Chapter 18

Social Effects of Mass Communication

This chapter will prepare students to:

- explain how scientists use surveys and experiments to study the effects of mass communication
- describe how the media can serve as agents of socialization
- discuss the impact of televised violence
- define the agenda-setting effect and agenda building
- explain how the media can help crystalize a viewer’s political choices
- describe how the Internet may affect social involvement

Chapter main points:

1. Surveys and experiments are the two main quantitative techniques used to study the effects of mass communication.
2. Media can serve as socialization forces when they are the primary sources of information about a topic and that information is presented in a consistent manner.
3. Media can cultivate false perceptions of reality among some heavy users.
4. The media can set the priority of certain issues for the public.
5. TV violence shows a small but persistent correlation with antisocial behavior among heavy viewers.
6. Experiments have shown that TV can produce prosocial behavior, and some evidence of this effect has been found in surveys.
7. The media are more effective in reinforcing or crystalizing a person’s voting choice. RV has had a significant impact on the conduct of politicians and political campaigns.
8. The main topics of research concerning the Internet are its effects on the usage of other media and the relationship between social isolation and online media use.

9. Other concerns about the effects of mass communication focus on the areas of privacy, isolation, communication overload, and escape.

This chapter examines the social effects of mass media. The first part looks at the impact of the media on people’s attitudes, perceptions and knowledge. The second part looks at how the media affect the way people behave.

INVESTIGATING MASS COMMUNICATION EFFECTS

Although we could look at mass media’s effect on individuals and society in a number of ways, we’ve chosen to focus on scientific studies. Scientists typically use two methods to gather information:

1. Survey. The survey consists of a large group of people who answer questions put to them via a questionnaire. Although surveys can’t establish proof of cause and effect, they do help establish associations. One survey type, the panel study, allows researchers to be more confident about claiming a pattern of cause and effect. Panel studies collect data from the same people at two or more different points in time. Researchers can control the effects of other variables to see whether viewing TV violence at an early age, for example, is related to aggressive behavior later.

2. Experiment. An experiment is performed in a laboratory setting and usually consists of the controlled manipulation of a single factor to determine its impact on another factor. A variation, the field experiment, is conducted in a real-life setting. Experiments are useful because they can help establish causality.

EFFECTS OF MASS COMMUNICATION ON KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES

Three topics that generate research interest are: media and socialization, cultivation analysis, and agenda setting.

Media and Socialization

Socialization includes the ways in which an individual comes to adopt the behavior and values of the group; it is a complex process, extending over a number of years and involving various
people and organizations. These groups, called **agencies of socialization**, contribute to the socialization process. The media are just one of the agencies of socialization, though media may play an important role in socialization when it comes to certain topics.

**The Media as a Primary Source of Information**

Learning is an important part of the socialization process, and the media (primarily TV) serve as an important source of information for a wide range of topics, especially politics and public affairs. Entertainment media also serve as a source of information about such topics as occupations, crime, relationships, minorities, alcohol and drug abuse, morals, and law enforcement.

**Shaping Attitudes, Perceptions, and Beliefs**

The mass media also play an important role in the transmission of attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. Specifically, TV can be an influential force with young people when:

- the same stereotyped ideas, people, or behaviors recur consistently in TV programs
- a child is heavily exposed to TV content
- a child has limited interaction with parents or other socializing agents and lacks an alternative set of beliefs to serve as a standard against which to assess media portrayals

**Stereotypes:** The TV world often presents images of people and lifestyles that are at odds with reality. There are many areas of reality that are stereotyped by TV, including crime and law enforcement, gender-role portrayals, the depiction of occupations, the methods of problem solving, the portrayals of scientists, and the depiction of mental illness.

**The Effects of Heavy Viewing:** Research assumes, but does not necessarily prove, that the mass media plays a significant part in creating either negative or prosocial attitudes among children who are “heavy” TV viewers. Although some evidence points to the media as a cause of certain attitudes, we can’t entirely rule out other explanations. Nevertheless, it’s likely that the link between media exposure and certain attitudes demonstrates reciprocal causation.

**The Absence of Alternative Information:** Although the evidence is less consistent here than in other areas, research suggest that under some circumstances TV can affect young people’s attitudes about matters for which their environment failed to provide first-hand experience or alternative sources of information. When media influence is indirect, it is difficult to pinpoint a cause and effect relationship. This is particularly true when the media operate simultaneously with other agencies of socialization and when interpersonal channels outweigh media channels in forming attitudes and opinions. Though numerous factors are influential in determining how a child will come to see the world, the media (particularly TV) have become important factors in the socialization process.

**Cultivation Analysis**
Cultivation analysis, developed by George Gerbner and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania, suggests that heavy TV viewing “cultivates” perceptions of reality consistent with the view of the world presented in TV programs. Cultivation analysis concentrates on the long-term effects of exposure rather than the short-term impact on attitudes and opinions.

Methodology: The first stage is a careful study of TV content to identify predominant themes and messages. Not surprisingly, TV portrays a rather idiosyncratic world that is unlike reality in many dimensions. Step two examines what, if anything, viewers absorb from heavy exposure to the world of television. Study respondents are given questionnaires about our society where each question has two answers: the real world answer and the TV world answer. If heavy viewers show a tendency to choose TV answers, we might have evidence that a cultivation effect is occurring.

Research Findings: How strong is the evidence? Most findings suggest that among some people, TV cultivated distorted perceptions of the real world. Other studies show that cultivation isn’t limited just to children, and that content other than crime and violence might also evoke a cultivation effect. Although the results of cultivation-analysis studies are intriguing, the conclusions can be clouded by three problems:

1. It’s difficult to determine cause and effect.
2. People may differ in ways other than their TV habits; that is, factors other than TV watching might affect the differences in perceptions and attitudes between heavy and light viewers. However, this does not allow us to conclude that a relationship does not exist. Recent research indicates that certain subgroups will show a cultivation and others will not. Gerbner and his associates have identified a phenomenon they call mainstreaming, whereby differences apparently due to cultural and social factors tend to diminish among heavy TV watchers. They also found evidence for what they call resonance, a situation in which a respondent’s real life experiences parallel those of the TV world, thereby leading to a greater cultivation effect.
3. Technical decisions about the way TV viewing and attitudes are measured can have a significant impact on findings. The precise wording of the questions is important. Some researchers argue that exposure to a particular kind of program gives a more accurate picture of cultivation than does simply measuring overall TV viewing.

Agenda Setting

The agenda-setting effect means that when the media emphasize certain topics, we begin to perceive these issues as important. Or, to paraphrase one author, the media may not always be successful in telling people what to think, but they usually are successful in telling people what to think about.

Generally most agenda-setting studies examine information-based media, with much of the research revolving around political campaigns and issues. Studies involve analyzing the content of media and asking voters what they think are the key issues. The research to date suggests a relationship between personal agendas and the media agenda, but these methods cannot prove a causal relationship.
Agenda-setting research has led to two related fields of study:

- **Framing** is the way a news topic is treated by the media. This research posits that the media not only tell us what to think about, but they also tell us how to think about it by the way the story is framed.

- **Agenda building** examines how the media build their agenda of newsworthy items. Some factors that seem to have an impact include presidential press conferences, Congressional hearings, and special-interest PR efforts. A journalist’s own considerations of what is important can also affect the media agenda, as can online newspapers and bloggers.

### MEDIA EFFECTS ON BEHAVIOR: A SHORT HISTORY

The political effects of the mass media, especially radio, prompted much of the early research. Large-scale studies in the 1940s found that the media had little direct effect on political decision-making. Personal influence was more important. The growth of TV during the 1950s and 1960s shifted the research focus to young people, and large surveys showed TV could influence children's values and perceptions of the world, as well as adversely affect social relationships and the skills to succeed in school. Concern for, and research about, media violence took center stage during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

### THE IMPACT OF TELEVISED VIOLENCE

Whether or not television viewing prompts violent or other antisocial behaviors is a complicated issue, and there’s no definitive answer. Yet analyzing research data helps researchers arrive at various conclusions.

**Survey Results**

Though it is difficult to summarize decades of surveys, this conclusion may come closest to being the most representative: “the evidence to date indicates that there is a significant correlation between the viewing of violent television programs and aggressive behavior in day-to-day life.” Nevertheless, a correlation is not necessarily evidence causality.

In 1986, panel studies conducted in five countries came to varying conclusions about the effects on children viewing TV violence and their later aggressive behavioral tendencies. The five panels were consistent on two findings:

- the relationship between the viewing of violence and aggressive behavior tends to be weak
• there was a pattern of circularity in causation. Viewing violent TV caused some children
to become more aggressive, and being aggressive caused them to watch more violent TV

Taken together, panel studies seem to suggest a mutual causal connection between watching TV violence and performing aggressive acts. This connection is small and influenced by individual and cultural factors.

**Experimental Results: The Catharsis Versus Stimulation Debate**

Two rival theories have been developed to explain the impact of media violence on audiences. The first is called the *catharsis theory* and can be traced back to Aristotle. This theory holds that viewing scenes of aggression can actually purge the viewer’s own aggressive feelings. People who watch violent content might end up *less* likely to commit violence. The second approach, *stimulation theory*, holds the opposite view and suggests that seeing scenes of violence will actually encourage an individual to behave more violently afterward.

The results of numerous studies in these areas conclude that watching media violence does tend to stimulate aggressive behavior. There is little empirical evidence for catharsis.

**Field Experiments**

Although people in field experiments are studied in their natural environments, and thus react more naturally than in a lab setting, they’re also exposed to new, outside influences that may affect results. The results of field experiments vary, but taken as a whole they tend to support the notion that viewing TV violence fosters aggressive behavior.

**What Can We Conclude?**

Though no one study or group of studies can make any definitive conclusion, a consistent thread seems to run through most experiments about watching TV violence and aggressive behavior. Taken as a whole, these results encourage a tentative acceptance of the proposition that watching violence on television increases aggressiveness on the part of at least some viewers. Yet while the effects might be weak or small, they are not necessarily trivial.

**Video Game Violence**

Violent video games have raised many of the same concerns as violent TV programs have, and research results generally parallel one another: there is a weak connection between playing violent video games and performing antisocial behavior. Researchers are still studying the potential effects of these games.
While most media research has concentrated on investigating the potential negative effects of media consumption by some people, some scholars began examining the positive effects the media might have on people. Positive behaviors, called \textit{prosocial behavior}, can include actions such as cooperation, sharing, self-control, and helping.

\textbf{Experiments}

Lab experiments have shown that films and TV programs can affect a young child’s self-control, cooperation, sharing, and helping.

\textbf{Surveys}

Researchers have examined a wide range of children’s prosocial behaviors, both by asking children or their parents and teachers.

\textbf{Research Results}

Generalizing about results of research is difficult because the term prosocial behavior covers many areas. One review that examined 34 studies indicated a moderate short-term impact of exposure to prosocial material. Children who were exposed to prosocial programs were slightly more likely to perform prosocial acts in a laboratory setting.

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\textbf{OTHER BEHAVIORAL EFFECTS}
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\textbf{Negative Advertising}

Recent political campaigns have centered attention on negative political advertising. Many speculated that negative advertising would turn off voters, make them distrustful of politics, and make them less inclined to participate in the political process. Most of those fears have not been supported by the research. Negative political advertising does not seem to have much of an effect on voters aside from reinforcing already polarized views on candidates and issues. However, some recent research seems to indicate that candidates who use a lot of negative ads receive a lower proportion of the vote.

\textbf{Mass Media and Voter Choice}

Effects of the Mass Media on Voter Choice: When it comes to choosing a candidate to vote for, the mass media function along with many other factors, both social and psychological, to affect a person’s choice. Some generalizations can, however, be made.

- \textit{conversion}, switching your vote from one political party to another, is unlikely to result from simple media exposure. It’s difficult for the media to persuade someone whose mind is already made up, and roughly 2/3 of voters have made up their minds before campaigns even begin.

Far more common are two effects that have a direct bearing on voter choice:
• *reinforcement*, or strengthening support of existing attitudes and opinions
• *crystallization*, or sharpening and elaborating vaguely held attitudes or predispositions

If a person approaches a campaign undecided or neutral, then crystallization is likely to occur. If the person has already made up his or her mind, then reinforcement will probably take place.

A key factor in winning any election is to keep the party faithful loyal (reinforcement) and to persuade enough of the undecided people to vote for your side (crystallization) in order to win. Thus, even though widespread conversion is not usually seen, the media are still influential. They may have significant indirect influence, by serving as sources of political news, by structuring "political reality," and by creating an image of candidates and issues.

Though this discussion centers on national elections, local elections present a different picture. Most research shows that media can be highly influential in affecting voters in a city, county, or district election.

**Televised Debates**

Research into the effects of presidential debates suggests that they’ve actually had little effect other than reinforcing previously held opinions on the candidates. That said, debates may affect the choice of previously undecided or neutral voters; though the numbers may be small, it’s worth remembering that the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon election was won by less than 1/10 of one percent of the total vote. The principal effect of presidential debates is to reinforce rather than shift voter attitudes, and TV debates crystallize opinion far more often than they convert.

**Television and the Political Behavior of Politicians**

TV has clearly affected the political behavior of politicians and political campaigns. Look at the changes politicians have adopted since the advent of TV:

1. nominating conventions are planned with TV in mind, designed not so much to select a candidate as to make a favorable impression on public opinion
2. television has dramatically increased the cost of campaigning
3. television has become the medium around which most campaigns are organized
4. campaign staffs routinely include consultants to advise candidates on their TV image
5. the Internet has become an important channel of political communication and a new means of fundraising

**RESEARCH ABOUT THE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE INTERNET**

Research into the effects of Internet use is still in its early stages, but two trends in Internet studies can be identified.
• **The impact of Internet use on other media.** The Internet seems to have had the greatest effect on TV usage. The Internet is becoming more important as a source of news.

• **The relationship between Internet use and social involvement.** Several early studies have given contradictory results. As such, it’s too early to conclude how, or even if, heavy Internet usage affects one’s involvement with personal or social relationships. Surveys tend to support the "rich get richer" model. Extroverted people gained the most social contacts through the Internet, while introverted people tended to shy away from social contact online.

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**COMMUNICATION IN THE FUTURE: SOCIAL IMPACT**

**Threats to Privacy**

While the advent of new communication technology and the explosion of harvesting personal information about us have contributed to our own benefit as well as society’s, there are just as many troubling issues that information exchange raises. Information is getting to be uncomfortably easy to find and access through centralized computer databases.

**Fragmentation and Isolation**

Mass media are increasingly serving the needs of more specialized audiences, thus directing individuals toward more selective content exposure. If this trend continues, it could result into smaller and smaller interest groups with little in common with the rest of society. This phenomenon has been labeled the cocoon effect by sociologists. This effect suggests that people surround themselves with only the political and social information that they find comforting, appealing, or acceptable. Moreover, as telecommuting becomes more popular, more people will stay at home. Already the computer allows consumers to work, bank, shop, and be entertained without leaving the confines of their homes.

**Communication Overload**

Innovations in communication technology have made us better connected, but disadvantages include interruptions and keeping up with the flood of messages psychiatrists have identified a new ailment called FAD or Facebook Addiction Disorder among people who spend inordinate amounts of time on Facebook. Texting while driving has caused accidents and the amount of time wasted by employees deleting spam costs corporations more than $20 billion a year.

In 2008, a typical teen spent 31 hours a week online, most of it on social media. The average teen also sends and receives about 80 text messages a day and spends more than an hour a day talking on the phone. Not counting sleep or school, typical teens spend about half of their time in some form of mass communication.
Escape

The possibility of people immersing themselves in the world of mass media and tuning out of the real world has always been a concern, but it just didn’t happen that often or with any significant numbers of people. Today, however, with the advent and advances in the areas of HDTV, the Internet, virtual reality, and role playing games, those fears have again resurfaced, and this time perhaps, with more likelihood of becoming realized.

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