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Mass Media Effects

A Review of 50 Years of Media Effects Research

Jim R. Macnamara *BA, MA, PhD*, FPRIA, FAMI, CPM*

**CARMA International
(Asia Pacific) Pty Ltd**
PO Box 671
Broadway, NSW, 2007
Australia
Telephone: 61 2 9281 8194
Facsimile: 61 2 9281 9194
E-mail: info@carma.com.au
Web: www.carma.com
Web: www.masscom.com.au

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The power of the media

The alleged power or influence of mass media has led to extensive studies of media effects in areas ranging from political campaigns to portrayals of violence, pornography, racism and women. Governments and political parties have focussed on the mass media as sources of powerful influence. More recently, businesses and organisations have recognised the importance of the media not only as channels for advertising, but for their perhaps even more influential editorial content.

Editorial in leading mass media has been shown to significantly affect stock prices; lead to corporate collapses; cause falls in sales; result in the resignation of senior office-holders – even bring down Presidents.

But effects of mass media are not well understood and often have been assumed rather than objectively researched.

Prominent media academic James Curran (2002) says: “The conviction ... that the media are important agencies of influence is broadly correct. However, the ways in which the media exert influence are complex and contingent” (p. 158). Newbold, Boyd-Barrett and Van Den Bulck (2002) say: “Although representations most certainly do matter, their interaction ... is very complex as indeed are all the relationships between media and reality (p. 310).

Before drawing conclusions concerning the possible implications of mass media content, it is important to understand the role and effects that mass media can have and how and when these occur.

Early media effects thinking and theory

Early media research assumed direct effects, adopting a ‘hypodermic’ injection concept of mass media, also described as the **‘transmissional’ model** based on the well-known concept of communication developed by Shannon and Weaver (1949) which

simplistically described communication as transmitting a message from a sender to a receiver. In this view, power was thought to reside in texts and the producers. Audiences were perceived as passive receivers of information (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 25). “The first stage of media audience research reflects ... strong impressions of the ... media as powerful, persuasive forces in society”, Lull (2000, p. 98) summarises.

Views of the media as powerful propaganda tools which were or could be unleashed on a hapless mass audience led to the Marxist influenced Mass Manipulative Model of the media and underpinned later cultural hegemony and political economy views. In 1937, with the proliferation of radio, Antonio Gramsci proposed that “ideological hegemony” created through powerful mass media was used by the ruling class to “perpetuate their power, wealth and status” (Barr, 2000, p. 17). Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1972; Habermas, 1989 and Marcuse (1972)) saw the media as “managers of opinion at the behest of the powerful” (Curran, 2002, p. 45).

The transmissional or hypodermic injection model of mass media dominated thinking during the first half of the 20th century.

Minimal or ‘limited effects’ thinking on the media

Landmark research in the late 1950s and 1960s refuted many claimed effects of the media and showed media power was over-estimated. Key studies were those of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) and Joseph Klapper (1960).

Klapper concluded that “mass communications ordinarily do not serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects”. He concluded instead that mass media were more likely to reinforce existing attitudes than change them or create new attitudes (Curran, 2002, pp. 132, 159; Newbold et al., 2002, p. 31). His findings became known as Klapper’s ‘law of minimal

consequences’ and triggered a ‘limited effects’ view of mass media (Curran, 2002, pp. 132-133; Newbold et al., 2002, p. 31).

Klapper’s views are supported by cognitive dissonance theory as espoused by psychologist Leon Festinger who found that people resisted messages that were dissonant with their existing attitudes and accepted information which was consonant with their views (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 123).

Research into media violence and pornography further supported Klapper’s view. For instance, no clear correlations have been found between media violence and violent behaviour in 30 years of research. Studies of pornography in Denmark following repeal of Danish prohibitions against written pornography in 1967 and the ending of film censorship in 1969, found the number of sex-related crimes declined (Merrill and Lowenstein, 1971, p. 149). Even today, the link between TV and film violence and actual violence in society remains a site of debate.

Another approach which considered the influence of mass media to be limited was a **pluralist view** of society which emerged in the 1940s and was popular through the 1960s. Proponents of pluralism considered that there are many centres of power in society and that natural checks and balances are achieved through “countervailing forces ... under pluralistic views, the power of the media was seen as limited and conditional, a power that was ‘mediated’ by an ever-extending range of factors” (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 31).

Another strain of media research which also rejected the direct effects thinking of earlier research and first introduced the notion of audience interpretation became known as the **‘uses and gratifications’** perspective. Proponents of this theory claim that people use mass media to gratify human needs. “Instead of asking what the media do to people, uses and gratifications research turned the question around: what do people do with the media” Katz says (as cited in Lull, 2000, p. 101)

‘Uses and gratifications’ thinking about mass media continues today, although it has lost some favour as it is linked to **functionalist media theory** advanced by influential American political scientist Harold Lasswell which assumes people willingly engage with mass media and benefit from the experience. Lasswell claimed that the media performed four basic functions for society: surveying the environment to provide news and information; correlating response to this information (editorial function); entertaining (diversion function); and transmitting culture to future generations (socialisation function) (Lull, 2000, p. 111).

American sociologist Charles R. Wright (1959) took Lasswell’s view of media functions further by outlining manifest and latent (not apparent or unintended) functions as well as *dysfunctions* of mass media communication. Wright proposed that when the media alerted the public to a health risk, for instance, it was serving its news and information function, but if a public panic was created, this was a dysfunction of the media (Lull, 2000, p. 112).

Political economy and cultural studies views of the media

Political economy thinking of mass media saw the dominant political, financial and industrial institutions of societies having a direct effect on the ideological forces maintaining control, including the media (Newbold, 2002, 219).

Mosco (1995) defined political economy as the “study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that influence the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources” (as cited in Newbold et al., 2002, p. 22). Like Marxist thinkers, “the radical political economy tradition continued to argue that the media were powerfully shaped by their political and economic organisation.” (Curran, 2002, p. 113). This included media ownership, cross-ownership, monopolies,

competition, public service broadcasting, and controls over quantity and content of advertising. In turn, **political economy** thinking argued that this political and economic structure influenced media audiences. Political economy views on the media saw the media as having a moral purpose and aiming at social action (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 49).

In this sense, political economy and later cultural studies views of the media reversed thinking that mass media had limited effects. However, they did not return to direct effects thinking. “Rather, political economy and cultural studies started from the premise that reinforcement was not neutral.” Moreover, they took the concept of reinforcement further arguing that “reinforcement was the inevitable and contrived outcome of a system whose very purpose was to maintain order and to prevent change in societies that were riven by manifest inequalities” (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 34). Political economy theory saw mass media involved in ‘the manufacture of consent’ – a concept made famous by Naom Chomsky.

Marshall McLuhan’s famous adage “The medium is the message” further focussed attention on mass media and their role in society (Lull, 2000, p. 37). However, McLuhan’s (1964) admonition pointed to the importance of the production and institutional processes of the mass media (eg. their internal news selection criteria and production techniques) in shaping media messages. Previously, focus had been on the suppliers of information and mass media had been viewed as a neutral channel.

‘Agenda-setting theory’ advanced by McCombs (1977), and later derivatives such as ‘agenda framing’ (Gurevitch, Blumler & Weaver, 1986) and ‘agenda priming’ (Blood, 1989, p. 12), shifted thinking further from viewing mass media as powerful propaganda instruments used by elites to manipulate public opinion and ‘manufacture consent’ towards a focus on mass media as the originators of messages. McCombs and others

of this school stopped short of seeing media power as absolute, but argued that while mass media may not tell people “what to think” they set, framed or primed the agenda of “what they think about” (Blood, 1989, p.12).

The weakness or Achilles Heel of political economy thinking about the media was exposed by the emerging fields of content analysis and audience research (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 37). Whereas political economy theory focussed only on quantitative (often crude) mass media content analysis methodology, assuming quantitative repetition was equivalent to semiotic or affective significance, new methods of qualitative content analysis began to consider the subtleties of narrative structure, characterisation and semiotics to determine likely meanings that audiences might take from texts.

Cultural studies approaches to mass media borrowed from literary criticism and cinematic analysis and drew on linguistics and socio-linguistics. This approach shifted focus away from the structuralist politics of Marx and Engels and the structuralist linguistic theories of Saussure and introduced qualitative methods which examined how different readers interpreted texts differently..

Even so, early neo-Marxist cultural studies saw mass media being used to influence or control audiences. However, they saw this as more subtle than direct control. Mass media, they argued, exerted influence through cultural hegemony.

Hegemony is summarised by Lull (2000) as “the power or dominance that one social group holds over others” gained through “a tacit willingness by people to be governed by principles, rules and laws which they believe operate in their best interests, even though in actual practice they may not” (p. 51). He states further: “Hegemony is a process of convergence, consent, and subordination. Ideas, social institutions, industries, and ways of living are synthesized into a mosaic which serves to preserve the economic, political, and

cultural advantages of the already powerful ... The mass media play an extraordinary role in the process” (p. 54). That people do not necessarily see the hegemonic power of mass media is not surprising when the subtle process of hegemony is understood. Lull points out: “The victims of hegemony don’t realise they are being repressed through ideology” (p. 73).

Habermas proposed a variation on political economy thinking with his concept of mass media as a ‘**public sphere**’ in which mass media function as a “forum of public communication ... in which individual citizens can come together as a public and confer freely about matters of general interest” (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 22). However, Habermas’ concept of mass media as a ‘public sphere’ where reason and logic would prevail has been widely dismissed and seen as flawed because of its “idealisation of public reason” (Curran, 2002, p. 45).

In summary, with the advent of cultural studies, media effects thinking evolved from force, to coercion to consent (albeit an engineered consent).

The ‘ethnographic turn’ – ‘death of the author’; birth of the reader

‘The ethnographic turn’ in social and cultural studies research brought a major change in thinking about mass media effects. Cultural studies approaches to mass media drew on literary analysis, linguistics and socio-linguistics (Newbold, et al, 2002, p. 307). A key influence was Roland Barthes’ (1977) concept of the ‘death of the author’ which shifted emphasis from the author’s intentions to the reader. This paradigm shift ushered in what Curran (2002) terms “a reconceptualisation of **the audience** as an active producer of meaning” (p. 115).

Socio-linguistic interpretations and semiological studies saw “meaning as mobile rather than fixed” and recognised “socially situated meaning systems” (p. 145). In simple

terms, texts could mean different things to different people in different situations.

Post-Marxist cultural studies further turned attention to ‘human agency’ (Connell, 1995, p. 9), drawing from anthropological and social research to specifically examine how audiences interpret media texts. Building on Stuart Hall’s influential ‘encoding-decoding’ model (Hall, 1973; 1977; Hall, Hobson, Lowe & Willis, 1980; Hall, 1980; Morley & Chen, 1996), and his concept of the “critical reader” (Hall et al., 1980), sociologists and modern media scholars point out that audiences actively construct the meanings of (decode) media texts within a matrix of influences, rather than passively absorb pre-determined meanings imposed on them (Mumford, 1998, p. 121; Newbold et al., 2002, p. 307). Hall, supported by Morley and Chen, (1996), suggested that a media producer may ‘encode’ a certain meaning into a text, which would be based on a certain social context and understandings, but when another person comes to consume that text, their reading (‘decoding’) of it, based on their own social context and assumptions, is likely to be somewhat different.

McQuail (1984), building on earlier uses and gratifications theory, reversed the classic question of media effect from ‘what effect do the media have on people’ to ‘how do people use the media’ and helped overturn previous assumptions of linearity and cause-effect in thinking about media and audiences.

Cultural studies’ main contribution to media studies was the identification of “intervening variables” that influence the relationship between text and audience (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 41). The ‘new audience research’ conducted in cultural studies of mass media found diversity of meanings drawn by people from the media they consume and revealed contradictions in how people consume mass media. For example, people were found in research to be “quite capable of conforming with prevalent social disapproval or depreciation of certain categories of text on one hand, while continuing to take pleasure

from those same texts on the other” (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 38).

In cultural studies approaches to mass media, texts are viewed as “polysemic, which is to say that they offer the possibility of a diversity of reading, even if a ‘preferred reading’ is inscribed within the text by its producers”, Newbold et al. (2002, p. 45) conclude. Curran (2002) and others agree. Curran says “... the media have fractured meanings” (p. 144), while Lull (2000) uses the term “multisemic” (p. 162).

Audience reception analysis carried out by Morley advanced theory of audience power by focussing on textual meaning not as messages implanted by either media producers or influential institutions as proposed by earlier Marxist and Neo-Marxist theories, but in more sophisticated and complex ways drawing on semiology and ideology. New thinking proposed “interdiscursive processes in audience reception” (Curran, 2002, p. 119).

“The rediscovery of audience power in revisionist reception studies” (Curran, 2002, p. 145) was an important development in media effects theory and debunked media ideology leading to a “more cautious assessment of media influence” (Curran, 2002, p. 115).

Fiske (1989a), one of the most strident cultural studies theorists, argues that it is the audience, not the media, which has the most power (p. 127). However, many scholars put the view that Fiske “hopelessly romanticises the role of audience members” (Lull, 2000, p. 168). Tester (1994) says that “Fiske’s work confuses the possibility that the audience might carry out oppositional readings of media texts with the claim that they actually do carry out such readings” (p. 70).

Also, reception analysis, while seen as a major advance in understanding how mass media and audiences inter-relate, relied heavily – some say over-relied – on group discussions and rather loose concepts of

‘decoding’ (Curran, 2002, p. 119). Ethnographic methods of research such as discussion groups and participant observation, while widely acclaimed as qualitative research methods allowing first-hand data gathering, also contain inherent dangers including (a) intervention by the researcher; (b) the researcher becoming too close to the audience (colloquially termed ‘going native’ from early ethnographic studies of tribal cultures); and (c) respondents ‘playing to the camera’ or, in this case, the researcher.

A number of other scholars also criticise cultural studies theory of mass media and its emphasis on the openness of texts which Windschuttle (1998) says leaves us “adrift in a sea of linguistic relativism” (p. 25). Windschuttle cites *The Media in Australia: Industries, Texts, Audiences* by Cunningham and Turner (1993), a history of textual analysis in media theory, which concludes:

While textual analysis has had to relinquish any ambition to reveal the meaning through its consideration of media texts, it still insists that one cannot just wheel in any old meaning at all. Most agree that the text does have the power to limit the range of uses to which it is likely to be put. Exactly how much power, however, or how one might define the limits, is more difficult to decide. The balance of power between text and reader seems to vary from text to text, from reading to reading, from context to context, from audience member to audience member, and over time (p. 266).

Contemporary theory of media effects – a synthesis of views

Lull (2000) summarises what he calls “three zones of indeterminacy” of media effects which he identifies as (a) institutions which he claims are diverse; (b) technology which he holds is ultimately unmanageable (eg. a private video operator filming police beating black motorist Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1992); and (c) messages which he agrees are polysemic (open to multiple interpretations by different readers) and diverse (p. 217).

Modern thinking on mass media recognises that perceptions “cannot be viewed as being constructed by media representations alone” (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 311). As discussed by Barthes (1972), Hall (1973), Hall et al. (1980), Lovell (1980), Cook (1992), Woodward (1997), Mumford (1998) and a number of others, interpretations and perceptions are influenced by a multiplicity of factors such as race, nationality, ethnicity, social background, education, gender, sexuality, religion and inter-relationships such as family, peers and occupation or work groups, as well as media content. Curran (2002) adds that first-hand knowledge, word-of-mouth relaying others’ first-hand knowledge, sceptical dispositions towards the media, and internal processes of logic also influence audiences reading of media texts (p. 121).

However, there are flaws in ‘limited effects’ or ‘minimal impact’ theories of mass media. Mass media *do* have a significant impact for a number of reasons. Bardikian (1997) notes that “throughout most of the 20th century the trend in culture industry ownership was toward concentration in the hands of fewer and fewer multinational corporations” (ie. monopolies and oligopolies). Lull (2000) says “the culture industries became part of a vast system of inter-related agencies” (p. 191). At the same time, globalisation of mass media has led to this shrinking group of powerful, mainly western publishers and broadcasters distributing homogenised media content worldwide. Curran (2002) points out that audiences’ ability individually and collectively to make oppositional readings or interpretations of mass media content depends on their access to oppositional discourses (p. 158). The growth of global monopolies and oligopolies in mass media has reduced diversity and audience access to alternative and oppositional discourses.

At the same time, a number of studies suggest that the influence of other traditional sources for interpretation and meaning such as the family, the Church and work have declined in recent times (Grossberg et al., 1998). A clear

indication of the decline of the Church as an influential institution is shown in the 1996 Catholic Church Life Survey, one of the largest studies of parish life ever undertaken in Australia, which reported that the number of Catholics attending mass weekly declined by 10% between 1991 and 1996 and that “less than half of 160,000 Catholics surveyed accepted without difficulty the Vatican’s authority to teach certain doctrines” (McGillion, 2003). International evidence of this trend was found in a *Times Mirror* Center for the People and the Press (1994) survey which reported that the Church has declined as a source of influence in the US, Canada, Britain, France and Germany, and in all countries except the US it was rated lower than television and newspapers as a source of guiding and influential information.

“From the last quarter of the 19th century onwards, there was a cumulative process of de-Christianisation”, Curran (2002) notes. Also, he says “during the same period” there was “decline of the factory, trade union, church, local neighbourhood and extended family” (p. 23). The influence of traditional sources of identities such as religion, family and work have declined in modern times, leading to new influences to shape identities, Newbold et al. (2002, p. 306) agree.

Furthermore, Fiske’s view that popular culture was “serious social struggle” created by everyday people resisting and evading dominant ideological and cultural forces (Lull, 2000, p. 167) has been rejected by many social and media researchers as overly optimistic. “The obvious criticism of Fiske’s work is that it is far too optimistic about the challenging impact of mainstream texts – or, to be precise, the challenging consequences of people’s own unique readings of mainstream texts,” Gauntlett (2002, p. 28) says. As noted earlier, Lull (2000) says Fiske “hopelessly romanticises the role of audience members” (p. 168).

Also, as Fiske acknowledges, notwithstanding the cautionary ‘minimal consequences’ finding of media research by Klapper and

others, there is an “overspill” of meaning whereby, even when readers interpret their own meanings from media texts, the meanings intended by the producers also get through (Fiske, 1989b, p. 70).

Accompanying the decline in sources of alternative or oppositional discourse to mass media, modern mass media use increasingly sophisticated methods including ‘docu-drama’ and ‘mockumentaries’ (fiction made to look like documentary) and Reality TV in an attempt to increase their semiotic efficacy. These trends result in substantial impact on media audiences, it is concluded.

In summary seven flaws can be identified in ‘limited effects’ thinking on mass media:

1. Reinforcement is an effect

Media reinforcement is itself a powerful and significant effect. By reinforcing the status quo and/or selective discourses, mass media exert a major influence in society.

2. ‘Overspill’ of meaning

While audiences read their own meanings off media texts (including rejecting some media messages), researchers such as Fiske (1989b) propose that some media-produced meanings get through. In other words, mass media representations are not fully absorbed by audiences, but ‘seepage’ occurs.

Umberto Eco’s concept of ‘aberrant decoding’ further supports a view that mass media messages are likely to get through to audiences. Eco (1965) describes texts as ‘open’ or ‘closed’ and says that ‘aberrant decoding’ is most likely to occur with ‘open’ texts (Eco, 1981). Exemplars of ‘open’ texts, which have a wide range of possible meanings are literary works which use metaphor, symbolism and poetic expression. Mass media texts tend to be ‘closed’ because they are written to formulaic journalistic styles and produced to programming standards which are widely followed. Eco believes ‘aberrant

decoding’ is less likely or unlikely to occur with ‘closed’ texts. Furthermore, while he argues that diverse decodings can occur with mass media texts when they are broadcast to heterogeneous audiences, many media target specific demographic groups and package their content for those groups (eg. men’s and women’s magazines), resulting in homogenous audiences accessing increasingly homogenous content.

3. Lack of oppositional discourse

Social and economic changes in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have resulted in lack of access to alternative discourses for many audiences. Studies shows that the influence of family, Church and work have declined in many developed societies. At the same time, globalisation of mass media and media monopolies or oligopolies have homogenised media content and reduced the number of independent media capable of representing alternative or oppositional views.

4. Intermediation – the ‘vicious circle’ of media influence

While audiences turn to other sources of information and discourse such as interpersonal relationships or institutions such as political parties, government bodies and organisations for interpretation and meaning, these too are media consumers often reacting to mass media representations. A simple example is friend or colleague telling an intending purchaser of a product that he/she has ‘heard’ that the product is good or not good, as the case may be, which appears to be personal communication or referral. In reality, the friend or colleague may have gained the information from a media report.

5. Short-term versus long-term effects

Most media effects studies have examined only short-term impact of mass media content on audiences. Long-term cumulative effects have been little studied. Other fields of social and scientific research suggest that long-term exposure

to influences results in cumulative effects. Long-term mass media representation, particularly repeated and consistent messages, may therefore have effects not detectable in short-term studies.

The notion of intertextuality discussed by Kristeva (1980) points to likely cumulative effects of mass media exposure. Kristeva refers to the construction of meaning from texts on two axes: a horizontal axis connecting the author and reader of a text, and a vertical axis on which the text is connected to other texts (p. 69). This is particularly relevant in the case of mass media. Few if any audiences connect with only one media text. Most read one or more newspapers and several magazines, listen to radio, and watch several hours of television each day. For instance, Australian television ratings data in 1999 found that the average person watches TV for two hours 43 minutes and 51 seconds a day, and during winter the figure climbs to close to three hours a day (Dale, 2000). Kristeva, cited in Culler (1981) says “every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it” (p. 105).

6. The blurred boundaries of mediation

While TV drama, comedy and movies are *prima facie* identifiable by audiences as ‘not real’ because of canned laughter, music soundtracks, and other production techniques, news, current affairs, documentaries and radio and TV talk shows are presented as though they are ‘real’. The advent of Reality TV is an extreme example of the blurred boundaries between fact and fiction in mass media. ‘Mockumentaries’ and ‘docu-drama’ are other media programming formats which present representation as fact or reality. The distinction between what is real and what is a mediated representation blurs for many audiences. This is further compounded by the next point.

7. Media self-promotion

Mass media widely promote themselves as providers of ‘truth’ and reality, with some programs and newspapers making specific claims to present ‘the truth’ in slogans such as “the way it is” and “the one you can trust”. This promotion further erodes audiences’ critical abilities.

Newbold et al. (2002) point out that “in the 1990s and into the new millennium it is becoming more common for studies to integrate political economy and cultural studies traditions ... this has undermined any temptation to complacent acceptance of the polysemic openness of texts” (p. 40).

Most modern researchers accept that a synthesis of influences comprised of (a) the content mediated by the producers; (b) the semiotic complexity and efficacy of the medium; and (c) interpretations by the reader shape meaning from media texts. The latter influence – the ‘ethnographic turn’ in research – recognises both internal factors in the reader such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, education level and socio-economic background, as well as external factors such as influence of family, peer groups, the Church, and so on. This evolution of media effects theory is summarised in Figure 1.

Newbold et al. (2002) summarise:

... the tradition of media effects has undergone a number of transformations ... in the past two decades. These transformations may be summarised as movements away from ‘transmissional’ models of effects towards a study of media within contexts of making of meaning, of culture, of texts and of literacy, in the interaction between media texts and media readers. Those who have asked how people make meaning from texts have had to look both at the ways in which texts are structured, and at the readers themselves” (p. 46).

They conclude that “media texts, including representations, do not affect audiences in a simple and direct way, but rather that this

process is complex, ambiguous and at times even contradictory” (p. 308).

McQuail (1997) summarises the evolution of mass media research as follows:

In the early days of mass communication research, the audience concept stood for the body of actual or intended receivers of messages at the end of a linear process of information transmission. This version has been gradually replaced by a view of the media receiver as more or less active, resistant to influence, and guided by his or her own concerns, depending on the particular social and cultural context (p. 142).

The answer to the age-old question of whether mass media create or reflect social reality is ‘both’ according to modern researchers such as Lull (2000, p. 165). Curran (2002) says: “... the media are powerful ideological agencies, though not in the simplistic form of brainwashing proposed by members of the Frankfurt school” (p. 165). “Today, it is commonly appreciated that the media do not simply mirror reality – even where that is their stated aim. Every form of representation involves selection, exclusion and inclusion” (Newbold, et al, 2002, p. 16).

Electronic media, in particular, are seen as having major influence. Lull (2000) says:

... mass media, especially the electronic media, are unparalleled forms of social power even in the most stable societies. Electronic media are among the modern world’s most celebrated and effective conveyers of ideology and articulators of social rules. Media stimulate short-term patterns and long-term conventions that can affect an entire society ... Despite concerns many people have about them, the mass media are among the most potent of modern-day authorities. The vast majority of people in the more developed countries all over the world say they trust television more than any other source of information (p. 93).

Theory developed in public relations which is a sector with a vested interest in understanding the power of the media also

sheds light on the likely effects of mass communication. Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed what they call ‘situational theory’ of communication effects (pp. 147-158). They argue that mass communication can have significant effects on audiences contingent on four key situational factors: (a) the level of problem recognition (does the audience understand and perceive there is a problem to be addressed); (b) the level of constraint recognition (does the audience feel empowered to do anything about it); (c) the presence of a referent criterion (previous experience or knowledge of the subject) and (d) level of involvement. If these situational factors are present, they argue that mass communication can have significant effects on audiences.

Chaffee (as cited in Grunig and Hunt, 1984) proposes that there are at least 18 kinds of media effects and he and other academics such as Grunig and Hunt suggest that social researchers have focused only on attitudinal or behavioural change, missing other important effects. Chaffee, and Grunig and Hunt, argue that media effects occur for two reasons – because of specific content, or simply because of the amount of time audiences spend with them, a factor taken up by social researcher Hugh Mackay (2002) who suggests that the main effect of media consumption is that it takes audiences away from other activities (eg. inter-personal relations) which might have affected them in other ways. Then they argue that media effects occur at three levels: cognitive (knowledge), affective (attitudes), and conative (behaviour), and propose that these can have effects in three spheres: on individuals, on interpersonal relations, and on larger social systems such as communities or societies. Thus, Chaffee, supported by Grunig and Hunt, calculates: 2 ways of affecting x 3 levels of effects x 3 spheres of effect = 18 possible areas of media effects (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 126).

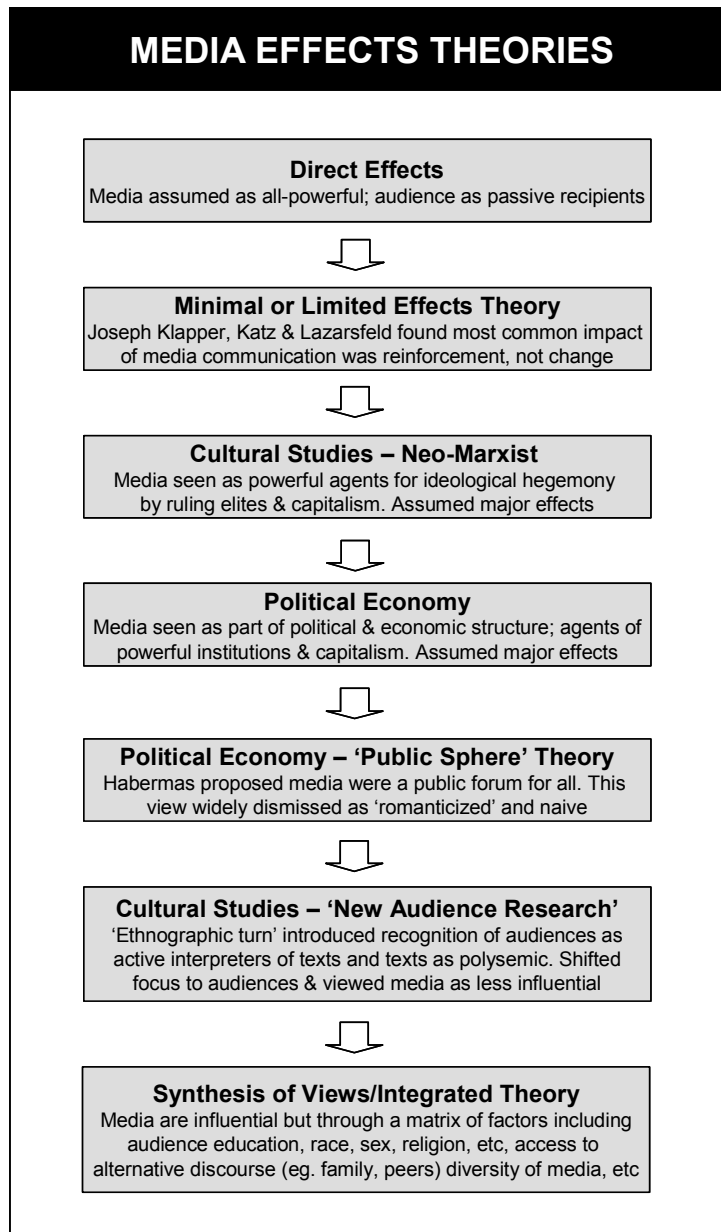


Figure 1. Summary of evolution of media effects theory.

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** Jim Macnamara has spent 25 years working in and with the media as a journalist, public relations practitioner and media researcher. He holds a BA in journalism, media studies & literary studies; a MA by research in media studies; and completed a PhD in media research in early 2005. He is the author of nine books on the media, public relations and communication and numerous papers published in journals including the Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal; Strategic Communication Measurement in the US; and Journal of Communication Management in London. He is CEO of Asia Pacific office of media analysis firm, CARMA International.*