See also Americanization of Media; Flow and Contra-Flow; Free Flow Doctrine; Globalization Theories; Media Democracy; Media and Mass Communication Theories; Media Sovereignty; Neocolonialism; New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO); Propaganda Theory; Public Opinion Theories

Further Readings

MEDIA ECOLOGY

See Medium Theory

MEDIA EFFECTS THEORIES

Media effects theories are, in essence, an umbrella term for intertwined research areas regarding the study of media audiences and effects. Although there have been disagreements about the development of the approaches and what aspects of study need to be highlighted, three main bodies of research can be extracted as the key conceptual ideas about the effects of media. They can be understood as periods in time, marked by a paradigm shift about the impact media have on audiences.

In general, the study of media effects has a history that traces its origin to late 19th-century crowd theories or mass society research. Being open to mass-communicated media influences was seen as the result of the loss of traditional institutions of authority of family, church, and state in a society that focused intensely on individuality. Understanding this irrational behavior of a mass audience became a means for early media psychology research to ascertain the kind of satisfaction audiences derive from media use.

Period 1: Direct Effects Models
This period encompasses work in the early 20th century, roughly ending in the 1930s. Drawn from stimulus-response models from psychology, the view of the mass audience was pessimistic. With the anonymous mass replacing the community, the media were said to have enormous power to which the isolated, anonymous members of this mass audience would succumb immediately. The hypodermic needle theory or magic bullet theory expressed the original concept of the effects of media. It contended that (a) technical advances and mass production of popular culture have created a mass audience focusing on the same messages, and (b) powerful stimuli elicit an immediate, mechanical and uniform response, compatible with the sender’s intentions. In other words, once the message hits or is injected into the audience, it will exert its powerful influences on everyone who processes it.

The emergence of mass broadcasting media, such as radio, motion pictures, and later television, reinforced the beliefs of media overpowering the audience, although they found support more through real-life anecdotal evidence than scientific research. For instance, on October 30, 1938 (the night before Halloween), Orson Welles, through his Mercury Theater of the Air, produced and narrated a radio adaptation of the science fiction story “War of the Worlds” and created with it a mass hysteria in the country, as people thought the nation was really under attack by creatures from Mars. A subsequent study conducted by a research team from Princeton University found that, while the impact of the program differed by specific audience factors, by and large most Americans had tremendous trust and confidence in the media. Since the theoretical framework for differences in audience response was nonexistent at the time, little consideration was given to factors that might have unearthed differences.

Period 2: Limited Effects Models
In 1940, researchers from Columbia University engaged in a massive project about the role of radio messages on voter behavior. The so-called
Period 3: Cumulative Effects Models

With the introduction and widespread use of television—making it the dominant medium by the 1960s—scholars started to doubt whether selective exposure was still possible. A new paradigm based on more sophisticated scientific techniques (e.g., lab experiments, multimethods approaches) emerged with a renewed outlook on stronger effects. The main emphasis of these models is an overpowering of the audience’s potential for limited exposure through a consistent and repetitive delivery of themes and message across media content. The difference between this and the direct effects models lies in the explanation of effects as a result of cumulative exposure to similar content rather than exposure to a single event. In other words, over time audiences start to adopt the media’s framing of reality as their own representation of it.

Cultivation Theory

One example of the cumulative effects of media is cultivation theory. Proposed in 1969 by George Gerbner, it was the strongest media effects model to date since the magic bullet theory. The theory holds that through repeated, heavy exposure to television, people begin to view the world as similar to the television world. Given the emphasis on crime and violence in many programs, a heavy TV viewer will perceive the world as a more violent place than it really is. The result is a social legitimization of the media reality. Although cultivation theory primarily sees effects as cognitive (alignment of TV world with real world) and affective (fear, aggression), it has been shown to also influence people’s behavior. Gerbner and his colleagues attribute two processes as the primary reasons for media cultivation. The first process, mainstreaming, refers to a vanishing of group differences due to similar cultivation by media messages. The second process, resonance, describes a resemblance of a person’s real-life environment to the depicted media event. A person living in a high-crime neighborhood, who already fears criminal victimization, now gets a double dose of exposure to the same message. The cultivation theory has been criticized over the years but due to its posited long-term effect has been hard to either verify or falsify with methods that avoid self-reporting.

See also Agenda-Setting Theory; Audience Theories; Cultivation Theory; Media and Mass Communication Theories; Spiral of Silence; Two-Step and Multi-Step Flow; Uses, Gratifications, and Dependency

Further Readings