

Key Concepts in Media
and Cultural Studies

Media Effects

James Shanahan

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Key Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies

June Deery, *Reality TV*

James Shanahan, *Media Effects*

Rebecca Sullivan and Alan McKee, *Pornography*

Media Effects

A Narrative Perspective

JAMES SHANAHAN

polity

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Preface

This book is not really a textbook. There are several fine textbooks or handbooks that deal with media effects that any student should have. I use them regularly in my own work and have contributed to some of them throughout the years. While this book attempts to provide a broad view of the field, it is also an attempt to resolve some of my own dissatisfactions with it. Chief among these has been the fact that people doing different kinds of work that bear on questions of media effect don't seem to talk to each other. The separation of scholars into "schools" that value their own approach seems to go against the grain of the fact that none of these schools has produced work - taken on its own - outstanding enough to warrant its being called a "paradigm" for media effects research. Given this, one would think there is ample room for scholars of different methodological stripes to work with each other. Our schools of thought, as well as our actual schools, should do more to encourage this cross-fertilization.

A second issue is frustration with the fact that media effects often seems to ignore its most salient aspect, its content. The evolution of communication study broadly, and media effects specifically, means that the field came into being as an intersection of other fields, borrowing methods and philosophies from them, even as those other fields were more focused on the content that media scholars were also studying. Thus, *media* scholars were more likely to be able to say something about the media instantiations of various messages, leaving observations about how the messages themselves could affect people to those with expertise in the content areas of those messages. But we have learned that it is difficult to speak about form without

reference to content, and in fact, in the end, many media effects theories really are about content anyway, just as much as form. In this book, I draw attention to what is really becoming obvious about media effects, which is that media's impact on people is heavily involved with narrative, the foremost way in which people receive and understand information of any kind.

This is a good place to make a disclaimer. This book is not by any means intended to be an exhaustive review of the field. As noted above, there are some good texts that already do a very good job of presenting the wide variety of theories, approaches, and methods that have been used throughout the years. An example of a good encyclopedic source would be Oliver, Raney, and Bryant's *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (2019), which is updated periodically to present new work in the major sectors of the field. The purpose of *this* book, within the goals of this series, is to present an accessible and concise account of the field, anchored by a unifying construct that links subfields that don't often talk to each other.

To create this construct, we focus mainly on media effects through the lens of narrative. As we will see, an important aspect of narrative is the selection of what will be presented, along with the many things that will *not* be included within the narrative. In this book, some things have been given short shrift along the way, including once-contemplated chapters focusing solely on sex/gender and politics. We can return to those at a later time. There has also been a larger-than-originally-intended focus on work from my own areas of interest (cultivation and cultural indicators), perhaps inevitably as I structure the media effects narrative from my own experience. As any author discovers, though, you end up writing what you *can* write, a realization that becomes a useful addition to the admonition to "write what you know."

Ultimately, this book is my own idiosyncratic storyline through the field of media effects. It won't replace any of the standard texts, but I do hope that it will leave clues for some as to new avenues that can be pursued, or even help generate new attitudes and states of mind that can be fruitful for new groups of scholars that are examining these now age-old questions about media, even as we move into confusing new media environments.

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This book was written in between other things. All of it has been done while I have been Dean at the Media School at Indiana University. Having such a wonderful staff at the Media School means that it has been possible to find some time between the “other things” to write. I should especially mention only a few individuals, at the expense of excluding others, who have been such valuable colleagues: Betsi Grabe, a wonderful associate dean and fantastic media scholar; Scott Feickert, who runs the Media School admirably; Patsy Ek, who is a financial whiz; and Emily Harrison, who generates the money we need to run the School. My thanks also to Walt Gantz. BJ Ferrand is the best. All of our staff and many colleagues at the Media School can take some credit, though none of the responsibility, for the book.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A quick story. In the 1960s, as a child, I was allowed to roam freely around the small city we lived in. My sister and I had bikes, and we could ride them where we chose, with the proviso that we would be back by dinnertime. This was not unusual; all of our friends operated under the same rules. The child-rearing culture of that time allowed parents a great deal of leeway in terms of how much freedom their children should have; children were encouraged to be independent.

In the 1990s, we raised our own daughter differently. If we had let her roam freely around our own small city, at the very same age that I and my sister had done so, our parenting practices would have been seen as irresponsible, and possibly also illegal. Small children were simply not allowed to be left alone; their experiences became much more structured and guided. “Play dates” rather than unsupervised playground interaction became the norm, and an increase in the number of scheduled and programmed activities for children also became more noticeable. The idea of children left to their own devices was no longer acceptable.

In the 30-year interval described above, what happened? One would be tempted to assume that the world had become a more dangerous place in the 1990s, and that parents were reacting protectively to these dangers. However, the facts were that crime rates in the 1960s were not that much different than they were in the 1990s.¹ Objectively speaking, children were about as safe from danger in either period.

Many people I have spoken with – who now raise their children in the same protective way we did – express surprise that crime is not worse now than it was 30 years ago. When confronted with the example I describe above, the explanation people usually arrive at, pretty quickly, is that maybe we *perceive* the world to be more violent than it really is. And once they self-highlight the issue of perception, people then start to think about *sources* of perceptions. Why do we think this way? In coming around to these thoughts, people often think about the variety of ways in which crime is reported to us, and especially we remember the very awful examples where children have been abducted or killed.

In 1981, 6-year-old Adam Walsh was kidnaped from a store; his body was found several days later. As it took years for his case to be solved, his father John Walsh became an activist for heightening awareness of crimes against children. He started the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and also later hosted a television show called *America's Most Wanted*. The show was a national sensation, and while it focused not only on child crime, the awareness, and fear, that it created was high. The show came at a time when the power of television to cover crime was increasing, with more cable channels available and the development of a 24-hour news cycle that emphasized sensational and disturbing events as ways to attract ratings attention. In this environment, a national panic over missing children developed (Waxman, 2016).

Of course, any missing or exploited child is a horrible tragedy, but the numbers that were used to generate public fear and concern during this time were far out of line. “The missing children issue subsists on reports repeatedly delivered by both electronic and print media, frequently quoting the figure that 1.5 million children vanish, disappear, or are abducted each year, with implications that

stranger or ‘troll-type’ abductions are the greatest concern” (Fritz & Altheide, 1987, p. 477). The scare-numbers were part and parcel of the programs’ ratings success. Scholars have since identified these media misrepresentations as playing an important role in the construction of the social problem and ensuing moral panic, with important effects on how we thought about protecting our own children. The numbers were overstated. A Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation in the *Denver Post*² showed that actual disappearances of the type most feared were quite rare, and that most of the reported numbers were within-family situations or runaways. Without denying the importance of addressing child violence issues as a national problem, the most-dreaded aspect of the issue of disappearing children was overhyped. It is certainly an instructive example of how media images can affect our most basic perceptions and the cultural practices based on them.

“Media effects”: What are they?

The missing child panic is an illustrative example, but not isolated. In fact, we know in general that media coverage of crime and violence is associated with greater fear among heavy viewers of television, a phenomenon that has been called the “mean world syndrome” (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999; Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2012). While especially true of television, frequent users of all media are exposed to a relatively heavy diet of violence and mayhem, much more than what they would see in “real life.” Thus, it is not surprising that they also tend to see the world in more violent ways than others:

we have found that one lesson viewers derive from heavy exposure to the violence-saturated world of television is that in such a mean and dangerous world, most people “cannot be trusted” and that most people are “just looking out for themselves” (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). We have also found that the differential ratios of symbolic victimization among women and minorities on television cultivate different levels of insecurity among their real-life counterparts, a “hierarchy of fears” that confirms and tends to perpetuate their dependent status. (Gerbner et al., 1986, p. 28)

While we can postpone the discussion of the causality of these relationships until later in this book, mean-world findings are consistent with the sorts of things that were also going on in the missing child case.

As they develop reasons to account for the differences between reality (the actual statistics) and perception (what they *think about* reality), people are starting to conceptualize what we call “media effects.” If we begin to see that our perception of reality can be influenced – either positively or negatively – by what we see reported or portrayed in the media, we are then also beginning to explain the importance of the role of media in not just our entertainment but also in our decision-making processes as well. If media can play a shaping role in something as important as how we raise our children, can their power extend to other domains?

*

This book is about a large body of research that deals with this issue. Most of us are likely to agree with the idea that media “matter.” It is not unusual to harbor personal views about media effects, especially in relation to what we see as their damaging consequences. Whether it is in relation to violence in the media, to material we see as dangerous

to children (such as content featuring drug use or sexuality), or to media usage practices that are harmful (too much media use, media “addiction”), at most any time there are vigorous debates ongoing about various aspects of the media scene that need reforming.

And it has been ever thus. Society became mass-mediated roughly in the 1830s, which was the time of the introduction of the popular newspapers, then known as the “penny press.” With these and the other new media that were introduced over the years (film, radio, TV, Internet, etc.) came social hand-wringing, moral panic, and more serious research-based concern about the effect of each new medium.

Concerns about media and violence (and other problematic content) have produced many moral debates. Drotner provides an apt summary of how these debates are usually conducted. She, along with many others, has noted that debate about a new medium results in emotional reactions, sometimes verging on panic. In the debate,

the discussion is highly emotionally charged and morally polarized (the medium is either “good” or “bad”) with the negative pole being the most visible in most cases; the discussion is an adult discussion that primarily focuses on children and young people; the proponents often have professional stakes in the subject under discussion as teachers, librarians, cultural critics or academic scholars; the discussion, like a classic narrative, has three phases: a beginning often catapulted by a single case, a peak involving some kind of public or professional intervention, and an end (or fading-out phase) denoting a seeming resolution to the perceived problems in question. (Drotner, 1999, p. 596)

We can see what Drotner is speaking about with a few examples. At the end of the 1800s, attention focused on

“dime novels.” Dime novels were cheap serial fiction that were considered to be “low” and of questionable morality by the better segments of society. They were normally sold on newsstands, and were distinguished by their cheap production (hence the term “pulp fiction” sometimes applied to them). The *New Medal Library*, one such series, described itself as follows:

This is a line of books for boys that is of peculiar excellence. There is not a title in it that would not readily sell big if published in cloth-bound edition at \$1.00. One of the best features about these books is that they are all of the highest moral tone, containing nothing that could be objectionable to the most particular parents. Next in importance, comes interest, with which every one of these books fairly teems. No more vigorous or better literature for boys has ever been published. New titles by high-priced authors are constantly being added, making it more and more impossible for any publisher to imitate this line.³

The offerings were action-oriented, highly popular, and often illustrated with garish cover graphics. Moral authority figures questioned whether young people should be exposed to them, and some wondered whether children should be exposed to any fiction at all.

Here is the type of thing – the actual text – that had people worried, from the story *Adventures of Buffalo Bill from Boyhood to Manhood*:

Instantly Buffalo Bill dashed over the ridge of the hill that concealed him from the view of the Cheyennes, and rode directly toward the band going to attack the two white horsemen.

They halted suddenly at sight of him, but, seeing that he was alone, they started for him with wild yells.

But still he kept on directly toward them, until within range, when he opened upon them with his matchless Evans rifle, a thirty-four-shot repeater, and a hot fight began, for they returned the fire.

This was just what Buffalo Bill wanted, for the firing alarmed the horsemen and placed them on their guard, and he knew that the Indian volleys would be heard at the command and hasten them forward.

Having dropped a couple of red-skins and several ponies, Buffalo Bill wheeled to the rightabout, dashed up to the top of a hill, and, signaling to the two whites to follow him, headed for the command at full speed. (Beadle's Boys' Library, 1882)

Conservative elements of society wondered: what would exposure to these types of stories do to impressionable children, and how could society hope to protect against them when they were so popular? Now, of course, these texts that gave so much concern seem hopelessly quaint, having been surpassed by the far more graphic accounts of violence and romance that we see in today's media. But they were a harbinger of what would come. As media became ever more accessible and vivid, concerns about their effects increased. In the end, there were active efforts to ban certain types of dime novels, but overall not much could be done to stem people's exposure to them.

The appearance of movies kicked up the level of debate. As films became more popular - dealing with the same themes

as dime novels did, but now with moving pictures – research efforts found a considerable number of images of violence in movies, as well as negative effects upon adolescents. The case is instructive, with concern about film rising almost as soon as it started to reach wide audiences in the early 1900s. When it was introduced, film was quite new in terms of the experience that it offered. The riot of image collages and narratives that it made popular could be somewhat un-nerving. Very early films that could be viewed by the public were often just visual records of popular vaudeville-style entertainments, or even things that were naughty or raunchy, such as burlesque dancers. The films appealed to a working-class aesthetic, and brought with them a concern among the well-to-do that films would exert a corrosive social effect. These worries were exacerbated as film developed a more accomplished technical vocabulary that made it appeal to even wider audiences. As film developed in popularity, it was also seen, by some, to pose a social danger.

Self-appointed social guardians responded to film in ways that would become typical across the history of mass media. A new medium introduces affordances for disseminating messages that are seen as socially problematic (e.g., film makes violence and sex available to young people), but it also becomes a vehicle for explaining intractable problems that might have been due to other sources (e.g., rising crime or violence rates). In the case of film, these concerns were brought to the fore in a series of early studies that was one of the first forays into the world of media effects research. Spurred by social reformers who were also publicity seekers, social scientists were encouraged to collaborate on studies that would explicate how people (especially children, as an often-perceived “vulnerable” group) would react, and to see whether the movies and their messages were in some way injurious to a

harmonious social fabric. These were the “Payne Fund Studies” (Charters, 1933; Jowett, Jarvie, & Fuller, 1996).

The Payne Fund studies were notable because they were the first that brought together social scientists in addressing media concerns, and they are the place where media effects work as we know it today really begins. As we have seen, there were those who had written or speculated about media and their influence well back into the age of the penny press. But during those early print days, there was not much of a social science apparatus to deal with media effects questions systematically. By the 1920s and 1930s the scene had changed greatly, with disciplines of psychology and sociology setting themselves in place to answer social questions with something approaching the rigor of the natural sciences.

Of the great body of films that were examined, the studies found that:

the average is heavily weighted with sex and crime pictures. An analysis of a smaller sampling of pictures shows a predominance of undesirable, often tawdry “goals” in life, and with a population of characters to match the goals. By this over-loading, moreover, life as presented upon the screen is too often inevitably distorted, so that the young and especially children, so far from being helped to the formation of a true picture of life, often derive its opposite. (Forman, 1934, p. 275)

There are two ways to look at such a quote. One is to see it as a relic of a time during which socially reactionary forces could use the appearance of a new medium in a nostalgic project to retard the development of society. Another would be to look at it as a legitimate concern about the social noise that could hinder young peoples’ development in a healthy and natural way. The reality of media effects research lies somewhere between these two poles; at times

we are reacting to precipitous new developments in media technology that are poorly understood, at other times we are struggling to find where the “human” still is in all the forward rush of technology.

The discussion did not end with film. Radio in the 1930s and 1940s was not immune to similar criticism (Dennis, 1998). In the 1950s, comic books were seen by some as particularly nefarious, “seducing” innocent child readers into a sordid life of violence and depravity (Wertham, 1954). The emergence of television then provided a fresh target for these fears. Since television seemingly combined all previous media into one (it was aural, visual, and immediate), its presumed effects were greater. And now fingers point to other media such as video games and the Internet.

“Media effects”: An etymology

Before we delve into the voluminous theoretical and empirical research on these questions, it might behoove us to try to unearth the origins of the terminology we will be using. Where did the idea of “media effects” come from? Who coined the term? What were the conditions of the birth of the idea? There are key readings and moments from the history of social science, and from our own social history, that can help us pin down its origins.

The growth of sociology, psychology, and political science as scientific disciplines was bound to eventually mean a turn toward media questions. The development of media technology has always been a key component in terms of how society has evolved (Innis, 1951; McLuhan, 1964); acceleration in the media sphere was a big part of how overall social change proceeded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Across this period, in relation to emerging media, we can identify two issues that became of

prime importance in how researchers would look at media effects: (1) the question of *opinions* (later also called beliefs and attitudes), and (2) the question of the *mass* nature of mediated communication.

Opinion

Much of human history occurred with little attention to the idea of opinion. Under systems of government that were monarchical or feudal, the thoughts and feelings of the average man mattered almost not at all. It wasn't until the advent of the very gradual process of the assertion of individual human rights in the political sphere, the Enlightenment, that opinions were brought to the fore. As this happened, there were not clear ideas about how opinions were formed, how they were "aggregated" into larger "public opinion," or whether the process was in any way rational.

One of the key figures in media effects theory, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, has given a cogent account of how opinion came to matter along two tracks. First, there is the idea of public opinion as a means through which gradually expanding classes of people contribute to the political discourse in *rational* ways. This form of public opinion (*raisonnement* in the words of the French Enlightenment thinkers) is how we like to think of public opinion (its "sunny side" as Noelle-Neumann puts it) contributing ever more progressively to the development of a politics that can benefit the largest number. People express viewpoints in public settings, and deliberative discourse based on these ideas leads to solutions for the body politic. It's what we colloquially think of as the "marketplace of ideas."

On the other side, though, she finds the idea of opinion as *social control*, looking at the tendencies of people to base their actions not only on their own beliefs and attitudes,

but also on what others think about them. Because, as social animals, we need and require approval from the group for what we do, we regulate and censor our own beliefs and activities to assure that they will meet with that approval (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Thus, we have not only our own rationally-formed individual opinions, but our expression of opinion as conditioned by what the group thinks about us. Because the latter process is based on this need for group approval, it is seen as less rational than *raisonnement* and ultimately more affective. It can even lead to irrationally-held opinions.

Both tracks of thinking have had great impact on media effects work. Rational ideas about opinion are seen in work that seeks to understand how individuals form opinions; we notice it quite clearly in the frequent use of psychological theories that explain how people extract facts and images from media and build those logically into attitudes and opinions. On this track, media in effect become a prime source of, if not *the* prime source of, personal opinion. The huge body of literature that has developed on attitude change is of this stripe. Media are seen as variables that can play a direct role in the formation of rationally held attitudes, and they have the capacity to change attitudes that might be strongly held by individuals.

Conversely, the idea of opinion as social control also influenced several major theories of media effect, including Noelle-Neumann's own "spiral of silence" theory, as well as Gerbner's "cultivation" theory (more on these later as well). On this darker view of opinion, media messages come to be seen as possibly sinister forces that can "manufacture" opinion in directions sought by elites. Because people have an instinctual need to know what others think about their own opinions, and because media provide the main vehicle for disseminating information about the popularity of opinions, media play an outsize role

in drawing support for what eventually become the majoritarian positions. Public susceptibility to media messages, driven by an a-rational need to conform, becomes another important part of the media effects picture, especially in relation to phenomena such as propaganda.

“Mass” communication

While the study of public opinion was and is contained in a field all its own, it has been heavily influenced by the development of media. Speier (1950) noted:

the history of public opinion has been written primarily with reference to channels of communication, e.g., the marketplace in ancient Greece; the theater in Imperial Rome; the sermons, letters, ballads and travels in the Middle Ages; pamphlets, newspapers, books and lectures, telegraph, radio and film in modern times. (pp. 379-80)

Without sufficient means to carry and represent the views of the people, there is no medium within which opinion can form, as it requires a dynamic and reciprocal process of the creation and sharing of views. Even wearing its darker vestments of social control, opinion adapts to the media of its time. Thus, media channels make an important difference in terms of how opinion is expressed; media matters in the control of opinion as well. It was the evolution of media toward a mass characteristic that made a most important difference for what we now call media effects research.

The “mass,” in sociology, is a very large, heterogeneous social grouping. In the latter half of the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s, it was seen as the dominant social form that the world was emerging into, as powerful forces such as industrialization and urbanization disrupted traditional forms of social organization (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). In a