williams 1986; Krosnick 1988; Granberg and Brown 1989; Rice and Atkin 1989). Although most of the work tends to be short-term, non-cumulative and micro, some has focused on macro effects, such as the effects of advertising on the aggregate demand for certain products (e.g. Warner, 1977; Weinberg and Weiss 1982).

Cognitive Learning Effects

Increasingly, attention has been directed towards 'learning' effects from the media, emphasizing the role of the media as a source of information. There have been a spate of recent volumes on learning and memory for facts as dependent variable, in the areas of advertising messages, news and political information, as well as recall of television characters (e.g. Robinson and Levy 1986; Bradac 1989; Becker et al. 1975; Drew and Reeves 1980; Neuman 1986; Ferrejohn and Kuklinski 1990). Other research reminds us that not only is the amount of learning important, but also *when* it was learned (Chaffee and Choe 1980; Bartels 1988) as well as what is *not* remembered (Gunter 1987). Although most of this work too tends to be relatively short-term, non-cumulative and micro, there are notable exceptions in the comparisons of communities (Tichenor, Donohue and Olien 1980); multiple data sets over time (Neuman 1986); and a year-long panel study (Graber 1988).

Cognitive Construction Effects

More subtle effects of media that have been examined go well beyond learning discrete facts to consider the news media as an interpreter of events and public policies (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Iyengar 1987, 1989; Crigler et al. 1988;

main story schemas, organizes and frames reality in distinctive ways. Furthermore, these frames may go beyond raising the salience of the problem or in question (agenda-setting as in McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987), but also, stemming from their formulation of the issue, suggest approaches or solutions to the problem. For example, framing the issue of drug use in the United States by using the 'drug war' metaphor implies a strong implication of law enforcement and even military intervention into the problem (McLeod et al. 1990). Alternative frames could focus either on health effects or on the economic implications of the problem. The former might make treatment solutions more likely while the latter might steer solutions away from military technology to the legal arena, where issues of legalization, personal responsibility and creating negative tax and price incentives would come to the fore. This line of research opens up a new domain of media effects while also connecting to the dynamics of the public policy process.

Cognitive Social Reality Effects

The power of mass media to create our symbolic environment is referred to as social reality effects. Evidence has at least partially supported the hypotheses that the media provide cues about the nature of social reality (Gerbner et al. 1986; Wober and Gunter 1988), for the agendas of our concerns (Downs 1972; McCombs and Gilbert 1986; Iyengar and Kinder 1987) and for the climate of public opinion (Noelle-Neumann 1984; Davison 1984).

Behavioral Effects

Mass media have been looked upon as a major source for behavioral modelling and for excitation (Bandura 1977; Malamuth and Check 1981; Liberman 1982; Huesman et al. 1984), for relaxation (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990), as well as for various types of behavioral intentions such as voting (Himmelweit, Humphreys and Jaeger 1986; Patterson 1980; Liberman and Husbands 1985; Miller et al. 1990). Attention to behavioral effects has led to examination of both antisocial and prosocial behaviors (see Arnold 1986).

Research on behavioral effects of media may be traced as far back as the Lippitt Fund studies. Several areas have received sustained attention over the years: adolescents' socialization; public information and commercial advertising campaigns; political campaigns and citizen participation; and development of communication and the adoption of innovation. Most research on behavior effects has been micro-oriented, message-specific and short-term in focus. There are exceptions, however, where long-term as well as macro-level behavioral effects are identified. For examples, consider the 22-year study of the effect of televised violence on aggressive behavior (Huesman et al. 1984) and the long-term comparative research on the introduction of television in different nations (Centerwall 1989).

Recently, mass media influences on social relationships have been examined, including media images affecting the functioning of organizations and other institutions (Diamond and Bates 1988; Patterson 1980; Cook 1989; Liberman and Shefter 1989; Blumler et al. 1990). Effects of media are thus extended well beyond their impact on the general audience.

Elaboration of Media Content and Use

All media effects research carries implicit or explicit assumptions about media content and the roles of audience members. The expansion of effects has been accompanied by further elaborations of how the input of media is viewed. A major distinction pertinent to media input is that between diffuse-general and content-specific influences (the sixth dimension above). Diffuse-general effects are those stemming largely from the activity of media use. One example of this is the time spent watching television displacing other things persons might be doing such as reading books or participating in community life (Parker 1963; Brown, Cramond and Wilde 1974).

Another type of diffuse-general effect centers on the *form* rather than the content of the medium. McLuhan (1964) was a major proponent of this view when he insisted that the medium was the message, not its content. While some content-specific approaches imply 'we become what we see', diffuse-general approaches make less of a connection between the specifics of content and the outcomes manifested. As examples, aggressive behavior can be predicted from the unpredictability of formal features of entertainment television as well its violent content (Watt and Krull 1977), and that both aggressive and erotic film content could enhance similar physiological excitations (Zillmann 1971, 1982).

Content-specific formulations continue to dominate conceptions of media effects. The ways of looking at content, however, have changed considerably. Expanding beyond the confines of quantifiable manifest content analysis of Berelson (1952), researchers have conceived content as a holistic message system (Gerbner 1973), as a textual structure (van Dijk 1988), as a symbolic representation of reality with various embodiments of meanings (Hartley 1982), and as a system of organized conceptual frames which shape how audiences understand and interpret reality (McLeod et al. 1987). The wide range of conceptual work on media content moves much beyond the simple dichotomy of diffuse-general vs. content-specific to allow for a much wider range of possible content-related media effects and for a much closer fit between the subtle content characteristics analyzed and the effects examined. The net effect is to broaden conceptions of content to consider units ranging from discrete *stimuli* to larger sets or messages or message *systems*.

Formulations of Media Production and Content

Broader conceptions of media content bring with them the need for stating traditionally implicit theories of media production and content as more explicit theoretical propositions. Of common concern to all media scholars are the production forces that account for the variance in the media content. For effects researchers, this is further extended to include what differences variation in media content make in audiences' understandings and reactions to such media content.

Both sociological studies of communicators and media organizations (e.g. Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Ettema and Whitney 1982; Turow 1984) and psychological studies of cognitive heuristics (e.g. Nisbett and Ross 1980; Stocking and Gross 1989) have contributed to our understanding of the processes and forces of media production and content.

different examples each having implications particularly for news content effects.

The first example is the macro-structural political economy approach of Tuman and Chomsky (1988). They specify a propaganda model operating at institutional level to constrain through five filters the news content of the media in the US and in other capitalist countries: the financial integration of media with the rest of the economic community; advertising as the financial basis of media operations; reliance on official sources of information; orchestrated flak campaigns as a means of disciplining media; and anti-communism/capitalism as the dominant ideology. To test their formulation, they attempt to show how stories similar in other ways receive differential treatment according to their fit into these filters (e.g. whether a massacre takes place in a friendly-capitalist or unfriendly-communist country). There are untested, if reasonable, assumptions about audience effects underlying their examples of different story content. Effects research might test such assumptions by comparing the effects, say, of a story that omits American battle casualties with that contains such figures.

A second example is the micro-social approach of Bennett (1988) who identifies four information problems in the news that combine to prevent the audience from developing a real understanding or a basis for political participation: personalization, dramatization, fragmentation and normalization. The first of these problems, *personalization*, is a tendency for the news media to concentrate on people engaged in political struggles rather than on the power structures and processes behind the issues. *Dramatization*, the second information problem, refers to the tendency for journalists to select those events which are most easily portrayed in short, capsule stories with actors at their center. The third tendency, *fragmentation*, fed by the first two tendencies, relates stories and facts such that events become 'self-contained happenings' which have no past or future. Finally, journalists tend to use official sources who provide soothing *normalized* interpretations of crises and problems without going into their deeper meanings.

Each of Bennett's information problems in news content contains explicit or implicit hypotheses about various audience outcomes. For example, together these information problems would lead audiences to adopt passive attitudes, to blame individuals rather than the system for problems, and to lack understandings characterized by complexity, historicity and connectedness.

Our third example comes from cognitive psychological studies of heuristic strategies and short-cuts people use in information processing that arise partially from the limited personal capacities of all persons and from a host of cultural and situational factors (e.g. Nisbett and Ross 1980). For example, research shows that even professionals schooled in statistical inferences are susceptible to 'illogical' reasoning similar to that of the average person (Tversky and Kahneman 1974; Nisbett and Ross 1980). Journalists, no less than others, thus should exhibit faulty reasoning by carrying their own cognitive biases and inference-making inadequacies over to the news they write (Taylor and Gross 1989). The term 'bias' as used here is much broader than the traditional journalistic definition as the intrusion of partisan opinions or *spin* into the story.

roughly into three groupings: *categorization* of the stimulus or issue; *selection* of information regarding the event; and *integration* of the information as the basis of inference making and behavior.

Categorization, a basic process of human thinking (Wyer and Srull 1981), may be best seen in the journalist's selection of terms, concepts, metaphors and headlines. Journalists have a great deal of discretion in how they frame stories, at least in certain situations. It matters whether an open-ended US military commitment is discussed as 'another Vietnam' or as a battle against 'another Hitler', or in some other, more accurate terms. It is clear that certain journalistic workways, bureaucratic arrangements, training, social standing and values may result in certain categorizations being favored by journalists (e.g. Tuchman 1978; Gitlin 1980).

Selection of information by journalists is an important channel for possible cognitive bias. Selection may be heavily influenced by 'off the top of the head' notions or in support of journalists' naive theories about a given situation (Taylor and Fiske 1978; Stocking and Gross 1989). Journalists' workways also encourage selecting vivid instead of dull information, unusual dramatic cases rather than more representative baseline data.

A final class of biases involve errors of integration that are referred to by psychologists as illusory correlation and fundamental attribution error. *Illusory correlation* refers to the tendency to form an inappropriate causal linkage based on skimpy information. Is a political candidate who forgets to attribute a quote one time in a speech he has given dozens of times guilty of plagiarism? Are several cases of a rare disease found in one area conclusive proof of an environmental hazard? *Fundamental attribution errors* involve a systematic bias toward holding individuals rather than systemic structures responsible for a situation. This suggests that problems are more likely to be seen in media accounts as the result of 'a few bad apples' in the barrel instead of bad management practices that allowed the fruit to spoil due to lack of proper inventory control. These and other cognitive shortcomings are shared by journalists and their audiences. But we should not equate the two sets of biases. Journalists' biases reflected in news stories may act to accentuate, modify or multiply the biases of those attending to those stories.

Conceptions of Audience Activity

For several decades, media effects theorists have struggled to specify properly the sense in which audiences are active. Failing to do so would be to leave an image of the audience as passive dupes or victims of media content. There is doubt in the broader media studies field, however, regarding the desirability of proposing strong audience activity in media theory. Gitlin (1978) seems to regard the conception of an active audience as a diversion from understanding real media effects, while Gerbner et al. (1986) argue that people watch television not its content. Others add that viewing is done mainly at low levels of involvement (Krugman 1983; Barwise and Ehrenberg 1988). Similarly, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) conclude that television is essentially a passive, relaxing, mindless activity. Balanced against these views are the majority of media scholars who see audiences as being in some sense more active in the

it is possible to examine several approaches to audience activity and to how each is related to media effects.

Gratifications

The idea that individuals are motivated to use media in various ways to meet their needs, often called the 'uses and gratifications' approach, began at Columbia University in the 1940s (cf., Herzog 1944; Wolfe and Fiske 1949; Eliason 1949). Gratifications research activity languished during the 50s and 60s but has seen a resurgence in the past two decades (cf. Blumler and Katz 1974; Rosengren et al. 1985). Traditionally, uses and gratifications has been seen as an *alternative* to media effects research rather than as a complement to replacing message-driven effects ('what media do to people') with an audience-driven perspective ('what people do with media'). This view has been criticized as implying that audiences are seen as obtaining any desired gratification (any chosen effect) from any type of content and as having a conservative traditionalist bias that justifies any sort of media content and absolves it of any harmful effects (Elliott 1974).

It is possible to see uses and gratifications research as an important complement to media effects research. Blumler and McQuail (1969) found that, in the British General Election of 1964, strength of motivation to watch party broadcasts interacted with viewing such broadcasts to enhance political information gain. McLeod and Becker (1974) identified four dimensions of gratifications sought from political information and showed effects above and beyond controls for media exposure and other variables. While gratifications might enhance learning, they may also act to deter agenda-setting effects. Voters strongest in motivation to seek campaign information, unlike those with lesser motivation, did not adjust their rankings of salience according to the emphasis placed on certain issues in the newspapers they read (McLeod, Becker and Byrnes 1974).

Selectivity

The idea of selectivity goes back at least to the early Columbia University campaign studies. The idea is that people selectively seek out information which is consonant with their preexisting attitudes and beliefs and avoid information which is discrepant with their views. Hyman and Sheatsley (1947) concluded that selectivity operates at various junctures in the reception process: exposure, attention, perception or interpretation, and retention. Selectivity would thus interact with media messages enhancing effects of consonant material and reducing or eliminating the impact of discrepant content.

After a half-century of research, it appears that the first half of the proposition is secure insofar as people do seem to prefer and seek out supportive, neutral or irrelevant information (Frey 1986; McGuire 1986; Katz 1987).

The other half of the selectivity proposition, the avoidance of discrepant materials, is much less secure considered in the light of more recent research. Logic alone, total avoidance of conflicting information would seem to be the 'costly' a strategy for a person to pursue than to deal with whatever discrepant information comes from media. Further, evidence points out cer-

information (e.g. Berlyne 1960; Kleinhesselink and Edwards 1975; Frey and Wicklund 1978; Streufert and Streufert 1978).

The efficacy of selectivity, in the exposure and attention phases at least, depends on the ability of the audience member to anticipate which messages are consonant and which are discrepant. Although pre-selection of print media content seems feasible enough, electronic media are less well indexed and often attended to without planning thus making selectivity a more questionable description of activity. Unfortunately, selectivity is almost always used as a dependent variable rather than as a variable mediating the effects of messages. Selectivity of consonant material, at least, is likely to be operating at all phases of media reception but its role in processing messages and shaping their effects is not well understood at present.

Attention

Perhaps the most obvious form of audience activity is attention, the focusing of increased mental effort. Common-sense assumptions tell us that learning from media should be enhanced at higher levels of attention (Chaffee and Schleuder 1986). Attention should be particularly important for the use of television. Whereas print media use virtually demands attention, television users are more free to vary their mental effort and to pursue other activities at the same time. Attention is complicated by being measured in a variety of ways. Attention considered by physiological measurement has a short time-span of milliseconds and is largely below the person's awareness and control (Reeves et al. 1986). When examined at a more conscious level from self-report, it represents a statement of generalized and purposive focus applied to a particular type of media content with a much longer time-span. It is likely that attention so considered is largely content-specific with little overlap in the levels of attention accorded to public affairs news content, entertainment content and to advertising, and is correlated across television and newspapers (McLeod and Kosicki 1986).

Attention has effects independent of the level of exposure. Chaffee and Choe (1980) found that attention paid to television news accounted for much more of the gains in campaign knowledge than did the frequency of news viewing, although much stronger effects were found for newspaper exposure to hard news content. In certain situations, the influences of news exposure and attention may interact to produce a combined effect beyond their additive effects (McLeod and McDonald 1985). Self-reports of attention to entertainment and to advertising have been less thoroughly examined; although a limited attempt to validate self-reports of attention to advertising produced largely null results, experiments on attention conceived and measured physiologically have demonstrated effects of advertising (Reeves et al. 1986).

Media Images

Media scholars have developed theories specifying some of the various flaws in media content (see Media Production section above). It is likely that audiences too have such conceptions, or 'common-sense theories' about the media (McQuail 1987). To the extent that people do have such lay theories or images, it is reasonable to consider them as a form of audience activity potentially

agers and public relations practitioners too may have their own media biases; at least from the vast sums of money they spend researching and noting it, they appear to assume that one dimension of image, *credibility*, is related to media effects. They may be wrong with respect to one type of effect, learning from news media content (Whitney 1985). Audience members with the most favorable evaluations of *news information quality* – those who think news is quite accurate, complete, thoughtful and responsible – have been shown to learn *less* from news than other readers and viewers (McLeod et al. 1987; Kosicki and McLeod 1990).

Perceptions of news quality, however, is by no means the only and likely not the most important dimension of media images. Audiences seem to have both more and diverse, if not necessarily informed, ideas of how media work. McLeod et al. (1986) identified four other dimensions of audience media images that have been replicated several times: *patterning of news*, the idea that news adds up to a comprehensive picture of the world; *negative aspects of news*, the view that news is dull, sensational, dominated by bad news, and by reporters' biases; *dependency and control*, a tendency to see media institutions as hegemonic in being consonant, controlling and that people rely on them too much; and *special interests*, a tendency to see media as representing special interests and being special interests themselves. Even after controlling for a host of social structural and media use variables, patterning of news has shown a consistent pattern of enhancing learning from news. Beyond learning of factual information, all five dimensions of media images are implicated in various ways to other effects: media use, choice of strategies for processing information; community involvement, cognitive complexity, and the framing of major news stories (McLeod et al. 1987; Kosicki and McLeod 1990).

Information Processing Strategies

Audience activity also has been seen in the strategies people use to cope with the 'flood of information' that threatens to overwhelm them (Graber 1988). The ability to identify such strategies depends on two key assumptions: that individuals are able to monitor and to verbalize in providing self-report data about their processes; and that these strategies are relatively stable over time. Graber and Windahl (1984) conceive of strategies as *pre-activity* selectivity in scheduling and time-budgeting, *dur-activity* interpretation at the time of exposure, and *post-activity* as a 'coin of exchange' in subsequent interpersonal communication. All three forms of activity were related to enhancing gratifications obtained from news programs.

Another approach to strategic activity identified three dimensions of audience news information processing (Kosicki, McLeod and Amor 1987). First, *Selective Scanning*, involves skimming and tuning out items as a response to the volume of news and limited time available. *Active Processing* gets audience 'processing difficulties' (Graber 1988) by going beyond a story to interpret or reinterpret the information according to the person's beliefs. Finally, *Reflective Integration* represents the often fragmented nature of news and the salience of certain information such that it is replayed in the person's mind and becomes the topic of discussion with other people. Each of the dimensions has been shown to have a connection to various types

extent of learning political information, political interest and participation are all restricted by Selective Scanning and enhanced by Reflective Integration. Although Active Processing does not appear to influence learning significantly, it does have a positive impact on both interest and political participation.

All three processing strategies are related to different conceptual frames that people used to interpret and understand media messages (McLeod et al. 1987). Processing strategies not only vary across individuals and over different phases of media exposure, but also are associated with variations in cognitive responses. As conceived within this framework, information processing refers to individually varying processes of meaning construction and understanding rather than a uniformly programmed input-output process (as criticized by Livingstone 1990).

Other Types of Activity

Many other conceptions of audience activity have implications for media effects. Interpersonal relations, once seen as an alternative to media diminishing its effects (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Katz 1987), are now viewed as varying patterns potentially either enhancing or limiting effects. For example, presidential debates increased interpersonal discussion which in turn influenced outcomes such as information gain and vote turnout (McLeod et al. 1979). Media reliance, the preference for or dependence on a particular medium for a given type of content, is another form of audience activity with implications for media effects (Becker and Whitney 1980). Reliance also has been shown to be a contingent condition limiting effects to the medium relied on most in studies of the effects of gratifications sought from television news (McLeod and Becker 1974) and agenda-setting by newspapers (McLeod et al. 1974).

Audience activity in various forms does seem to add to our knowledge by specifying conditions of news media effects. Activity does not imply rationally calculated decisions about media use, however. Instead, activity places media as only one element in peoples' busy lives. People are 'active' in various ways largely to cope with the flood of media information that must be balanced with other commitments. The antecedents of these forms of activity and their effects, we should note, are not reducible to social status or any other set of variables. They tend to reflect a combination of modest influences of many structural, cultural and political variables.

Processes, Models and Levels of Analysis

As should be clear already, most contemporary research is informed by the notion that media do not have universal across-the-board effects. Rather, research attempts to identify conditions under which media exposure may lead to effects for certain members of the audience. McLeod and Reeves' (1980) seventh dimension, direct vs. conditional effects, captures this development. Whereas Klapper (1960) saw such conditions as indicating that media effects were limited and minimal, present day researchers see them as showing where and how effects take place. They have no commitment as to overall strength of effects and indeed averaging strength across audiences with differential effects may be misleading.

posure. If the control for the third variable identifies some subgroup of the audience (potentially a group as large as a nation or culture) in which the media effect is found and another in which it does not take place, we can say that this additional third variable has revealed a *contingent* condition. For example, high newspaper reliance and low motivation to seek political information acted as contingent conditions for the newspaper agenda-setting effect (McLeod et al. 1974). Another type of pre-exposure condition is where the third variable acts as a *contributory* condition making the effect more likely. Prior angering of the audience, for example, can make aggressive behavior more likely (Berkowitz 1982). As discussed earlier, the knowledge-gap hypothesis suggests social status as a conditional variable where the media may inform status groups at uneven rates (Tichenor et al. 1970).

Conditional variables may also intervene during and after media exposure representing either an internal cognitive or social process set off by exposure. As mentioned earlier, research indicates that exposure to presidential debates stimulated interpersonal political discussion which, in turn, had much greater impact on the political process than did the initial exposure (McLeod et al. 1979). Other debate research also indicates that perceptions of who won the debates were not well formulated until several days afterward when debate winners had a chance to read press evaluations and to discuss the verdict with others (Lang and Lang 1979; Morrison, Steeper and Greendale 1977).

Interactions of media use and conditional variables may take many forms. In certain situations where the effects of exposure are *opposite* in direction, we may identify a transverse interaction with potentially significant relationships; without examination of the third variable, the conclusion might have been that media had no effect whatsoever (McLeod and Reeves 1980). It is vitally important to identify conditional effects and to incorporate them into media theory. They require systematic investigation of more complex models. In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of models taking the form S-O-R. The addition of the two Os represents a profound difference. The first O represents the totality of structural, cultural and cognitive influences the media audiences bring to the reception situation. As we have seen, the S is no longer confined to discrete micro-stimuli of a message but alternatively may be conceptualized in terms of units ranging up to macro-message systems. It is possible that the term 'stimuli' is misleading in its implied narrowness and that some other concept should be substituted for it. The second O denotes what happens in the viewing situation between the reception of the message and the response of the audience member. It too may be conceptualized at various levels ranging from a short-term physiological response to the social context of the reception situations to a complex set of interpersonal interactions that may occur after reception. Finally, the R term of response, as we have seen has been broadened to include a longer time span and social consequences as well as individual change.

The O-S-O-R model is meant to emphasize the strong role of cognitive processes both in receiving and interpreting the message and in formulating responses. Cognitive processes function not only as mediating factors but also as vital components of the entire process. The mass media are considered an important source of influence in that they supply our frames of references.

activities. Cognitive processes are also a part of the message production process influencing journalists and their sources. None of the cognitive processes focus denies the importance of more macro social structures on both the media production and audience reception processes. Creative message production and diverse audience readings should not blind us to various organizational and social structural influences on these individual cognitive performances. The theoretical problem is to develop cross-level linkages that lose neither media production or the audience (Pan and McLeod 1991).

Conclusions

The critical and cultural studies critiques have been shown to be both historically limited and overly narrow in their conceptions of contemporary media effects research. A close examination of media effects research demonstrates that a simple S-R model inaccurately describes the effects perspective from its early empirical phases to the present day. Further, the term 'administrative' may have been appropriate to the Lazarsfeld era, but is very misleading when applied either to empirical work before Lazarsfeld or to the past 20 years of media effects research. Rather than serving the narrow applied needs of media managers, effects research has been predominantly reformist in examining potential problems with existing media content. The problems are largely those which adversely affect some vulnerable segment of the public (e.g. children, lower status persons), although a sizeable minority of effects researchers do study ways to make advertising messages and publicity more effective. Reform as a research goal, of course, remains unsatisfactory to critical scholars in that its concern is with changes within the existing system and thus lacking in an a priori commitment to fundamental transformation of that system. Whatever their private views on the ultimate necessities of redistributing wealth and power etc., advocacy of changes effects researchers state as implications from their evidence, are more likely to be confined to changes compatible with public service and social responsibility conceptions of media. The policy implications of recent research have broadened from earlier remedies (e.g. making messages simpler, balanced between political parties) to solutions that imply more basic changes linked to message systems and the production process.

Contrary to the assertions of these critiques, media effects research has long since gone beyond persuasion as the sole effect of concern. Equating of media effects with persuasion is an historic remnant of the control of the research agenda by Berelson (1959) and Klapper (1960) for more than a decade. Similarly, the charge that media effects research is confined to a positivist atheoretical desire to discover 'natural' concepts to build universal laws of human communication has characterized little since the Project Revere search for an invariant diffusion curve (DeFleur and Larsen 1948). If there is a dominant trend in contemporary effects research, it is the broadening of outlook on effects and the conditions of media production and messages. It is now relatively common to see social structural and cultural conditions included

Media effects research is vulnerable, however, to several serious charges by critical and cultural studies. The first is the potential for an individualistic bias in media effects theory. The bulk of research in this tradition uses the individual as the primary unit of observation. Conceptions of social system effects are less clearly developed than those of individuals and appear mostly, if not exclusively (e.g. Tichenor et al. 1980), as social implications in the conclusions sections of research primarily dealing with individual effects. Individualistic bias will remain a threat until more adequate cross-level (i.e. micro-social to micro-individual and vice-versa) influences are dealt with theoretically (Pan and McLeod 1991).

Another weakness of effects research identified by its critics is the lack of systematic ties to message production. There has been increasing attention to 'horizontalizing' media effects theory in recent years (e.g. Neuman 1989), but a tendency to separate production, message system and audience effects research is apt to continue in the immediate future. Linking audience reception with media production is easier said than done; the existing concepts in each domain are lacking in 'goodness of fit' – concepts used to analyze media production and audiences were developed independently without concern for their connection. Examples bridging these separate parts, however, can be seen in research examining power relationships in information control and dissemination (Donohue et al. 1972; Tichenor et al. 1980; Blumler and Gurevitch 1975, 1981; Turow 1984).

A third persisting challenge from its critics is to represent adequately variations in media content in effects research. Most effects research deals with actual content variations only by implication or by assumption. The charge that inappropriately reduces media content to psychological stimuli devoid of cultural context applies to much of effects research, but we can also point out that increasing attention is being paid to broader connections of media content. This is an area where media effects research potentially can benefit from cultural studies as well as from discourse analysis (e.g. van Dijk 1988; Gimson and Modigliani 1989).

Media effects research will continue to struggle with understanding the various conceptions of audience activity. It is clear that audiences should be regarded neither as passive dupes nor as active rationalists, but there is considerable territory in between. Activity has been programmatically examined from motivation (e.g. gratifications sought) to attention to processing strategies used to deal with media. But the social structural and other antecedents of the various forms of activity are only partly identified, although it is clear none are simple outcomes of a single type of influence. Conceptual disputes continue over the meaning of attention and other concepts and work on media images and processing strategies is at an early stage.

The behavioral science critique of media effects research appears to have overstated the extent to which strong and powerful effects are claimed. Although it is true that Noelle-Neumann (1973) raised the question of whether research has justified a return to the notion of powerful media effects, most researchers seem content to identify statistically significant proportions of variance that can be attributed to mass media without making claims as to power. Certain issues frustrate a simple assessment of the power of media

controls are appropriate; whether controls should be applied simultaneously or one at a time; whether the forms of activity should be added to exposure effects; whether interactive effects and indirect effects are included in the total effect; and whether corrections for measurement error have been made. Obviously, the lowest estimates of media influence will be obtained where many controls are applied simultaneously and where only direct effects of time spent or exposure to content are considered without correction for measurement error. Although media effects researchers probably should be more straightforward in stating that their effects are not powerful but *important nonetheless*, it is not them but others (e.g. popular writers, public officials and the public generally) who make the boldest claims of media power. To the extent public acceptance of powerful media effects may be used by unscrupulous officials to launch assaults on media and other institutions (e.g. attacks on media and the arts in America), media researchers may have to make clear the non-massive strength of media effects. Many theories of media effects are stated without disclaimers of their great strength and contingent nature; it is quite possible that these theories would be quite different and very likely more interesting if these modifications were made clear. Contributions to theory and public policy are most likely to come through identification of contingent and contributory media effects, not through futile arguments about averaged effects.

The behavioral criticism of mis-attribution of causality to media in effects research will remain as a warning to media researchers. Undoubtedly, asserting 'television' without further specification as a cause of anything is potentially misleading. If television covers an event dominated by a source (e.g. a press conference by political leaders), is it fair to say changes in the viewing audience are a media effect? It would be better if we could separate what portions of the event (or an agenda) are attributable to sources and which can be said to have been contributed by journalistic practices. This requires a more firm theoretical connection to the production process, including conceptions of how messages might have been constructed differently (e.g. the research programs of the Glasgow Media Group 1976; Robinson and Levy 1986). The implied 'horizontalizing' in this 'media-centric' strategy is in tension with the approaches of other 'effects-centric' researchers who believe theoretical development is most likely to come from concepts emanating from social psychology and other social science fields.

The 'vertical' connections of the various micro- and macro-levels of analysis will remain a challenge to media effects and other research traditions. There is, admittedly, tension within media effects research as to 'boundary conditions' of concepts (i.e. their domain in terms of implications for other levels of intellectual discourse) and which levels might be crossed in theorizing. One area of communication research makes connection to the 'floor' of physiological processes (e.g. brain-waves associated with messages) while another reaches to the 'ceiling' of social processes (e.g. interpersonal communication enacted by messages). They address quite different research questions and are not easily connected. There is nothing inherently wrong in two (or many) separate research domains if both acknowledge that *all* theoretical systems and research traditions have limited explanatory power. If notions of research as a

arch) can be rejected, the damaging outcomes of intellectual warfare might be avoided.

The media effects perspective outlined in this chapter is so diverse as to make the label 'dominant paradigm' very misleading and any quest for a 'correct' approach quite fruitless. Warfare involving methods and standards of evidence, levels of analysis, and different emphases on production and audience is likely to continue. This is both the burden and the challenge of media studies as a 'variable field' (Paisley 1980). We are advocating neither a total war nor a natural selection of the 'correct' approach nor a simple merger of theoretical perspectives and research strategy into some kind of intellectual shepherd's

We do believe that communication and intellectual stimulation is possible both within and between perspectives and that there is evidence that such has already taken place. There is, for example, a growing interest in media audiences and their reactions within the various media studies perspectives. Our study of media effects research reaches three general conclusions: (1) that variations in theoretical perspectives and research strategies help generate complex and rich data of media production and audiences' media consumption; (2) that both horizontal connections across productions and audience outcomes as well as vertical connections between various levels of analysis will enrich our understanding of media processes and effects; and (3) that progress in the media studies areas will be more likely if the varying perspectives gain the measure of mutual respect and abandon total war against each other while identifying the real 'enemy' in ignorance, inequality, political repression and abuses of power.

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13

Meaning, Genre and Context: The Problematics of 'Public Knowledge' in the New Audience Studies

John Corner

As other articles in this collection will variously indicate (see particularly the overview provided by Sonia Livingstone) one of the most striking points of development in the media research of the last decade has centred upon questions of 'reception'. These questions have essentially been ones about *what* meanings audiences make of what they see, hear and read, *why* these meanings rather than others are produced by specific audiences from the range of interpretative possibilities, and *how* these activities of meaning-making, located as they usually are in the settings of everyday domestic life, might relate to ideas about the power of the media and about the constitution of public knowledge, sentiment and values.

Such a development – in many ways a return to the empirical study of audiences with a new and sharper agenda concerning the nature of meaning as social action – has rightly been seen (Curran 1990) to have exerted a 'revisionary' pull on those theories about media power which were grounded in structuralist accounts of ideology and which were so highly influential in British research in the 1970s (see, for instance, Hall 1977 for a critical review from within the perspective). So much so that in some 'new paradigm' work concerned with reception, the question of an ideological level of media processes, or indeed of media power as a political issue *at all*, has slipped almost entirely off the main research agenda, if not from framing commentary. In what *might* turn out finally to be a temporary phase of 'high swing' on the pendulum, so much conceptual effort has been centred on audiences' interpretative activity that even the preliminary theorization of influence has become *awkward*. There have been a number of useful overviews of 'reception' studies recently (for instance, Schroder 1987, Morley 1989, Ang 1990, Jensen 1990a, Moores 1990) along with a consideration of their ethnographic methods (see the special issues of the *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 13.2. 1989 and *Cultural Studies* 4.1.1990).

My interest in this chapter is not in offering a further synoptic account but in