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Media Effects Theory

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Media effects include theories that explain how the mass media influence the attitudes and perceptions of audience members. Media effects represent one of the core ideas of communication research (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011).

A brief history of media effects

Historically, media effects had tended to emphasize a three- or four-phase model with each phase characterized by either "significant" or "minimal" media effects (see Bryant & Thompson, 2002; McQuail, 2010; Noelle-Neumann, 1973; Wartella & Middlestadt, 1991). The boundaries of each phase are fluid but are generally defined by emerging media technologies, the cultural milieu, and the types of methods, perspectives, and ideologies used by each phase's researchers. The first phase—a significant effects phase—begins in the 1920s and 1930s and often incorporates "magic bullet" or "hypodermic needle" metaphors, as if messengers shoot messages and effects into receivers. In this initial stage, as the enormous popularity of press, film, and radio intruded into everyday life, media were credited with immense power in shaping opinion, attitudes, and behavior. During this phase citizens and researchers alike were fearful of the wide, overarching effects that emerging media like film and radio could have on society. The mass propaganda campaigns that started during World War I further fueled these concerns. Harold Lasswell (1927) is often cited as the main figure of the first phase of media effects. Lasswell used the arguments of Freudian psychology, pragmatism, and political science to argue that society and individuals could be effectively controlled by a minority through propaganda.

Even as these theories were developing, a second and more minimal phase was already beginning in the 1930s. This phase was marked by the development of more sophisticated scientific methods in communications theory (McQuail, 2010). This sophistication resulted in studies and experiments that increasingly called into question theorists' earlier assumptions. In this phase, the theory of "personal influence" (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) began to define media effects theory, and the phase culminated in the work of Lazarsfeld's student Joseph Klapper (1960), who argued that the effects of mass communication merely reinforced predispositions and did not directly influence them. During this phase, researchers considered there was no direct or one-to-one link between media stimulus and audience response. As more media effects research was produced, and as scientific methods became more advanced, it was determined that

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media effects were not as direct as initially thought. This approach became known as the limited effects model.

The next and third phase coincided with the rise of television in the period after World War II. While it was no longer feasible to return to the theories of Lasswell and his contemporaries, it was again possible to explore the long-term effects of media as significant. The focus was on cumulative change, and media effects theory emphasized direct effects models (McQuail, 2010). Noelle-Neumann (1973), who later developed the spiral of silence theory, was one of the phase's researchers who called for a "return to powerful mass media." In this phase, the arrival of TV in the 1950s and 1960s did bring forth a return to the concept of powerful mass media. The renewal of research helped transfer attention to long-term influence, cultural patterns, and institutional behavior to break the "no effect" myth. These researchers criticized the older, psychology-oriented methods, and instead favored methods that took long-term media effects into account, also referred to as cumulative effects.

Beginning in the 1990s, a potential fourth phase has emerged (McQuail, 2010). The new phase marks a return to the minimal models of media effects and places special emphasis on constructivist models (McQuail, 2010). By this time a more egalitarian approach to media effects had grown in popularity, and this has been referred to as the social constructivist approach. This approach argues that much of what the media do involves the construction of reality, with the public deciding whether or not to adopt the media's world view. Many contemporary theorists still refer to media effects as having just three phases, and the history of media effects remains a contested space, especially as new theories and methods call into doubt the findings of earlier researchers.

Theorists have increasingly propounded alternative models of media effects theory in order to expand and call into question the various iterations of the phase model. Lang and Lang (1993) argue against the phase model and instead propound a model that emphasizes investigations of cumulative effects. Perse (2001) posits an alternative model based on four types of media effects: direct, conditional, cumulative, and cognitive transactional. Perse's model seeks to demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of the interplay of media content variables and audience variables regardless of time period or media. Neuman and Guggenheim (2011) analyzed 50 years of communications research and argued that media effects theory is characterized not by phases but by six broad theoretical areas: persuasion theories, active audience theories, social context theories, societal and media theories, interpretive effects theories, and new media theories. These theoretical areas overlap substantially and demonstrate the diverse and fractured approaches used by media effects researchers.

Brief overview of theories

There are several important theories that fall under the umbrella of "media effects." It is beyond the scope of this entry to elaborate on all of them. Below is a brief overview of some of these theories.

Cultivation theory

Given the role of television as a wide-reaching, shared cultural experience, it is no surprise that the study of television has had profound implications for media effects research. Therefore, the premise of George Gerbner's cultivation theory is that heavy viewers of television are more likely to think that real life is similar to realities portrayed on television. Furthermore, these "heavy" viewers are presumed to have the same sort of beliefs and world views, leading to a societal homogenization effect referred to as "mainstreaming." The most commonly cited cultivation effect deals with the large amount of violence on television, which convinces heavy television consumers that the world is a more violent place than it actually is. The phenomenon is typically referred to as "mean world syndrome" (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shahnahan, 2002).

Exemplification theory

The gathering and categorization of information necessary for survival or success (referred to here as "exemplars") have taken place in some form for millennia. But since the dawn of mass media, human beings have relied on this sort of important information to be mediated to them, as opposed to it being learned from first-hand experience. Despite these changes, exemplification theory argues that the gathering of simple experiential knowledge serves us better than knowledge that comes from an abstract event. In addition, particularly salient events will stick better in the minds of individuals than irrelevant ones, and human beings do categorize similar events for the purpose of assessing the true import of information. Finally, the cognitive process that occurs when retrieving "exemplars" relies on events that remain most in one's memory, as well as the categorizations of simple versus abstract experiential knowledge (Zillman, 2002).

Uses and gratifications

Implicit in the theory of uses and gratifications is the belief that while mass media have had and do have a significant impact on society, there are many forces at work when it comes to influencing individuals to change their beliefs or behaviors. Aside from mass media, individual environments, needs or desires, preconceived notions of society and/or media, and real-life consequences as a result of behavior, all influence societies and the individuals within those societies. This view contradicts the classic direct effects approach to media effects; it suggests that people engage with particular media messages purposefully, that they have agency when it comes to consuming media, and that their social environment inevitably changes how they interact with media. Furthermore, mass media must constantly compete with other forms of communicative stimuli such as interpersonal communication (Rubin, 2002).

Third-person effect

The fact that researchers study "media effects" should give a relatively clear indication that the media do have some sort of effect. However, despite the fact that media consumption levels have grown exponentially since the early 20th century, it is natural for individuals to think that the media are not having an effect on them. Instead, the assumption is that the media are affecting others. And yet, it is obvious that those "other" individuals would say the same of people that they perceive as "others," which would inevitably include the original individuals. This paradox of media effects has come to be known as the third-person effect. The assumptions on the part of people exhibiting this effect are (1) that communication stimuli have a bigger impact on other individuals, and (2) that behavior must be changed to match the assertion that media are having a larger influence on "others" (Perloff, 2002).

Effects of media violence

Even to those not familiar with media effects research, the fear that violent media content will influence viewers to engage in actual physical violence with others is not a new phenomenon. In social science circles, however, there is no doubt that the popularity of this research can be traced back to Albert Bandura's infamous "bobo doll" experiment (Sparks & Sparks, 2002). The results of that study presented compelling evidence that supported social learning theory and the idea that children could be conditioned to engage in violence. Although Bandura's study generated controversy and criticism, decades of research has in fact demonstrated that there is a causal link between media violence and actual violence (Sparks & Sparks, 2002).

Framing effects, agenda-setting, and priming

Three of the media effects theories that are commonly used in the study of political communication are framing, agenda-setting, and priming. This body of research has "signaled the latest paradigm shift in political-communication research" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 10). Considering the importance of this research area, this entry focuses on these three important theories of media effects, explaining the cognitive processes involved in them.

The research on frames and framing has provided a prolific area of literature, drawing from diverse fields. The interdisciplinary nature of framing research has led to the varied definitions of frames and the employment of different methodologies (Borah, 2011). Frames are a "characteristic of the discourse itself" (Pan & Kosicki, 1993) that provide "a central organizing idea" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989); they form a "structure on which other elements are built" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), calling "attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements" (Entman, 1993).

Framing effect research, on the other hand, is a "strategy of constructing and processing news discourse" (Pan & Kosicki, 1993) that examines "individual frames" (Scheufele, 1999) or "mentally stored clusters" (Entman, 1993). Therefore, frames can mean the "devices embedded in political discourse" or the "internal structures of the mind" (Kinder & Sander, 1996). This "double life" (Kinder & Sander, 1996) of framing research is perhaps what appeals to scholars across varied fields. Hence conceptually framing has two broad foundations: sociological and psychological.

Besides examining the media frames, researchers have most enthusiastically studied the processes involved in the formation of the audience frame. There is much research that demonstrates how news framing influences information processing and the subsequent decision-making processes. The experimental work of Kahneman and Tversky (1979, 1984) was the first to demonstrate how different presentations of essentially the same information can have an impact on people's choices. They found that individuals were inclined to take risks when "losses" are highlighted. But when the same information is presented in terms of "gains," individuals shy away from risks. Kahneman (2003) uses the "determinants and consequences" of accessibility to explain prospect theory, framing effects, and heuristic processes. He calls the basic principle of framing a "passive acceptance of the formulation given" (p. 703). Framing effects violate "invariance," the assumption that preferences are not affected by variations in arbitrary aspects of the issue. Examples such as the Asian disease problem suggest that individuals can be affected by variations in irrelevant features of options and that framing effects challenge citizen competency.

Kahneman's approach to framing has been called the "equivalency" framing effect (Druckman, 2001), in that it examines the influence of different but logically equivalent messages. In this approach, all factual and stylistic elements are comparable so that the pure influence of the frame can be observed. The "equivalency" approach draws extensively on the experiments of risk–gains research (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Other scholars have used this research approach to study frames. However, there are very few who have been able to maintain the purity of Kahneman and Tversky.

The "emphasis" (Druckman, 2001) approach to framing effects demonstrates that accentuating certain considerations in a message can influence individuals to focus on those particular considerations. Scholars in this approach maintain that it is not always possible to manipulate a frame without changing some of the facts. Druckman (2001) aptly points out that in many cases, especially with political issues, it is not always possible to present a situation in different but equivalent ways. Instead, emphasis framing effects refer to situations where, by emphasizing a subset of "potentially relevant considerations," individuals are led to focus on those considerations in the decision-making process (Druckman, 2001, p. 230). Thus, for political issues the concept of framing usually refers to "characterizations" of a course of action where a central idea provides meaning to the event (Sniderman & Theriault, 2004).

Unlike equivalency framing effects, emphasis framing does not "violate preference invariance" (Druckman, 2001, p. 235). In the case of emphasis framing people's preferences do not change because of the change in a single piece of information. Here, a shift in opinion might take place because a considerably different consideration is brought to mind. The accessibility argument for emphasis framing suggests a passive process where people automatically and subconsciously base their decision on whichever consideration is accessible at the time. If framing effects are explained by the accessibility bias, concepts such as agenda-setting and priming cannot be differentiated from framing. Framing research has actually often been grouped with agenda-setting and priming. All three approaches have been examined under the broad category of cognitive media effects (Scheufele, 2000). However, there are conceptual and operational differences among the three approaches.

Challenging the limited effects model, McCombs and Shaw (1972) tested the proposition that through the day-to-day selection of news, the mass media influence the public agenda. Their studies found a significantly high rank-order correlation between the importance of issues on the media agenda and their corresponding importance on the public agenda. The methodological approach has been replicated in many studies. In several studies framing has been brought under the umbrella of agenda-setting studies and has been considered a second dimension to agenda-setting research (Maher, 2001). However, over the years scholars such as Scheufele (2000) have disputed this and explained the differences between the two processes. Agenda-setting occurs due to the frequency with which an issue is discussed in the mass media. It does not involve how the issue is treated in the media and is not relevant to framing (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

Closely related to the concept of framing, priming is another theorized media effect that occurs by altering the salience or accessibility of the information used in making a judgment or an evaluation. Iyengar and Kinder define priming as "the changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations" (1987, p. 63). The basis of priming research is the recognition that people are cognitive misers who will not, and often cannot, evaluate all the relevant information before making a decision, and so often rely on a variety of heuristics, especially the accessibility of the information, to make their decision (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Unlike agenda-setting, priming contends that the media are responsible both for the ranking of issue importance and for the use of this issue importance by voters to judge their leaders (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Both agenda-setting and priming are concerned with the relative frequency of issues in the news coverage and not with how these issues are treated.

Priming activates a stored knowledge unit, which temporarily increases the accessibility of the unit. This increased accessibility increases the chances of this knowledge unit getting activated by stimulus messages (Higgins, 1996). Price and Tewksbury (1997) link agenda-setting, priming, and framing using a model of the knowledge activation process. Agenda-setting and priming occur when story selection in the media alters audience judgments by shifting the likelihood of accessibility of issues. As a result of the issues that come to mind easily, individuals' estimate of issue importance (agenda-setting) and approval of public actors (priming) get influenced. In contrast, in issue framing, alternative media messages can activate very different considerations in the audience mind, which in turn could influence how they think about issues or form their opinions.

Price and Tewksbury (1997) develop a psychological model "most heavily" relying on associative network theories. The associative network model proposes that different constructs or concepts are linked together in a nonhierarchical manner. In this case the structure of the network is not as important as the links between the different items. The associative network model is ideal for explaining how knowledge activation can spread from a construct that has been activated by some external stimulus to a related concept.

Knowledge activation does not just depend on the accessibility of stored knowledge units. It also depends on the relation between these units and the stimulus information (Higgins, 1996). The spreading activation phenomenon contends that when a "node" in a network is activated, the activation spreads to other related nodes, resulting in the possibility that they will also get activated.

The psychological model developed by Price and Tewksbury (1997) is briefly described below. At any point in time, the particular concepts that are activated depend on an individual's established knowledge store. Knowledge activation will also depend on the salient attributions of the current stimulus, which might activate ideas and feelings that were in the individual's mind. Of these activated constructs, those with the highest activation levels will be used for making evaluations. All the activated ideas might not be used for evaluations as individuals might make conscious judgments about their relevance. As such, three primary variables determine whether a construct is activated: its chronic accessibility, its temporary accessibility, and its applicability to current stimuli. Once a construct is activated, it remains temporarily accessible for a period of time, which Price and Tewksbury refer to as a "train of thought." They distinguish between applicability and accessibility as first- and second-order effects respectively. During message processing, the salient attributes of a message activate certain constructs. These constructs will have an increased possibility of being used in evaluations responding to the message. This process is called applicability effects. The process by which these activated constructs retain "residual activation potential" so that they are used in subsequent evaluations is called accessibility effects.

The authors describe priming as a temporal process, whereby an activated construct remains temporarily accessible through the process of activation, recency, and frequency of its activation. This construct, unless considered inapplicable, will be used as a basis for making a judgment. They call agenda-setting a particular case of priming, when the evaluation is the judgment of issue importance. So in the agenda-setting process the evaluation made is a judgment not of the president or other political actor (as in priming) but of the relative importance of public issues. Calling framing an applicability effect, Price and Tewksbury describe the process as the effects of salient attributes of a message "on the applicability of particular thoughts, resulting in their activation and use" (1997, p. 198).

Price and Tewksbury (1997) illustrate in their psychological model that different constructs can get activated due to the exposure to certain stimuli. Further, Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997) use a similar psychological model to explain framing effects, going beyond just knowledge activation to a priority explanation demonstrating the selection of competing considerations. Their model also differentiates framing effects from the general persuasion effects of media messages. They argue that persuasion involves the influence of a message that contains "new" information, which is not already a part of individuals' belief structure. However, framing effects occur upon the activation of information "already at the recipients' disposal" (p. 225) stored in memory. Frames may not provide any new information but they influence individuals on the perceived relevance of alternative considerations. Using welfare support as the subject, they conducted an experiment to examine the moderating effects of prior knowledge on framing effects versus persuasion. Unlike persuasion for belief change, framing effects were stronger for individuals who were higher on prior knowledge. Their results suggest that frames activate existing beliefs and cognitions, and influence decision-making processes by altering the "weight" of particular considerations about the issue.

It is rare that individuals encounter mass media messages with a blank mind. They carry "cognitive structures" or "schemata" which are used actively to make sense of the world. A schema provides an "initial expectation, an anticipation of what one is going to see" (Gamson, 1988, p. 170). The schema directs one's exploration, functioning as a "tuning" mechanism for grasping the attention of certain details while ignoring others. Schemata are often modified as individuals are exposed to new information — a process that depends on many variables, such as involvement with the issue, attention paid, or ideological beliefs (Gamson, 1988).

A simple example used by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) explains the framing process in the context of "frames of reference." A paragraph that is incomprehensible becomes easy to understand when a heading "washing clothes" is added. Due to the pre-existing set of knowledge, and the interconnections between concepts and procedures, the unseen connection becomes obvious. So very simply, framing provides context, which activates prior knowledge. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) use the associative network and spreading activation to understand the cognitive bases of framing effects. They contend that political knowledge is organized as a set of associations among constructs.

In their study of examining strategy and issue frames, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) also differentiate between semantic and schematic activation. Semantic activation involves the activation of information stored in memory, which depends on external cues semantically related to the stored information. Schematic activation involves activation of whole structures of information called "schemata," by external stimulation. Even though the two processes are closely related, they differ in their types of cuing — "common meaningful associates" for semantic and "socially determined connections" for schematic. Their data demonstrate mixed results as far as the two kinds of activation are concerned. However, their results do confirm that irrespective of the two kinds of frames, exposure to frames causes substantive knowledge gains compared to the control groups.

Pan and Kosicki (2005) conceptualize framing as a process of making sense in public deliberation and elaborate the process under three headings — ambivalence, activation, and suitability judgment. Calling ambivalence a "necessary condition" for framing effects, they explicate the term as a psychological condition characterized by the "coexistence and potential relevance of conflicting cognitions" (p. 177). A result of the application of conflicting values, ambivalence is inevitable in matters of politics. Ambiguities may contribute to ambivalence but they are not the same. Similarly ambivalence is different from uncertainty. Ambivalence would not be reduced by new information, but framing is a key variable because it invokes certain values and principles for individuals to organize their considerations.

Pan and Kosicki (2005) highlight the possible differences in processes within the different framing effects recognized by scholars. The loss and gain frames of Kahneman and Tversky's studies, termed "equivalency" framing (Druckman, 2001), invoke different kinds of cognitive processing. Exposure to loss frames involves a "problem place" and much more in-depth processing than gain frames. The "emphasis" framing effect (Druckman, 2001), on the other hand, consists of several conceptualizations of framing as well as different cognitive processes. Value framing (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Nelson et al., 1997; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996) is specific in "the evaluative direction" of activation. Value frames may alter individuals' value configuration. In contrast, other forms of issue framing involve the formation of an issue or an object of interpretation in specific relation in memory or in spreading activation to conceptual nodes that are more closely related than others. Thus, in this condition what gets activated is a larger and more "compounded cognitive unit" (Pan & Kosicki, 2005, p. 185) such as strategic versus issue positions in terms of election campaign coverage or conflict versus human interest angles to construct a news story.

Pan and Kosicki (2005) suggest the possibility of framing effects being a conscious process. The authors quote many studies that demonstrate a "deliberate selection and integration" process that starts after the activation by a framing message. The thought-listing studies by Price and Tewksbury (1997) show that individuals listed thoughts about the issue irrespective of the framed or control condition. Framing did not influence the number of thoughts but did help them to focus on their cognitive elaboration. Kinder and Sanders (1996) use national survey data to come to similar conclusions. Emphasis framing does not work through an automatic accessibility process (Druckman, 2001). Most of these framing studies suggest that individuals use framing in a "systematic and well-reasoned manner" (p. 245). Thus, scholars have explained framing, agenda-setting, and priming with the help of several mechanisms. Future research can test some of these hypotheses that have not been empirically tested.

Another important question for future research is about how the rise of emerging communication technology impacts the shaping of framing (see Borah, 2012), agenda-setting, and priming. Recent studies have started exploring news frames in the contemporary media landscape (see Harlow & Johnson, 2011) such as the political blogosphere. The "common consensus is that blogs play an increasingly important role as a forum of public debate" (Farrell & Drenger, 2008, p. 16). The authors contend that the blogosphere has the capacity to impact the focal points through which the traditional media operate, perhaps through processes such as agenda-setting, framing, and priming. Harlow and Johnson (2011) show that in the case of the Egyptian revolution in 2011, the news frames used by mainstream media outlets were considerably different from those used in social media outlets. Is the role of the traditional media in framing issues changing due to the rise of social media? Since Twitter and Facebook play an increasingly important role in disseminating news and informing the public, can social networking sites play a role in framing issues and setting the agenda? Do social networking sites pick up their frames from the traditional news organizations or vice versa? These are important questions for future research.

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SEE ALSO: Agenda-Setting; Communication Theory; Framing Theory; Media–Politics Relations; Political Communication; Political Communication Research; Priming; Third-Person Effect; Uses and Gratifications

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