The Handbook of Communication Science

Mass Media Effects

Contributors: Robin L. Nabi & Mary Beth Oliver
Edited by: Charles R. Berger, Michael E. Roloff & David R. Roskos-Ewoldsen
Book Title: The Handbook of Communication Science
Chapter Title: "Mass Media Effects"
Pub. Date: 2010
Access Date: June 22, 2017
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.
City: Thousand Oaks
Print ISBN: 9781412918138
Online ISBN: 9781412982818
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412982818.n15
Print pages: 255-272

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The study of mass media effects has a long and storied history that predates the existence of the communication discipline itself. Yet, its breadth and scope have made it challenging for the area to gain coherence. This chapter's goal is to review the historical roots of media effects research and the most popular theoretical perspectives that have emerged to date. After discussing the state of the literature, including the limitations or controversies within each tradition, we identify some potentially fruitful avenues for future theory development.

Historical Roots

Although interest in the effects of mediated messages can arguably be traced to long before the 20th century, it was the advent of technologies allowing for mass production and distribution of messages, electronic media in particular, that stimulated more systematic interest in the production, content, and selection of such messages and, of course, the effects they have on the audiences that consume them (Schramm, 1997). This interest was generated from a range of academic disciplines, including journalism, sociology, political science, psychology, and advertising, that converged to form the foundation of current academic interest in the study of mass media. First, we discuss general schools of thought that have influenced the development of the modern-day study of media effects and then turn to particular scholars whose works raise conceptual ideas fundamental to the most widely examined media effects paradigms.

Influential Schools of Thought

Four broad schools of thought have been frequently referenced in mass communication research (see Bryant & Miron, 2004). The Chicago school of sociology emphasized notions of pragmatism and humanism. The Vienna Circle focused on logical positivism and thus motivated the emphasis on logical reasoning and empirical evidence to validate theory. British cultural studies and the Frankfurt school's critical theory both focus on issues related to the role of cultural products (such as media messages) in creating and perpetuating social and political ideologies. They are distinguished in that critical theory emphasizes the conveyance of the dominant ideology, whereas cultural studies emphasizes negotiated meaning on the part of audiences. Although each of these four approaches has greatly influenced lines of media effects research, as we will soon see, the logical positivist approaches have become increasingly emphasized in more contemporary media effects research. Indeed, as we look at the more influential scholars' works in the 20th century, we see the roots of some of the most influential theories from the past several decades.

Influential Scholars

As Wilbur Schramm (1997) describes in his posthumously published memoir, there are a few notable scholars whose work may be viewed as foundational to the modern study of media effects. He begins with Harold Lasswell, a product of (and later contributor to) the Chicago school. By affiliation, Lasswell was a political scientist perhaps most famous for his summary of the communication process as "*who* says *what* to *whom* through *what channel* and with *what effect* " (Lasswell, 1948). His contributions might be summarized as helping to understand how to assess media content (e.g., via more thoughtful content analyses), propaganda (and more specifically the use and effects of symbols), and consideration of the

role of mass communication in informing and socializing audiences and influencing society's response to that information.

Paul Lazarsfeld, a sociologist in the famed Columbia Bureau of Applied Social Research, engaged in extensive audience-centered research. His interests focused on audience attention and selectivity. That is, who listens to what messages, why they listen, and what they do with that information. In addition to his contributions in advancing social science research, he expanded media research to consider effects of radio, film, and TV in addition to print media and interpersonal communication. Thus, beyond looking at news and information, he opened the investigations into more entertainment-based media.

Kurt Lewin, the German social psychologist who spent much of his career at Iowa, is perhaps best known for his notion of “lifespace” or the complete psychological environment (including needs, goals, beliefs, memories, unconscious influences, etc.) in which people operate and, by extension, the influence of groups on individual behavior. His ideas that these forces invariably conflict laid the foundation for research relating to dissonance, frustration and aggression, and especially group dynamics.

In sharp contrast to Lewin's methodological approach, Carl Hovland, a psychologist central to the Yale School for Communication, focused on experimental work related to the persuasive effect of specific message and audience characteristics, including message argument, source credibility, personality traits, and fear arousal. Thus, his work on propaganda is the foundation for the contemporary study of persuasion. As Schramm (1997) characte ri zes it, Hovland approached communication from a learning theory perspective with an ultimate interest in understanding not simply human cognition and attitudes but, more important, human behavior.

Surely there are other scholars we could point to as influential in the field, but what is interesting about the set that Schramm (and editors Chaffee and Rogers) highlighted is that although their names might not be directly attached to central theories of media effects, their ideas were clearly influential to those theories' development. The notions of learning, socialization, attention, selectivity, consistency, and group dynamics, in addition to the methods of content analysis, survey research, and experi mental approaches, are central to the research to which we now turn.

Influential Theoretical Paradigms in the Study of Media Effects

With the literally hundreds of theoretical perspectives applied to the study of media effects, it is a daunting task to identify those that are most influential. Fortunately, recent analyses of the extant literature aid us greatly in this task, and despite different sampling strategies, they arrive at very similar conclusions.

Content Analyses of the Extant Literature

In their content analysis of 1,806 articles published in the three leading mass communication journals between 1956 and 2000 (*Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, Journal of Communication,* and *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*), Bryant and Miron (2004) document that despite the fact that more than 600 theories, models, paradigms, and schools of thought were noted, only 26 were referenced 10 or more times, and only 5 were referenced more than 30 times. These 5 include uses and gratifications, agenda setting, cultivation, social learning, and Marxism. In their follow-up content analysis of every issue of six journals

between January 2001 and May 2004, they found similar results, with framing, agenda setting, cultivation, mediation models, the third-person effect, uses and gratifications, selective exposure, and social cognitive/ learning theory as the top 8 “theories,” each cited at least 10 times. Particularly noteworthy, across both content analyses, nearly half of all articles merely referenced theory (48% and 47%, respectively), and 26% simply used theory as the framework for empirical study. About 12% to 13% involved theo retical critique or comparison, and only the remaining 13% to 14% involved theory construction.

These results were largely echoed in Potter and Riddle's (2007) more recent content analysis of effects articles in 16 journals in the odd years between 1993 and 2005. In their sample, they identified 144 different theories referenced across the 336 articles. Similar to Bryant and Miron (2004), Potter and Riddle found that a substantial portion of the research—65%—failed to be guided by theory. Within the studies that mentioned theory, only 12 theories were mentioned in more than 5 articles, and of these, the most commonly cited were the third-person effect (cited in 7.4% of the articles), agenda setting (7.1%), and uses and gratifications (5.7%).

These studies paint a somewhat discouraging picture of the media effects research landscape —one that is at best as likely to mention any theory as not, one that uses theory as a framework only a quarter of the time, and one with little attention to theoretical development. Even for the most commonly studied theories, there is little systematic attention and critical examination. Indeed, many of the “theories” that Bryant and Miron (2004) and Potter and Riddle (2007) identify may be better characterized as interesting phenomena, replicable relationships among variables, or models of effects rather than theories per se (see Pavitt, Chapter 3, this volume).

Because these studies suggest a set of paradigms arguably most worthy of our attention, our focus will be so directed, and in the interest of simplicity, we will refer to them as media effect theories throughout the chapter, with the above caveats in mind. Rather than simply discussing these theories, though, we will concentrate on the previously noted concepts that reflect critical components in the process of mediated communication and then match them to the most commonly referenced theories in the extant literature. Thus, we divide the literature into five categories, with prototypical theories offered for each: learning (social cognitive theory), socialization (cultivation analysis), selective exposure (uses and gratifications), selective presentation/perception (framing, agenda setting), and perceived effects (e.g., third-person effect). In discussing these theoretical approaches, we address the essence of each perspective's predicted effects, the mechanisms that explain the effects process, and limitations or controversies raised within each domain.

Learning Theories

Learning theories refer to those processes by which media consumers acquire knowledge, information, and behaviors. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; later extended and renamed social cognitive theory) is perhaps the most widely known and cited in media research, although other examples include the knowledge gap hypothesis (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970) and Piaget's (1921) stage theory of cognitive development, both of which made it onto Bryant and Miron's (2004) “top 26” theories list.

Social Cognitive Theory. Social cognitive theory (SCT) revolves primarily around the functions and processes of observational learning (Bandura, 1986, 2002). That is, by observing others' behaviors, including those of media figures, one may develop rules to guide one's own

subsequent actions or be prompted to engage in previously learned behavior. According to Bandura (1986, 2002), observational learning is guided by four processes, which are moderated by observers' cognitive development and skills. First, *attention* to certain models and their behavior is affected by source and contextual features, such as attractiveness, relevance, functional need, and affective valence. Second, *retention* processes focus on the ability to symbolically represent the behavior observed and its consequences, along with any rehearsal of that sequence. *Production* focuses on translating the symbolic representations into action, reproducing the behavior in seemingly appropriate contexts, and correcting for any errors based on the feedback received. Finally, *motivational* processes influence which symbolically represented behaviors are enacted based on the nature or valence (positive or negative) of the reinforcement. As observational learning occurs via symbolic representations, the effects are potentially long lasting, and self-efficacy is believed to be central to behavioral performance.

SCT, as applied to media contexts (Bandura, 2002; Stiff, 1986), suggests that for viewers' behaviors to be positively affected, the audience must pay attention to attractive models who are displaying relevant behaviors. To the extent that positive behaviors are portrayed (e.g., practicing safe sex), the model's behavior should be positively reinforced (e.g., through displays of positive outcomes, such as greater interest by the sexual partner or enhanced self-respect). To the extent that negative behaviors are portrayed (e.g., practicing unsafe sex), the model's behavior should be negatively reinforced (e.g., through displays of negative outcomes or experiencing negative affect, such as guilt or regret).

Limitations and Critique. SCT has received extensive support in numerous interpersonal contexts and is frequently cited to explain the effects of both positive and negative media depictions. For example, SCT is invoked as the theoretical explanation for the success of entertainment-education, or the embedding of prosocial messages into entertainment programming to influence the attitudes and behaviors of resistant audiences (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Conversely, studies of violence often reflect the assumption that the way in which violence is portrayed (e.g., with or without consequences, performed by heroes or villains) will influence viewers' acceptance of violence and the likelihood of using violence to solve problems in their own lives.

Despite the support for SCT, it has some notable limitations. First, it is rather complex, incorporating an array of concepts and variables. As a result, SCT is not easily tested. Indeed, although many scholars reference SCT in their media effects work, very few actually test it via manipulating attraction to behavioral models, positive and negative rewards, self-efficacy, and so on. Also, measuring some of the theory's key constructs is challenging. Thus, although it is intuitively appealing and social learning is well supported, SCT is frequently not tested directly. In fact, there is some reason to believe that it may not be as readily transferable to the media environment as is often assumed, as audiences' expectations about how events unfold in fictional realms versus in reality may differ (see Nabi & Clark, 2008). Thus, future research that attempts to model the process of media influ ence according to SCT and to determine appropriate concept operatio nalizations and measurement would be most welcome.

Socialization Theories

Socialization theories focus on the acquisition of the norms and values of one's social group. Along with parents, peers, and schools, the media are considered one of the foremost agents of socialization. Although critical/cultural theories arguably focus extensively on issues of

socialization, the most popularly cited theory in this domain is cultivation analysis, which offers a more social scientific approach to the phenomenon.

Cultivation Analysis. Cultivation analysis, or cultivation theory as many now call it, asserts that common conceptions of reality are cultivated by overall patterns of TV programming to which communities are exposed regularly over long periods of time (Gerbner, 1969; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). Gerbner and his colleagues propose that compared with light TV viewers, heavy viewers are more likely to perceive the world in ways that mirror reality as presented on TV rather than more objective measures of social reality. Researchers have tested and found support for the cultivation hypothesis in a range of contexts, including racism, gender stereotypes, alienation, and so on (see Morgan & Shanahan, 1997). However, a substantial proportion of cultivation research has focused on TV violence and its effects on perceptions of real-world incidences of crime and victimization (see Potter, 1993, for a review). Numerous content analyses have documented that the number of violent acts on American network TV greatly exceeds the amount of real-world violence. In turn, heavy TV viewers (a) overestimate the incidence of serious crime in society (i.e., first-order effects, or prevalence estimates) and (b) are more likely to believe that the world is a mean place where people cannot be trusted and are just looking out for themselves (i.e., second-order effects, or attitudes; Gerbner et al., 2002; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980).

Beyond these basic effects, moderators of the cultivation effect have been identified. Most notable among them is personal experience (Doob & Macdonald, 1979; Shrum & Bischak, 2001; J. B. Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986), which has been proposed to have two possible effects. *Resonance* suggests that cultivation effects may be amplified in situations where viewers have more real-world experience, whereas *mainstreaming* suggests that TV exposure might override differences in perspectives that might ordinarily result from personal experiences (e.g., Gerbner et al., 2002). In addition to personal experience, the cultivation literature has revealed several other moderators of the cultivation effect, including viewing motivations (e.g., Carveth & Alexander, 1985), attention level, need for cognition (Shrum, Burroughs, & Rindfleisch, 2005), elaboration styles (Shrum, 2001), and personality traits (Nabi & Riddle, 2008).

Although originally a more sociologically based theory, cultivation theorizing has taken a decidedly psychological turn in recent years. In particular, Shrum and his colleagues offer evidence that overestimates of crime prevalence are likely the result of heuristic processing, which allows TV-based constructs to enjoy higher accessibility in the minds of heavy viewers (e.g., Shrum, 1995, 2001). That is, because heavy viewers are recently and frequently exposed to certain common images and themes on TV, those themes become more accessible in memory and thus more influential in making judgments (e.g., violence prevalence estimates).

Limitations and Critique. Although cultivation theory has generated a wealth of data, and though meta-analyses suggest a small but consistent cultivation effect on social reality beliefs (r = .09; Morgan & Shanahan, 1997), this theory has also generated a great deal of debate within the academic community. Some of the criticisms include the assumption of uniformity in media portrayals, the assumed linear relationship between TV viewing and beliefs, lack of clarity regarding the relationship between first- and second-order beliefs, potential problems with nonfalsifiability, difficulty in establishing causal relationships, and difficulty in accounting for selectivity in exposure and interpretation of media content (Doob & Macdonald, 1979; Hirsch, 1980, 1981; Potter, 1993). In addition, cultivation analysis, as originally conceptualized by Gerbner and his colleagues, has been criticized for not clearly specifying the theoretical

mechanisms that would account for television's influence on attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Hawkins & Pingree, 1990).

Many of the prior criticisms of cultivation have been addressed or acknowledged in more current research. For example, authors now routinely employ multiple controls in their analyses, many studies test for the linearity of relationships, and a great deal of research now examines cultivation as a function of exposure to specific types of media content (rather than TV content generally). In addition, Shrum's (2002) heuristic processing model of cultivation effects has made great advances in explaining the mechanisms that may account for how media exposure can influence first-order beliefs.

With these advances in mind, cultivation researchers continue to struggle with some important theoretical issues. For example, although Shrum's (2002) model provides a parsimonious explanation for media's cultivation of first-order beliefs, it does not address how media may influence second-order beliefs. Recently, Shrum and colleagues have suggested that in contrast to first-order beliefs that may be conceptualized as memory-based judgments, second-order beliefs are cultivated “on line,” or during viewing itself (Shrum, 2007; Shrum et al., 2005). Thus, high levels of involvement *while viewing* may predict greater influence on viewers' attitudes. This reasoning is similar to that of other scholars who suggest that greater immersion into media narratives should lead to greater persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000; Slater & Rouner, 2002) and will undoubtedly be very useful as resear chers begin to examine the influence of media content that *under* represents certain issues (e.g., poverty) or demographic groups (e.g., Asians, Latinos).

Selective Exposure/Attention Theories

Building from Lazarsfeld's interest in the active audience, this set of theories take as its premise the idea that audiences choose to expose themselves to or attend to messages that consciously or unconsciously meet their various psycho-logical, social, and instrumental needs. Although some media theories may touch on issues of selectivity in exposure and attention in more or less obvious ways (e.g., mood management theory, Zillmann, 1988; limited capacity model, Lang, 2000), the proto typical theory in this general domain is uses and gratifications.

Uses and Gratifications. The uses and gratifications (U & G) paradigm is frequently referenced as a framework through which to understand media selection and use and has evolved to include five primary tenets. In sum, they suggest that individuals are aware of their social, psychological, and biological needs; evaluate various media channels and content; assess functional alternatives; and select the media or interpersonal channel that they believe will provide the gratifications they seek to meet their various needs (e.g., Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985; Rubin, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 1985). Such needs include those related to diversion (e.g., escapism, arousal), personal relationships (e.g., social utility), personal identity (e.g., reality exploration), and surveillance (e.g., news gathering; McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972; see review by Rubin, 2002). The U & G perspective is grounded in the conceptualization of audience members as active, in control of their own media consumption, and able to provide accurate self-reports about the gratifications they seek and receive from the media.

In the 1980s, the evidence suggesting inconsistent associations between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained led to more serious efforts to conceptually flesh out the theory. Applying an expectancy value orientation, Palmgreen (1984) laid out what he called an

integrative gratifications model that captured cultural, social, and psychological variables—the most critical of which is beliefs or expectations about media and nonmedia alternatives— all of which might affect gratifications sought, media choices, and resulting gratifications. Further, Levy and Windahl (1984) identified three time periods (before, during, and after message exposure) and three audience orientation dimensions (selectivity, involvement, and utility) to help explicate audiences' needs from, uses of, and gratifications received from mass media. These conceptual advances, however, arguably failed to take hold in that most subsequent research reverted to using U & G as a generic framework to describe why people use new media forms (e.g., the Internet; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000) or why they choose to watch certain types of programming (e.g., reality TV; Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003).

Limitations and Critique. Although the U & G paradigm has enjoyed sustained scholarly interest, it is also one of the most heavily criticized as being in desperate need of theoretical elaboration, specificity, and clarity. Critiques assert that the theory is overly individualistic in focus, lacks coherent typologies of people's motives for media use, and needs greater clarity of its central concepts (e.g., Conway & Rubin, 1991; Finn, 1997; Ruggiero, 2000). Further, and particularly problematic given the vague predictions derived from the U & G perspective, it is difficult to falsify and thus assess support for the theory.

Perhaps one of the most fundamental criticisms of U & G approaches reflects one of the paradigm's most basic assumptions— that audiences are active consumers of their media selections. Although it is undoubtedly true that almost all behaviors reflect, at some basic level, individuals' needs and desires, it is unclear that this observation necessarily translates into evidence for the claim that media use is as active, autonomous, or goal driven as U & G supposes. Characterizations of some media use as reflecting addictive or compulsive behaviors and research pointing to the passivity and lack of cognitive effort involved in many media behaviors, such as TV viewing, capture this criticism well (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; LaRose, Lin, & Eastin, 2003; McIlwraith, 1998), as does U & G's own identification of ritualistic viewing motives (i.e., to pass the time, habit).

A related criticism of U & G research is its assumption that viewers are able and willing to articulate their motivations for media consumption. For media that may be considered personal or sensitive (e.g., pornography) or perhaps simply socially undesirable (e.g., some forms of reality TV), individuals might not be willing to disclose their use or motivations for use, especially in research settings. In addition, some scholars have questioned the assumption that individuals are necessarily aware of their viewing motivations (Zillmann, 1985, 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), and extensive research on preconscious processing (see Bargh & Morsella, 2008, and Wilson & Dunn, 2004) supports this challenge. Consequently, experimental procedures and behavioral measures may be more accurate and informative indicators of some media use motivations than the self-report methods typically employed by U & G researchers.

In sum, despite the popularity and heuristic value of the U & G paradigm, the descriptive nature of much of its related research, coupled with the host of criticisms launched against it, has made it a popular target of derision by media effects scholars. However, were future research to (a) identify more clearly the boundaries of U & G, (b) provide greater specificity in the linkages between particular psychological needs and message features, or (c) consider U & G as a broad orientation under which more specific theories might be generated, this approach might shed the current disdain in which it is held in the eyes of many and emerge as a more legitimate theoretical guide for media research.

Theories of Selective Presentation/Perception

Beyond theories of selective exposure are those related to selective presentation/ perception. These theories suggest that as a result of exposure to particular message content, one would view the world differently and in ways that may not necessarily accurately reflect reality. Although this may sound similar to socialization theories, the difference is that the former effects are more likely to be short, rather than long term, and shift with changing patterns of media content. Here we discuss two theories that fit these parameters—framing and agenda setting— given they are often discussed in relation to one another in the literature.

Framing and Agenda Setting. The notion of framing posits that the way in which information is presented, or the perspective taken in the message, influences the res ponses individuals have to the issue at hand (see Benoit & Holbert, Chapter 25, this volume; McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, Chapter 11, this volume). As Entman (1993) argues, "[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). Based on this definition, then, a frame is a perspective infused into a message that promotes the salience of selected pieces of information over others. When adopted by receivers, frames may influence individuals' views of problems and their necessary solutions.

Framing research is widespread in academe, with roots in numerous disciplines, including psychology, sociology, economics, political science, linguistics, and, of course, communication. Indeed, framing has become an extremely popular topic of media effects research, taking either of two forms that meaningfully intersect: content studies of the frames used to present various topics and the effects of various presentations on audience impression formation and decision making (see Scheufele, 1999).

In comparison, agenda setting is more closely rooted in the discipline of communication and suggests that the weight ascribed to issues in the news media is transferred to audiences such that the audience will view as more important the issues that are covered more heavily (Benoit & Holbert, Chapter 25, this volume; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McLeod et al., Chapter 11, this volume). Thus, this research involves assessing the amount of an issue's coverage in the media and its association with how important the public believes that issue to be. As the theory has evolved, McCombs and his colleagues have argued for two levels of agenda setting. First-level agenda setting is captured by the initial agenda setting hypothesis—amount of coverage predicts perception of importance. Second-level agenda setting is argued to focus on attributes of issues such that emphasis on certain object attributes will lead people to weight those attributes more heavily, leading to their disproportionate influence on subsequent evaluations (e.g., Ghanem, 1997; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001).

As to the processes through which these effects occur, it is generally argued that both are, to some extent, a consequence of information accessibility biases (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). However, whereas agenda setting may be more a function of mere exposure to an issue and thus not as dependent on attention to or processing of message content per se, framing effects are fundamentally a function of message content as they involve recall of applicable information made accessible via multiple exposures (see Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar, 1991; Price & Tewksbury, 1996, for various related perspectives). As Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) say, the difference between the two may be summarized as "*whether* we think about an issue and *how* we think about it" (p. 14).

Controversies and Criticisms. There is extensive evidence supporting both framing and agenda-setting effects (see Iyengar, 1991; Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). A main controversy, however, resides in how the two effects relate to one another. Agenda-setting scholars have argued, in light of the concept of second-level agenda setting, that framing is actually a subset of agenda setting. However, given the accessibility/applicability distinction noted above in terms of the cognitive processes by which each effect occurs, others suggest that they are, in fact, different phenomena. Indeed, given the broad and varied definitions of framing, it might be argued that framing is the superordinate concept (see Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; D. H. Weaver, 2007). Nevertheless, this debate, on its surface, is not particularly compelling in that the answer will not fundamentally change the way in which we view these effects. To the extent the debate generates close attention to the nature of these processes, however, it is worth continued discussion (see Benoit & Holbert, Chapter 25, this volume).

Ultimately, though, it is far more important that the study of framing in particular move beyond demonstrating the effect and toward greater precision in conceptualizing the notion of framing as it applies to media research, deeper consideration of the cognitive processes that underlie these effects, and, in turn, development of a true media effects framing theory. Despite the existence of framing-based theories in other disciplines (e.g., prospect theory, Kahneman & Tversky, 1984) and numerous calls to advance theory in the media domain (e.g., Scheufele, 1999), the field has seen very limited progress on this front. The same may be argued for agenda setting. However, were scholars to expend greater effort illuminating the processes of effects by focusing on, for example, potential moderators (such as the need for orientation for agenda setting and personal relevance for framing) and effect mechanisms (e.g., accessibility, emotional arousal), we would move more rapidly toward satisfying the urgent need for theoretical development in this domain (see Nabi, 2007).

Theories of Perceived Media Influence

Theories of perceived media influence focus not on how media actually influence viewers' attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors but rather on individuals' *perceptions* of such influence and how those perceptions, in turn, influence audience reactions (Gunther & Storey, 2003). There are a variety of presumed influence effects noted in the literature, such as hostile media perceptions (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), which suggest that individuals who are partisan on a given issue tend to perceive news coverage as biased and thus hostile (or at least unsympathetic) to their position (see also the persuasive press phenomenon; Gunther, 1998; Gunther & Chia, 2001). However, the most heavily researched media-based perceptual bias is the third-person effect.

The Third-Person Effect. The perceptual component of the third-person effect (TPE) refers to the general tendency for individuals to believe that others are more (negatively) influenced by the media than they are (Davidson, 1983). The TPE's behavioral component refers to the behavioral or attitudinal implications of differential perceptions on self versus others. For example, perceptions that others will be more heavily influenced by depictions of sex or violence on television might lead to greater support for content censorship. Meta-analyses confirm the robustness of TPEs (e.g., Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008), and although the effect itself is well established, the bulk of research now focuses on identifying the best theoretical explanation for the effect.

Multiple explanations for TPEs have been offered, including self-enhancement, exposure to harmful messages, and self-categorization, among others. The self-enhancement hypo thesis suggests that people are motivated to maintain or enhance positive self-images (e.g., Gunther

& Mundy, 1993). Thus, if being influenced by a message (i.e., persuasive appeals, violent content) is seen as socially undesirable, audiences are expected to assume that others are more vulnerable to and thus more influenced by that message than they. Conversely, if message yielding might be viewed as positive (e.g., prosocial appeals for donations), audiences might expect that they would be more influenced than others (also called the first-person effect; for exemplar evidence, see Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1999; Reid, Byrne, Brundidge, Shoham, & Marlow, 2007).

The media exposure explanation for TPEs suggests that individuals assume that others are more influenced by harmful media messages in part because they are more likely to be exposed to such messages. For example, McLeod, Detenber, and Eveland (2001) found that whereas individuals' estimates of the influence of violent or misogynistic music on the self depended on their assessment of their own level of "common sense," estimates for others were predicted by the extent to which they were thought to be exposed to such content. These authors interpreted their findings as indicating that people perceive media influence on others in "magic bullet" terms but have a more nuanced model of media influence for the self.

A third explanation for TPEs rests on the categorization of self and others in relation to the message's content. That is, when a message is perceived as *appropriate* or *valued* by the target group (for the self or for others), perceptions of media influence are heightened. So, if message content is seen as normative for the in-group, first-person effects are heightened, whereas if message content is seen as normative for the out-group, third-person effects are enhanced (e.g., Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995; Meirick, 2004; Reid & Hogg, 2005).

Limitations and Future Directions. Despite the extensive evidence supporting the TPE and the range of explanations offered, there is still much uncertainty regarding the theoretical mechanism that drives this effect. Perloff (2002) suggested that self-enhancement motivations have received the preponderance of support. Yet, the evidence is inconsistent (see Tal-Or & Tsfati, 2007, for supportive evidence, and Meirick, 2005, for a counterexample). Indeed, in their critical test of the three explanations noted above, Reid et al. (2007) found strong support for the self-categorization explanation, although self-enhancement could not be ruled out for many (but not all) of the findings.

Further, judgments of differential media influence on the self versus others in the enhancement of self-image can take many forms, including perceptions that others are less critical or literate media consumers, are simply more vulnerable or susceptible to media influence, or are more frequent consumers of media content that may cause harm, among others (for reviews, see Perloff, 1999, 2002). Moreover, although numerous scholars have speculated that individuals may possess "media effects schemas" that lead to differential perceptions of media influence, research that has attempted to directly assess such schemas has obtained limited support (Meirick, 2006; Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997). Consequently, although numerous potential mechanisms have been identified, stronger evidence for their viability and a parsimonious integration of these mechanisms into a clear theoretical framework are both needed.

Avenues for Future Theory Development

The above discussion has exposed a healthy list of theoretical limitations, including fuzzy conceptualizations of boundaries (framing/agenda setting; social cognitive theory), underdeveloped explanatory mechanisms (uses and gratifications; third-person effect), and seemingly contradictory effects of moderators (cultivation). Despite the progress made in

recent years, much work remains to move these cornerstone paradigms of mass media effects research onto surer conceptual ground.

Apart from developing already prominent theoretical frameworks, we would like to consider domains of mass communication that we think would particularly benefit from scholarly attention—all of which arguably connect to areas or fill in gaps identified by our mass media forebears. The three areas we choose to focus on here include (a) the nexus of interpersonal/group and mass communication, (b) issues of emotion and media, and (c) new media contexts.

Examining the Nexus of Interpersonal/Group and Mass Communication

Impression Formation. The idea that people form impressions of others based on others' media habits has great intuitive appeal. It is easy to imagine perceiving a self-proclaimed lover of poetry as insightful, a heavy viewer of horror films as a bit psychotic, and an avid consumer of teen comedies as somewhat juvenile. As individuals often "advertise" their media preferences to others through, for example, wall posters, T-shirts, and bumper stickers, the probability that media use will be employed in the process of impression formation is surely heightened (see Zillmann & Bhatia, 1989). Further, in some instances, such as online forums in which users create avatars and identities, media content may serve as the *only* source of information available about others. In light of these uses and functions of media in expressing identity via media choice, media customization, and media creation, the importance of media as a means of impression formation is arguably more salient now than at any point in history (Gill, Oberlander, & Austin, 2006; Gosling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2007) and is fertile territory for future research.

Interpersonal Discussion and Media. Despite early attention to the intersection of media and interpersonal communication (e.g., two-step flow, Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, and Lewin's influence of groups), these issues have largely faded to the background of the media effects research landscape, although they have not disappeared completely (see Benoit & Holbert, Chapter 25, this volume). Research on parental mediation of children's TV viewing is a notable example of research that integrates interpersonal discussion and media use (Nathanson, 2001), yet there are numerous gaps in the literature. For example, we might ask this very basic question: How much does media content form the basis for interpersonal discussion between friends, children and parents, coworkers, or strangers? Building from this question, what role does discussion of media play in relationship development and maintenance? One might imagine that issues of impression management would be relevant here, but so too might issues of relational closeness and satisfaction. At a perceptual level, we might ask: How does interpersonal discussion, either during or after media exposure, possibly reframe media messages in the minds of viewers? What effects might group viewing contexts have on message processing, perceptions, and effects? How does group identity influence media selection and, in turn, shape or reinforce group norms? There are an abundance of questions about how media and media content influence interpersonal and group discussion and relationships that present exciting opportunities for research in the upcoming years, and future media scholarship will certainly benefit from greater integration of interpersonal and mass communication theories.

The Role of Emotion in Media Effects Research

In general, there appears to be a strong bias toward cognitively based processes and effects

such that emotion-based issues are minimized in the context of the dominant media effects paradigms. This is not to suggest that no domains of media research focus on emotion. Indeed, several prominent lines of research emphasize the importance of affect-based constructs, such as emotion and persuasion research (e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Nabi, 2002), fright reactions and children (e.g., Cantor, 2002), mood management (Zillmann, 1988), and limited capacity models of media processing that focus on valence and arousal (Lang, 2000). However, when compared with the extensive literature in which cognition is highlighted, this area of research appears rather anemic. Research in which the role of emotion is considered more fully as either the source or outcome of media exposure as well as the theoretical mechanism that might explain various media effects (e.g., TPEs, SCT) would be most welcome. This would involve looking at a range of affects beyond fear, the structure or content of media messages and emotional response, and the interplay between emotion and cognition in various media contexts (see Planalp, Metts, & Tracy, Chapter 21, this volume).

New Media Contexts

Today's media outlets are characterized by a dizzying array of choices—hundreds of cable channels and on-demand programming are readily available and commonplace, and users now have access to a limitless diversity of content on the Internet. Further, and perhaps more important, newer media technologies now afford individuals the opportunity to customize, personalize, and create media content such as blogs, Facebook pages, YouTube video diaries, and portals (e.g., Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006). This media environment not only opens up virtually limitless research opportunities in terms of issues related to what individuals choose to include in their media diets but also raises the question of whether the media effects theories that have been developed in a very different era of message distribution still apply and, if so, how predictions might change in these newer contexts. We have little doubt that the issues we raised above in terms of impression management, interpersonal and group dynamics, and emotional response will be as important, if not more so, in this new era of media effects research.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we hoped to offer some historical context to the study of media effects and to highlight the domains and theories that have received the greatest attention in the extant literature. At this point, though, we might ask: Why these theories? Of the hundreds that have purportedly been advanced over the past 60 years, why have these risen to the fore? There is no one explanation, and although we cannot assert the following with absolute certainty, it seems likely that the following three explanations may play some role. First, these theories tend to be widely applicable, and in important contexts. Second, they are often intuitively appealing and easy to understand, test, and apply, although interestingly, when they get more complicated, simpler approaches tend to once again emerge (e.g., U & G, social cognitive theory, framing). Third, in some cases, we are virtually guaranteed to find effects and thus produce potentially publishable work. We do not judge whether or not these reasons are appropriate, but we note that the pattern of relying on the same paradigms with minimal theoretical growth will likely continue without some change in circumstance. As we reflect on why media effects theorizing has been somewhat stunted, we might consider that one of the strongest motivations for studying the media, that is, its great practical appeal, may also serve as our greatest stumbling block in that once effects are demonstrated, the lure of issues of application becomes stronger than those related to illumination of process (see

Berger, Roloff, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, Chapter 1, this volume). Perhaps the new media environment might serve as a catalyst to encourage media effects scholars to reassess our theoretical explorations, and we hope chapters such as this might help to encourage scholars to continue to build on the key lessons from our forebears that have guided theoretical developments to this point, most notably, the integration of interdisciplinary thinking with practical experience to shed light on issues of social significance.

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- media effects
- third-person effect
- cultivation
- agenda setting
- media research
- media

- selective exposure

http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412982818.n15