Mass Media and Society

Second Edition

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On the Continuing Problem of Media Effects[1]

Sonia Livingstone

The Scope and Context of Media Effects Research

Introduction

The mass media occupy a high proportion of our leisure time: people spend, on average, 25 hours per week watching television,[2] and they also find time for radio, cinema, magazines and newspapers. For children, watching television takes up a similar amount of time to that spent at school or with family and friends. While school, home and friends are all acknowledged as major socializing influences on children, a huge debate surrounds the possible effects of the mass media and findings both in favour and against effects are controversial. The question of effects is typically raised with an urgency deriving from a public rather than an academic agenda and with a simplicity which is inappropriate to the complexity of the issue (we do not ask of other social influences what is the effect of parents on children or do schools have an effect which generalizes to the home or do friends have positive or negative effects?).

The possibility of media effects is often seen to challenge individual respect and autonomy, as if a pro-effects view presumes the public to be a gullible mass, cultural dopes, vulnerable to an ideological hypodermic needle, and as if television was being proposed as the sole cause of a range of social behaviours. Such a stereotyped view of research tends to pose an equally stereotyped alternative view of creative and informed viewers making rational choices about what to see. Overview articles often describe a history of progress over the past seventy years of research which alternates between these two extremes – first we believed in powerful effects, then came the argument for null effects, then the return to strong effects, etc.– a history whose contradictions become apparent when old research is re-read with new eyes. Contemporary media studies sometimes defines itself through its rejection of the language of effects research – criticizing the laboratory experiment, the logic of causal inference, and psychological

reductionism. This rejection is, I will suggest in this chapter, in part justified and in part overstated.

The Effects Tradition

The 'effects tradition' focuses predominantly but not exclusively on the effects of television rather than other media, on the effects on the child audience especially, on the effects of violent or stereotyped programmes, and on effects on individuals rather than on groups, cultures or institutions. The question of media effects as more broadly understood includes relations between media, politics and the public, the use of media for public health campaigns or for propaganda or educational uses, among many other issues. However, given the volume of research within the effects tradition as narrowly defined, the present chapter will not include these broader issues. Since the 1920s, thousands of studies of mass media effects have been conducted and I could exceed my allotted space merely listing the references to the research conducted during the past ten years! Rather than aiming for breadth, I will describe selected studies in depth to give a grounded sense of the approaches taken by effects researchers. The reader may refer to the excellent summaries of the field in Wartella (1991), Roberts and Bachen (1981), Katz (1980), McQuail (1987). Critiques of effects research are offered by McGuire (1986), Freedman (1984), Cumberbatch (1989a), Rowland (1983), and Kubey and Cziksentmihalyi (1990), while arguments for effects may be found in Comstock (1975), Stein and Friedrich (1975), Andison (1977), and Bryant and Zillman (1986).

The sheer mass and variety of effects research makes comparisons across studies difficult. Yet the numerous dimensions on which effects studies differ can also serve to map out the parameters of the field. These include empirical design (experimental, correlational, field study, etc.), and type of effect studied (short-term or long-term effects, media-induced change or reinforcement effects, effects on beliefs or behaviour, cognitions or emotions, etc.), target population studied (children, adolescents, young offenders, etc.) and type of media studied (films, violent cartoons, adverts, news reports, etc.). Differences between studies must also be understood in their historical context: the media have themselves changed over the past 50 years of research, in terms of technology, content, availability and relation to the changing practices of everyday life.

Despite the volume of research, the debate about media effects – whether it can be shown empirically that specific mass media messages, typically those transmitted by television, have specific, often detrimental effects on the audiences who are exposed to them – remains unresolved. This is partly because the debate is more about the epistemological limitations of social science research than it is about the media in particular, and partly because the debate is motivated more by a public and governmental agenda of education, censorship and regulation (Rowland, 1983) than by an academic agenda concerning media theory (Roberts and Bachen, 1981).

Media Effects: a Matter of Change or Reinforcement?

If by media effects we mean that exposure to the media changes people's behaviour or beliefs, then the first task is to see whether significant correlations exist between levels of exposure and variations in behaviour or beliefs. 'Change' theories – on which this chapter will focus – generally presume that the more we watch the greater the effect. Most research does show such a correlation (Signorelli and Morgan, 1990), albeit a small and not always consistent one. The next question concerns the direction of causality. For example, having shown that those who watch more violent television tend to be more aggressive (Huesmann, 1982), researchers must ask whether more aggressive people choose to watch violent programmes (i.e. selective exposure), whether violent programmes make viewers aggressive (i.e. media effects), or whether certain social circumstances both make people more aggressive and lead them to watch more violent television (i.e. a common third cause). To resolve this issue, the effects tradition has generally adopted an experimental approach, arguing that only in controlled experiments can people be randomly assigned to experimental and control conditions, thereby controlling for any other variables in the situation. Only then can causal inferences be drawn concerning any observed correlation between the experimental manipulation (generally media exposure) and resultant behaviour.

In research on media violence, some researchers offer a bidirectional argument, concluding that there is evidence for both selective viewing and media effects (Huesmann et al., 1984). Undoubtedly, many viewers choose selectively to watch violent or stereotyped programmes (after all there has always been a market for violent images). However, it does not necessarily follow that there are no effects of viewing such programmes or that motivated viewers can successfully undermine any possible effects. Many remain concerned especially for the effects of violent programmes on children and so-called vulnerable individuals, irrespective of whether they chose to watch them.

However, if by media effects we mean that the media do not generate specific changes but rather reinforce the status quo, then empirical demonstration of media effects becomes near impossible. It is difficult to know what beliefs people might have espoused but for the media's construction of a normative reality, and difficult to know what role the media plays in the construction of those needs and desires which in turn motivate viewers to engage with the media as they are rather than as they might be. Nonetheless, arguments that the media support the norm, suppress dissent and undermine resistance, or remove issues from the public agenda, are central to theories of ideology (Thompson, 1990), propaganda (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1986) and cultivation (Gerbner et al., 1986; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Similarly, it is extremely difficult to test the argument that the media, in combination with other social forces, bring about gradual social changes over the long term, as part of the social construction of reality. Yet for many, these 'drip, drip' effects of the media are likely to exist, for television is 'telling most of the stories to most of the people most of the time' (Gerbner et al., 1986: 18).

There are, then, difficulties in conducting empirical research on both change and reinforcement conceptions of media effect. As we shall see, the findings

of the field are in many ways inconclusive. It has been argued, consequently, that the media effects debate can never be resolved and so research should cease. This raises two related questions. Firstly, can any general conclusions be drawn from effects research to date concerning both the overall balance of findings and promising future directions. Secondly, if the issue will not go away – as the history of effects research and public concern throughout this century suggests – how should the question of effects be reformulated?

The Contested Findings of Experimental Effects Research

The Classic Experiment

Let us first consider the prototypical effects study. As part of a series of experiments during the 1960s, Bandura and colleagues (Bandura et al., 1961; 1963) investigated the notion that children imitate the behaviours they see on television, particularly when enacted by admired role models or when the behaviours viewed are rewarded. Four- to five-year-old children were shown a five-minute film in the researcher's office and then taken to a toy room and observed for twenty minutes through a one-way mirror. Children had been randomly assigned to watch one of three films, each involving a boy picking a fight with another boy and attacking some toys. In the first, the attacker won the fight and was rewarded by getting all the toys to play with; in the second, the attacker is beaten by his opponent and is punished; in the third, the two children play together with no aggression. In addition, a fourth group of children was observed with no prior exposure to a film. The results showed that those children, especially the boys, who had seen the rewarded aggressive model spontaneously performed twice as much imitative aggression as all other groups (including kicking a large 'Bobo' doll), but no more non-imitative aggression. When interviewed afterwards, these children were found to disapprove of the model's behaviour and yet they were influenced to imitate him because his aggression led to success.

Turner et al. (1986) argue that there are significant parallels between the situation in Bandura's experiment and that of the domestic viewing situation: children may and often do identify with characters who are rewarded for their aggression in television programmes. More aggressive children are more likely to watch violent television (Huesmann and Eron, 1986), thus enhancing the likelihood of an effect. Being arbitrarily provoked before viewing also enhances the effect. Borden (1975) argues that such findings are an artefact of the demand characteristics of the experiment (that children sense what is expected of them and try to please), for children are more likely to imitate the aggressive behaviour if an adult in the test situation is seen to approve. Yet arguably, in the context of the playground, and sometimes in the home, aggressive behaviour is indeed approved by others, especially by and for boys. Does it make sense to suggest that the 'real' child has been taken over by one influenced by social desirability if such influences also occur elsewhere?

What Kinds of Violence Portrayals are Effective?

As, increasingly, real television programmes, rather than artificial extracts, are shown to viewers, questions about types of portrayal can be addressed. The greatest antisocial effects are found to be associated with the news, particularly the portrayal of justified and realistic violence with no negative consequences (such as when police control a riot). Cartoons, containing no justified violence and the negative consequences of aggression, are much less effective (Hearold, 1986). Whether or not the consequences of violence are shown – even if children can connect a portrayed action to its consequences (Collins, 1983) – seems less important than whether the programme provides a justification for the violence and whether the portrayal is realistic (Dorr, 1983; Hodge and Tripp, 1986). As there is some suggestion that these conclusions are reversed for very young children, the need to differentiate children of different ages is critical.

What About Positive Effects of Television?

The bulk of effects research is concentrated on harmful media effects, with some exceptions (Davies, 1989). There are far fewer studies of the prosocial effects (such as helping, kindness, cooperation) which might result from viewing positive images of social relations. Interestingly, the results for such studies are far less controversial, although the same methodological problems apply. Generally researchers conclude that while, unfortunately, few prosocial television programmes exist, they have broadly beneficial effects and these effects are more substantial than for harmful effects. Comparing across many experiments, Hearold (1986) found that the overall effect size is around an extra 20 per cent of antisocial responses following violent or stereotyped content compared with an extra 50 per cent of prosocial responses following prosocial content, after a single viewing session.

How Big are the Effects of Television?

Hearold (1986) conducted a meta-analysis of 1043 media effects reported in 230 studies with over 100,000 subjects over the past 60 years. In general, the correlations between viewing and effect vary between 0.1 and 0.3. These are small effects, and findings which meet the criteria for statistical significance are not necessarily socially significant. It is a matter of judgement whether effects which account for some 5 per cent of the variation in the behaviour concerned are important or not and whether they are more or less important than other factors. A satisfactory explanation of social phenomena, such as violence, stereotypes, consumerism or prejudice, will involve understanding the combined and interactive effects of multiple factors, of which television may be one such factor, although probably not a major one.

How Long Do the Effects Last?

Few experiments follow up media effects over time. Those which do tend to show a drop in effect size of about one quarter over the two weeks following

exposure, but the effects are still present (Hearold, 1986). Hicks (1965) showed that a Bandura-type experiment resulted in aggressive behaviours being well remembered, although little performed, six months after viewing. However, given the daily nature of television exposure, one might argue that persistent effects are less important than immediate and cumulative effects.

One advantage of correlational studies is that, although they cannot easily discriminate either causal direction or the operation of underlying causes, they can follow up their respondents over several years. Eron et al. (1972), Huesmann et al. (1984) and others generally show a positive correlation between viewing at one time and aggression some years later, even when parental, family, and socio-economic variables are taken into account.

Common Criticisms of Experimental Research

The artificiality of effects experiments has been heavily criticized (Cumberbatch, 1989b; Freedman, 1984; Noble, 1975) – for example, for their use of artificial stimuli rather than real programmes (which was especially true of earlier but not of more recent studies), and for their measurement of short-term effects, with few follow-up studies. The operationalization of dependent measures – the definition of aggressive behaviour, the use of experimental analogues of everyday aggression – is problematic, although Friedrich-Cofer and Huston (1986) argue that studies which use observations of naturally occurring interpersonal aggression find similar results to those which use staged aggression (hit the 'Bobo' doll) or analogue aggression (push the 'hurt' button). There has been concern also about the 'demand characteristics' of experiments, although Friedrich-Cofer and Huston (1986) report evidence that the demand characteristics of the situation are more likely to inhibit displays of aggression than promote them.

While the 'artificiality' of the experimental situation has come under fire, the laboratory (in practice, typically a research office or playroom with one-way mirror), like the living room or the classroom, is a social situation whose dynamics and meanings must be considered (Wuebblen et al., 1974). Situations involving real people are only artificial in the sense that we live through variously artificial situations in other areas of our lives, although of course the experimental laboratory – as a social situation – is highly unusual. Given that people act under certain constraints in every situation, usual or not, explanation depends on clarifying in what ways the results obtained in an experiment are a consequence of factors in the laboratory situation (intended or otherwise, i.e. manipulated or confounding factors), and generalizability depends on how far these same factors may occur or not in everyday life.

Can We Draw Any Conclusions?

Most reviews of the literature agree that viewers learn both prosocial and antisocial attitudes and behaviour from television portrayals (Comstock and Paik, 1991; Liebert et al., 1982; Roberts and Bachen, 1981; Rubinstein, 1983). Children can learn new prosocial or aggressive behaviours from a single

exposure; violence portrayed as punished is less likely to be imitated; violent images in the news affect older children more, while younger children are more affected by cartoons; boys, younger children and more aggressive children are more influenced by antisocial content; and so forth. Most would also agree that, having learned these behaviours, viewers can be shown to re-enact these or related behaviours under experimental conditions.

However, none of this need imply, and it certainly does not show, that beliefs or behaviours learned under experimental conditions can be generalized to viewers' everyday lives, whether routinely or on occasion. Indeed, results which are relatively consistent in the experimental literature have generally been poorly replicated under naturalistic conditions, although relatively few studies have attempted this. One might argue that in principle the experiment is such an unusual situation that the results cannot be generalized (the most cynical would say that all children learn from experiments is what researchers expect of them). Judgements differ over whether the social characteristics of the experimental situation sufficiently parallel everyday situations in which both viewing and aggression occur. This leads us then to field experiments, which study the possible changes in children's ordinary behaviour as a result of an experimental intervention into an everyday setting, and to naturalistic experiments, where real life, on occasion, provides the conditions for an experimental test with no intervention required.

Different Research Designs, Different Results

A central problem for effects research is the lack, at least in contemporary western society, of a group of people who have not been exposed to the media in their lives but who in all other respects are similar to those who have been exposed to the media. Cultivation analysis tries to overcome this problem by comparing those who have watched a large amount of television compared with those who have watched less television in their lives (Signorelli and Morgan, 1990). One reason why experimental studies, especially field studies, tend to show small effects is that only the effects of exposure to, typically, a single programme can be tested against a control group who are not shown that programme. Yet the everyday lives of both experimental and control groups involve years of exposure to a similar television diet. Such a weak manipulation of exposure differences is likely to underestimate rather than overestimate effects:

if as we argue, the messages are so stable, the medium is so ubiquitous, and accumulated total exposure is what counts, then almost everyone should be effected . . . . It is clear, then, that the cards are stacked against finding evidence of effects.

(Gerbner et al., 1986: 21)

With Whom Can We Compare Television Viewers: the Problem of Control Groups

Interestingly, naturalistic experiments – studies with 'real' control groups which were either conducted during the 1950s or on data from the 1950s –

tend to show rather minor effects, although of course, labelling effects as 'minor', especially when they are cumulative, is a matter of judgement about what is socially important. Two kinds of study will be illustrated below: the first involved analyses of social statistics from the 1950s; the second compared those with and without television and was conducted during the 1950s.

Hennigan et al. (1982) reasoned that, if television violence was making its audience more aggressive and violent, then this should be reflected in the crime statistics. Fortunately for them, the introduction of television across America during the 1950s was interrupted by the Federal Communications Commission between 1949 and 1952, so that there existed cities equivalent in other respects which gained television at different points in time. Analysis of the crime statistics for both categories of city before and after the freeze on introduction of television, showed no impact whatsoever on the incidence of violent crimes. However, they found that:

in 1951, larceny increased in a sample of 34 cities where television had just been introduced, relative to a sample of 34 cities where the FCC freeze prevented access to television broadcasts. In 1955, larceny theft increased in the 34 cities that had just gained access to television, relative to the 34 cities that had been receiving broadcasts for several years.

(p. 473)

The observed increase was of the order of 5 per cent. They suggest that explanations other than that of a media effect are hard to support. For example, it may be that television content makes the police and public more crime-conscious and so increases reported statistics, but why would this occur just for property crime? Hennigan et al. (1982) explain their findings by noting that the overwhelming majority of television programmes portray middle-class characters enjoying comfortable material lifestyles while poorer characters receive more negative portrayals. Combined with the exposure to television advertising, they suggest an effect of increasingly materialistic values, frustration at inequalities, and, for some, the resort to crime.

This explanation fits the findings of Himmelweit et al. (1958) from their comparison of children with and without television, matched for age, sex, social class and intelligence, during the 1950s. They also compared the responses of a smaller sample in Norwich both before and one year after the city received television transmission, again pairing those with and without television. As a multimethod, naturalistic experiment conducted with nearly 2000 children, this study has been given considerable weight in the literature. Yet the study did not find large effects. Of a range of findings, some key points can be summarized. While they reported similar thoughts about jobs, values and success before television entered their homes, after a year of having television children reported more ambitions, more 'middle-class' job values, and more concern with self-confidence and success than did the control sample, although their actual job expectations were unchanged. The lower ability 13–14-year olds, irrespective of social class, were most affected in these values.

As fits the subsequent experimental findings that stereotyping effects are stronger than aggression effects (Hearold, 1986), Himmelweit et al. (1982) found no evidence that viewing made children more aggressive, but found that

teenage girls became more concerned about marriage compared to those without television. Younger and lower ability children were the only ones to gain information from television while the schoolwork of brighter children tended to fall behind, as in Gerbner et al.'s (1982) theory of mainstreaming. Children with television stopped listening to the radio (this may no longer apply now that audiences experience several media simultaneously), and they read fewer books once they had acquired television (especially those of medium ability). Children's lives became more structured, with less hanging around doing 'nothing in particular' and more time spent with their family. This need not imply more togetherness, and again will change as families gain multiple sets (Livingstone, 1992).

Laboratory and Field Studies Compared

Following research such as that discussed above, the possibilities for natural experiments all but disappeared as television became part of everyday life in the west. Drawing conclusions from the more recent effects research is problematic partly because laboratory and field experiments tell a different story.

In her meta-analysis of numerous effects studies, Hearold (1986) examined the relationship between research design and effect size. She judged every study for its 'ecological validity' (or generalizability to everyday life), taking into account the authenticity of the treatment, viewing and measurement setting and outcome behaviour. Thus, Bandura's 'Bobo' doll experiment (Bandura et al., 1963) was considered low on ecological validity, while Friedrich and Stein's (1973) field experiment was considered high.

In this latter study, several complete syndicated television programmes (violent, neutral or prosocial) were shown to different groups of children over a four-week period, outcome behaviours were not direct modelling of the programme but the naturalistic observation of a diverse set of anti- and prosocial behaviours during free play, and the settings for showing programmes and measuring outcomes were natural to the children (their nursery classroom). However, the study showed no effects of television except that children initially high in aggression remained aggressive and less self-controlled if exposed to violent television but declined in aggression if they watched neutral programmes. Thus the study provides clearer support for reinforcement effects rather than for media-induced change.

Most of the studies re-analyzed by Hearold, contrary to common opinion, made fair attempts at an ecologically valid design, but the more ecologically valid studies also had lower internal validity (being less likely to have random assignment to conditions, less control over external and confounding variables, etc.). There is, consequently, a trade-off to be faced in choosing between laboratory and field experiments. Most problematically, Hearold found that, overall, the more ecologically valid the study the smaller the effect size. Compared with the effect size for laboratory experiments and for naturalistic correlational studies, the effect size for field experiments is low for the effect of prosocial programmes on prosocial

behaviour, and it all but disappears for the effect of antisocial programmes on antisocial behaviour.

We are faced with a less than ideal situation, as four incompatible conclusions could be drawn: that the laboratory experiment demonstrates the existence of causal effects while the null effect of field experiments reflects their poor design and conduct; that the laboratory experiment is too artificial to be generalized to everyday life while the absence of effects under naturalistic conditions justifies this 'no effects' conclusion; that research findings depend on the method used, so no general conclusions are justified and researchers set out to show what they want to show; or that we can only draw conclusions from studies designed to examine causal processes under naturalistic conditions and so more and better field studies, with high internal and external validity, must be conducted.

Aren't All the Findings Contradictory?

Broad generalizations about the overall balance of evidence tend to be bland and cautious. For example, as a broad generality, it is still true, over thirty years later, that the fairest conclusion from research is that:

for some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For some children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children, under most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial.

(Schramm et al., 1961: 11)

Twenty-five years after Schramm et al.'s conclusion, Huesmann and Malamuth (1986) concur with many other summaries of the field when they claim that: 'it seems fair to say that the majority of researchers in the area are now convinced that excessive violence in the media increases the likelihood that at least some viewers will behave more violently' (p. 1) while 'a significant minority of dedicated researchers have remained unconvinced that media violence significantly influences real life behaviour' (p. 1). Yet many would support Cumberbatch's (1989a) claim that 'little consensus exists . . . [and] research which has examined audiences is rarely able to demonstrate clear effects of the mass media' (p. 1). Much hangs, of course, on Huesmann and Malamuth's qualification that effects are only more 'likely' for 'some', and on Cumberbatch's requirement that 'clear' effects must be demonstrated. The apparent debate – over the balance of evidence for the effects of the media – could be seen as relatively consensual, for many on both sides would probably agree with Schramm et al.'s (1961) conclusion.

However, as I shall argue below, academic research on media effects is often assessed against a political rather than a scientific agenda. This has resulted in a double standard when assessing the literature: critics note the many failings of media effects research while accepting many other, equally dubious (or adequate) findings from social science. For example, is the evidence for poverty as a cause of crime better in principle or practice than that for television causing crime? There is also an interpretative bias among critics such that results in favour of effects are scrutinized closely, whereas

null effects are accepted at face value. Greenwald (1975) notes that while biases in the research publication process mean that findings of media effects are more likely to be published than null findings, this is because experiments are heavily biased against finding effects, while null findings could indicate methodological incompetence or invalidity rather than an absence of effect. An unbiased assessment of the literature, therefore, would scrutinize both positive and null findings, using similar criteria to those applied to other social science domains, and would not draw conclusions on the basis of what one wants to believe.

Effects research, like any other field in the social sciences, will not find the single definitive study which resolves debate. We need, therefore, to draw many diverse findings into a larger pattern and balance them against each other by locating studies in their particular contexts. It is inappropriate to suggest that, as findings contradict each other, empirical research can always undermine itself and should be abandoned. Rather, apparently contradictory findings can pinpoint loci for future research. For example, what does it tell us that the findings for media effects differ for children of different ages or for girls compared to boys or for different kinds of violent representations? The challenge for research is to construct a more complex picture, drawing on existing findings and based on the differences, contradictions and parallels among diverse studies – treating these as informative – rather than attempting to smooth over 'confusing' or 'confounding' differences in the construction of a generalized conclusion.

Moral Panics about Media Effects

The bland and cautious conclusions which researchers offer regarding media effects do not satisfy the strength of public feeling on the issue. There have been moral panics about the power of the media throughout history (Pearson, 1983). Since the 1950s, many of these have focused on television and, latterly, videos. While moral panics are not necessarily unfounded, in those triggered by specific cases research tends not to support a strong link to the mass media (although the emergence of a moral panic is itself a media effect that most accept). Broader-based panics are also often unsupported by research. Himmelweit et al. (1958) reported teachers' belief that television made children more tired, unimaginative, unable to concentrate and lacking in initiative, and yet no such effects were found when those with and without television were compared. Psychiatrists (Sims and Melville-Thomas, 1985) report that violent offenders are often triggered to act by violent media images, yet Hagell (1994) found few differences in the media consumption of offenders and non-offenders.

Arguably, the fervour and contention surrounding the interpretation of effects findings derives not from genuine contention about those findings but from the broader significance of the media effects debate in which the mass media provide a scapegoat for cultural anxieties and for which the actual evidence is almost irrelevant. For example, the concern over children and television may reflect cultural pressures towards constructing childhood as a

period of innocence, as a private sphere of protected and uncontaminated leisure in which children can acquire the moral strength to deal with society and in which adults can ground their values and ideals (a related argument has been made about women) (Holland 1992; Pearson, 1983). Adolescents, on the boundary between child and adult, particularly require policing for the knowledge they may acquire and the sexual or disruptive behaviours they may enact. This connects with a further fear of the irrational masses, the supposedly growing and unstable underclass whose destructive tendencies must be kept under control and not provoked (who must be 'protected' from themselves). All of these groups, it is feared, are especially influenced by emotional and visual images, and, with the apparent loss of community and tradition, are increasingly difficult to control. Middle-class, adult fears and anxieties concerning 'the other' may be dictating an agenda of public policy which finds it convenient to scapegoat the mass media.

Interdisciplinary Debates

Other debates can also be identified as motivating the strong feelings which frame – and confuse – the media effects debate. Underlying the often intense debate over the effects of the mass media is a debate about the relation between academic research and public policy (Katz, 1978) and a related debate about the epistemology of social science research (Gitlin, 1978). Rowland (1983) traces the detailed history of relations between academic effects research, government policy and funding, and public concern. This history of debates over the administrative and epistemological frameworks for communications research also can be understood as part of a broader 'legitimate crisis' for late twentieth-century social science (Habermas, 1988).

Part of the problem is one of disciplinarity. The effects tradition is largely a social psychological one, meaning that it is concerned with phenomena at the interface between the individual and society, typically construed as a concern with the effects of social institutions on individuals, and with identifying a set of causal processes proposed by 'middle-range' theories which may be dependent upon, but not fundamentally constituted by, their social context. While other traditions of both social psychology and media effects research continue to exist, the dominant tradition has shaped not only the field of effects research but the emergent discipline of mass communications more broadly. Hence many of the debates over effects are also (or, are really) debates over the theories, methods, and assumptions of the discipline. Yet for the educationalists, policy-makers, psychiatrists, lawyers, social workers and parents who have an interest in media effects, the academic debate is evidence of the failure of a discipline rather than of the fascinating negotiation of a discipline's form and focus.

Policy and Knowledge

Public debate about media effects is less concerned with what social science actually shows and more concerned with which policies research may or may

not support. Irrespective of the evidence, certain types of effects seem more intuitively acceptable than others – for example, prosocial rather than anti-social effects, or desensitization to violence rather than incitement to violence. There is similarly strong (or poor) evidence for each of these types of effect, yet they are regarded differently depending on their policy implications. The liberal concern is that identifying television as a problem distracts attention from real problems of social deprivation and inequality: the need to improve the conditions of many children's lives should not be obscured by scapegoating television. Yet the complicated conclusion is that aggression and crime, to take a common example, are multiply caused. Policies to alleviate social deprivation need not necessarily undermine other policies addressing the separate problem of media violence and its minor but not non-existent impact on crime. In fact, probably rather few policy implications would follow from identifying television as a cause of crime, while many follow from a focus on poverty. Britain already has more media content regulation than much of Europe, so the most one could do is maintain existing censorship practices, establish media-literacy programmes in schools, persuade parents to establish different domestic routines or appeal to the better instincts of producers.

There are, moreover, difficulties in relating media effects research to the legal, policy or political domain. Linz et al., (1986) note that research generalizations concerning media violence and pornography, for example, do not fit the legal arguments required to establish either that violent pornographic materials should be censored, or that their producers/suppliers be held liable for any violent acts which they may have incited. Social science cannot, for ethical reasons, test whether exposure to media violence results in illegal violent behaviour, only that it may result in aggressive behaviour analogous to illegal behaviour. Nor can social scientists provide evidence concerning a specific individual, only that concerning a class of individuals likely to aggress, it would falsely identify a large number of 'innocent' individuals as well, making policy intervention very difficult.

Where Next? The Future of Media Effects Research

So large a research field as that of media effects research will inevitably pursue many future directions at once, and it would be premature to speculate on their likely success. In this final section I will discuss two possibilities. The first is to draw on a currently lively domain of audience research, that of audience reception (see also Corner, this volume), and develop links with media effects. The second is to call for more, and more complex, research on media effects, of either similar or new kinds.

Audience Interpretations and Media Effects

The ways in which viewers selectively interpret what they see, depending on their own experiences and sociocultural background (Livingstone, 1990;

Morley, 1992), is often taken to undermine media effects. While audience reception research has yet to establish how and when programmes constrain viewers' selections and interpretations, it is argued that the relative freedom of viewers to make sense of television in different ways has substantial implications for media effects (Katz, 1980). Text analysts do not, indeed cannot, have an authoritative view of the text: one analyst argues that the western is about violence, for another westerns are about family and community loyalty. Which effects one should measure depends on audience interpretations of the genre, and whether these concern violence or the reinforcement of traditional values.

Sense-making depends on the domestic viewing context. One million Americans were terrified into believing that the Martians were taking over New Jersey after the broadcast of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, partly because they did not hear the opening announcement of the drama and so interpreted the programme as an extended emergency news report (Cantril, 1940). As viewers increasingly watch bits of programmes across multiple channels (Newcomb, 1988), the carefully constructed meanings of whole programmes (for example, the final punishment meted out to the bad guys which provides a moral framework for a crime film) may not actually be watched.

However, the argument for active viewing should not allow us to conclude that responsibility for viewing lies solely with the audience (as broadcasters would like to argue). Viewers may not relate to programmes for the same reasons that researchers or the public may be concerned about them. For example, boys may enjoy action adventure for its excitement, fast cutting and male heroes, and yet be affected by the message that conflicts are best resolved through aggression rather than negotiation, or that women can only admire from the sidelines. The identity needs of young boys may make them select programmes with heroic role models, but this need not imply a psychological or cultural predisposition to the violence or sexism which accompanies these role models in the programmes.

The need to understand how audiences make sense of television is particularly important in relation to children. Both research (Huesmann and Malamuth, 1986) and common sense suggest that habits and ideas learned early in life are self-perpetuating and so disproportionately influence future development. Yet children's resources for making sense of television – in terms of both comprehension and interpretation – are very different from those of adults and vary considerably according to the development of the child. For example, children younger than about 7/8 years old do not share an adult understanding of narrative, genre, reality and fantasy (Collins, 1983; Dorr, 1986). Adult arguments about the narrative, generic or fantastic framing of programme events such as violence bear little relation to children's actual understanding of and interest in what they view (Hodge and Tripp, 1986).

Linking Interpretations and Effects: An Example

Philo (1990) explored the contribution of media representations to diverse audiences' understandings of the British miners' strike of 1984/5. The news

concentrated overwhelmingly on portraying the strikers as violent, and half of those interviewed believed that the picketing was violent, giving the news as the source for their beliefs. Yet all those with personal experience of the strike, whether on the side of miners or police, agreed that the strike was mainly peaceful. Philo argues that, in common with other studies of the news audience, people rapidly forget the facts, the details of date, number, location, etc. (Graber, 1988), yet they learn and apply the explanatory frameworks provided by the news unless they have contradictory personal experience.

However, as only half of the sample believed the picketing to be violent, an alternative explanation may focus on the prior differences (e.g. political beliefs) between those who did and did not believe the picketing to have been violent (Cumberbatch et al., 1986). These researchers may offer compatible suggestions: neither political beliefs nor personal experience account for all the variation in viewers' judgements of the strikes, and so both may play a role in mediating media effects, for both provide viewers with interpretative frameworks which are compatible with or which contradict the media representation, and which may therefore either reinforce or undermine media effects. The data, as always, underdetermine the theory.

However, selective viewers must get their cultural frameworks from somewhere. While it has proved difficult to construct an argument about our interpretative frameworks, it is also difficult to demonstrate that the media does affect the origins of these frameworks which does not involve the media, for the media have permeated most if not all aspects of everyday life, and sources of symbolic culture are ever less separable from one another. To argue that viewers routinely test media representations against personal experience is to assume that experience is itself unmediated. Yet most domestic and many workplace experiences are permeated by the mass media. Parents relate to children in the context of the television, they discuss politics or morals or decisions in the context of television images and often as stimulated by a television agenda (Liebes, 1992). Schools increasingly incorporate television into classroom activities, legitimating it as a source of information.

The Call for More Studies

Following the apparent inconclusiveness of effects research, two implications are commonly drawn. Although these are apparently opposing, in fact they converge. The first suggests that we should stop doing effects research and instead ask different, more interesting, more productive questions. The second suggests that we should do more, and better, effects research. Both responses acknowledge that simple questions are inappropriate, and that simple answers to complex questions have not been and are unlikely to be forthcoming. However, if we search for complex answers to complex questions, we must accept a considerable distance between the 'findings' of social scientific research and the 'conclusions' desired by policy-makers and the public.

For those developing the effects tradition, the questions can be easily laid out. There is a need for more cross-cultural research, as most studies are American, and so the generality of findings to countries with different media and cultural histories is in question. There is a need for a closer look at

problematic findings: for example, many studies of the antisocial effects of violent content show clearer or stronger findings for boys than for girls, without asking what is going on for the girls (the reverse is true for prosocial effects; Hearold, 1986). There is a need for better methodologies: field experiments conducted with better experimental controls and a longer follow-up period would, for many, provide the most convincing evidence, whether it turned out to be for or against effects. There is a need for replication as much effects research is dated: children brought up in the 1990s, indeed, the media themselves, are very different from children, and media, in the 1970s or the 1950s. There is a need for a more integrated approach, combining the many relevant variables rather than selecting only a few for investigation. There is a need for better theory, so that we are no longer faced with choosing between bottom-up models which combine numerous variables in an apparently ad hoc manner or a plethora of middle-range theories such as agenda setting, the spiral of silence, cultivation analysis, knowledge gap theory, and so forth (Fejes, 1984; McQuail and Windahl, 1982) whose mutual relations have not been worked out. And so forth.

For other research traditions, asking new questions involves the rejection of the effects paradigm, as narrowly defined. Such approaches assert that the search for simple cause–effect links is inappropriate in media studies, for one should expect (rather than control for) diversity and variation in social phenomena, and these should be discovered using naturalistic methods. The starting point here is that the media and everyday culture are mutually defining and interdependent rather than independent determinants of social behaviour.

Those working in the ethnographic tradition (Bausinger, 1984; Silverstone, 1994), in the uses and gratifications tradition (Rosengren et al., 1985), in the audience reception tradition (Livingstone, 1990; Morley, 1992) would all make such arguments, claiming that it is the particularity and diversity of specific daily practices, subcultural interpretations, patterns of media involvement, that are significant, and that such specific practices, interpretations and patterns can only be understood through the local cultural contexts in which they are observed. For example, there may be a public concern about the effects of violent content on children, but such researchers (and, indeed, many of those in the effects tradition) would resist the attempt to offer any general conclusions. Any 'effects' would depend on the type of effects (e.g. fear, aggression, understanding), on the significance of the effects (long- or short-term, small or large), on the particular children (vulnerable or not, boys or girls, different ages or cultural/economic backgrounds), on the media content (cartoons, the news, films, comics, pornography), on the mode of involvement (active or passive, fan or casual viewer, playful or serious), and so on.

These researchers are, nonetheless, still motivated by an underlying concern with effects, although this may be masked by use of implicit rather than explicit causal claims (e.g. arguments for the construction of reality, media shaping, or media-related changes). For example, the suggestion that subcultures re/generate their own meanings to resist dominant meanings of television and to facilitate oppositional uses of media is implicitly an anti-effects argument. Yet we do not know how much and under what circum-

stances subcultures resist or reinterpret compared with joining in with normative or mainstreaming processes.

Most media researchers believe that the media have significant effects, even though they are hard to demonstrate, and most would agree that the media make a significant contribution to the social construction of reality. The problem is to move beyond this platitude. Katz (1980) advocates contextualizing relations between media and audiences in terms of active viewers, the primary group, everyday contexts of conversation, etc. He argues not that the multiplicity of factors which mediate between television and viewers undermine media effects but rather that it is only through such complex mediations that any effects could occur at all. On this view, the study of effects necessarily involves the study of active audiences, interpretative communities, parent–child relations, living-room culture, developmental processes, historically changing media cultures, and so forth.

Part of the continued concern with media effects, aside from the occasional moral panics engendered around key issues (censorship, parental responsibility, new media, etc.), is a concern with changing cultural understandings and practices. In other words, the effects many believe exist are different from those we have been seeking. Maybe it is time to accept that violent images, for example, have in general little direct effect on viewers' actions, and time for more research on the enculturating role of the media – the (changing) contribution of media to culture, how the media construct and validate certain audience desires over others (especially for those for whom identity-definition is fluid, such as children and adolescents), how the media serve to legitimate violent solutions, the celebration of an aggressive masculinity and a passive femininity, the relentless promotion of consumerism as necessary for well-being and social identity, the symbolic annihilation of diverse or dissident representations of political strategies or subcultural interests.

Many of these questions have been examined in terms of media content; recently, there is a growing body of work on the often unexpected and complex relation between content and audience reception; more recently still, there are in-depth studies of the role of television in the practices and assumptions of everyday life. However, we lack an adequate theorization of the link between this work and the (reconceptualized) question of effects. The study of enculturation processes, which work over long time periods, and which are integral to rather than separable from other forms of social determination, would ask not how the media make us act or think but rather how the media contribute to making us who we are.

Notes

1   I would like to thank the many colleagues and students with whom I have discussed the ideas expressed in this chapter.

2   Source: BARB, cited in The Guardian, January 23, 1995.

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