

Media Today, 6th Edition

Chapter Recaps & Study Guide

Chapter 2: Making Sense of Research on Media Effects and Media Culture

This chapter provides an overview of the different ways researchers try to explain mass media activities and their effects on audiences and culture.

Chapter Objectives:

1. Identify and explain mass media research.
2. Recognize and discuss the mainstream approaches to mass media research.
3. Recognize the shift from mainstream approaches to critical approaches.
4. Recognize and discuss the critical approaches to mass media research.
5. Recognize and discuss the cultural studies approaches to mass media research.
6. Harness your media literacy skills to understand and evaluate the media's presence and influence in your life.

The Nature of Mass Media Research

- Mass communication researchers have been grappling for decades with the most important social issues involving media; knowledge of mass communication research traditions and discoveries is crucial to developing media literacy. (29)
- Research is the application of a systematic method to solve a problem or understand it better than in the past. (29)
- Mass media research, then, entails the use of systematic methods to understand or solve problems related to the mass media. It addresses many different topics: audiences, the success of media materials, the outcomes of advertising campaigns, and the impact of the mass media on the relationships, values, and ideals of society and its members. (29-30)
- Early critical studies scholars explored the ideas behind a mass society. The widespread media brought people from disparate groups together, creating a mass society (See Figure 2.1, p. 31). Some

scholars, such as Dewey, saw these media as enabling democratic participation. Dewey, along with Cooley and Park, were members of the Chicago School. (29-31)

- Harold Lasswell saw the mass media as powerful purveyors of propaganda, or messages designed to influence people's behaviors and attitudes. Mass media would allow propaganda messages to reach millions of people at a time, and some like Lasswell feared that spreading of lies to support political agendas. The magic bullet or hypodermic needle approach suggested that propaganda affected everyone in the same way at the same time (See Figure 2.2, p. 33). This idea was quickly modified due to its oversimplification of audience responses. (30-34)
 - The Payne Fund studies employed a range of techniques to examine the question the impact of violent films on young people. They found that youngsters' reactions to movies were not uniform. Rather, they depended on key social and psychological differences among children. These questions later were applied to television, comic books, videos games, and and music. (33-34)
- Walter Lippmann first described how media give audiences a sense of what to think about. This media function is called agenda setting. (32)
- Later research began to recognize the importance of people's relations with each other, and the impacts of these relationships on media message reception.
 - In the 1940s, researchers put forth a new theory that focused on social relations—or the interactions among people—and the part those relations played in the way individuals interpreted media messages. (35)
 - Paul Lazarsfeld and other Columbia sociologists developed the two-step flow model of media influence. This model states that media messages are diffused in two stages: (1) media content is picked up by people who use the media frequently, and (2) these people act as opinion leaders when discussing that content with others. Those others are then influenced by the media in a way that is one step removed from the original content. (35-36 and Figure 2.3 on p. 36)
 - Lazarsfeld and his associates developed the concept of an active audience, meaning that people are not simply passive receivers of media messages. (36)

- Another outgrowth of the Columbia School research is the uses and gratifications research, which examines how people use media products to meet their needs and interests. This model of analysis maintains that it is as important to know what people do with media as it is to know what media do to people. (36-37)
- Research further limited the effects of media on audiences:
 - Further analysis (Carl Hovland's naturalistic experiments summarized as The American Soldier) emerged from the Second World War era and showed that even materials specifically designed to persuade people would succeed only under limited circumstances, and with only certain types of people. This area of inquiry is called limited effects research. (37-38)
 - Findings indicate that, under normal circumstances, where all aspects of the communication environment could not be equal, the mass media's ability to change people's attitudes and behavior on controversial issues was minimal. (38)

Consolidating the Mainstream Approach

Into the 1950s, researchers began building on previous findings. These later approaches can be divided into three areas of study: (1) opinion and behavior change, (2) what people learn from media, and (3) the motivations and applications of media use. (38)

- In terms of opinion and behavior change, researchers look at the effects of TV violence on children and of sexually explicit material for adults. Family, social setting, and personality have a bearing on the results. Heavy exposure may lead to desensitization. (38-39)
- In terms of what people learn from media, researchers have found that children can learn basic skills such as vocabulary. Media content in theory enables adults to participate in democratic society; however, media content is also highly selective. Priming is the process through which the media affect how people evaluate media content. Not all people pay attention to media, nor does everyone have access to media content. This lack of access results in a knowledge gap, with those with access receiving information faster and earlier than other population segments. (38-42)
- In terms of the applications and motivations for people's media use, researchers draw on uses and gratifications and sometimes media

effects to develop answers to the question, “Why do people enjoy programming like radio soap operas and quiz shows?” Several scholars have been studying social media, addressing not only how people interact but also how they create content. A serious answer arises with the digital divide, or the separation between those who have knowledge access and those who do not due of education or income. (41-42; see Figure 2.4 on p. 43)

The Rise of Critical Approaches

- While mainstream approaches to research have laid a strong foundation for communication research, some scholars recognize two persistent problems: (43)
 - Stress change rather than continuity. By stressing change over continuity, critics contend that much of mainstream research focuses on whether a change will occur as a result of media exposure, ignoring the possibility that the many important effects of the media have to do not with *changing* people but with encouraging them to *continue* certain actions or views on life. Although outlooks or behavior may not be changed by media content directly, they may be reinforced by it. (43)
 - The other problem of mainstream research is its emphasis on the active audience member in the media environment, rather than the power of larger social forces controlling that media environment. By focusing so much on the role of the individual, mainstream researchers are accused of ignoring the impact of social power. What ought to be studied, critics say, is how powerful groups come to influence the most widespread media images in ways that help them stay in power. (43-44)
- “Critical theory” is the term used to describe these points of departure from mainstream media research. (45)
 - The Frankfurt School of researchers focused on the cultural implications of Marxism, or the belief that the direction of history would eventually result in labor’s overthrow of capitalism and, in turn, the more equal distribution of resources in society. Capitalism refers to the ownership of the means of production by the ruling class. Scholars wrote about the corrosive impact of capitalism on culture, emphasizing the ability of the mass media to control people’s worldviews. For example, co-optation describes how potentially revolutionary ideas become tamed within capitalist ideas. (44-45)

- Political economy theorists, in contrast, focus on the link between the economic and the cultural. They ask when and how the economic structures of society and media systems reflect the political interests of society's rich and powerful. Most critical work in this area focuses on how institutional and organizational relationships create requirements for media firms that lead their people to create and circulate certain types of material over others. (45-46 and Figure 2.5 on p. 46)
- Some political economists who are concerned about the corrosive impact of U.S. media content on other cultures study cultural colonialism, the exercise of control over an area or people by a dominant power not so much through force of arms as by surrounding the weaker countries with cultural materials that reflect values and beliefs that support the interests of the dominant power. (47)
- Cultivation studies researchers focus less on industry relationships and more on information about the work that people pick up from media portrayals. It differs from mainstream research by taking the following approach: when media systematically portray certain populations in unfavorable ways, the ideas that mainstream audiences pick up about those people help certain groups in society keep power over the groups they denigrate. George Gerbner is one of the main figures pursuing these lines of inquiry. (47-48)

Cultural Studies

- Cultural studies scholars often start with the notion audiences find meaning in the technologies and texts presented to them by mass media. These scholars examine what it means to "make meaning" of such technologies and texts, and what consequences this has for audiences. (page 49)
- Approaches to cultural studies include historical, which ask questions about media and the past; anthropological, which explore how people use media in different settings; and linguistic and literary, which incorporate multiple ways of reading media texts such as the "dominant" and "resistance" readings posed by Stuart Hall. Though complicated, the linguistic and literary approaches question where meaning is created in texts, and understand that texts are polysemous, or open to multiple readings. (49-51)

Using Media Research to Develop Media Literacy Skills

- Media research relates closely to media literacy. The history of mass media research provides students with tools to figure out three of the key ideas a media-literate person must know: (51-54)
 - 1. Where you stand with respect to the effects of media on society. (51-52)
 - 2. How to make sense of discussions and arguments about media effects. (52)
 - 3. Part of becoming media literate involves taking an informed stand on why the media are important. New ideas on the subject are emerging constantly, and it helps to stay current with press coverage of media developments or academic journal articles in this area. (52)
 - The five key considerations in making sense of media effects analysis are: (53-4)
 - Are the questions the researcher is asking interesting and important?
 - Into what research tradition does the study fall?
 - How good is the research design?
 - How convincing is the analysis?
 - What do you wish the researchers would do next in their research?
 - How to get involved in research that can be used to explore concerns you might have about mass media. (52-54)
- See Table 2.1 for an overview of the different theories used in media research. This table summarizes the key research efforts explained in this chapter.