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Conceptualizing Mass Media Effect

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Scholars have generated evidence of a wide variety of mass media effects over almost 9 decades of research. Although each of these effects has been defined in a relatively clear manner, there has been much less conceptualizing about what constitutes a mass media effect in general. Rarely have scholars provided a formal definition of mass media effect, instead opting to provide a definition in either an ostensive or primitive manner. In this essay, a conceptualization of "mass media effect" at the most general level is synthesized from this previous definitional work. The proposed conceptualization posits 4 general kinds of mass media effects: gradual long-term change in magnitude, reinforcement, immediate shift, and short-term fluctuation change.

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Since the scholarly study of mass media effects began in the 1920s (Lowry & DeFleur, 1988), researchers have generated a very large effects literature, with some estimates as high as 4,000 published studies (Potter & Riddle, 2007). This literature has documented a great many effects. Although most of these individual effects present scholars with a clear conceptualization of that particular effect, there is comparatively little work that focuses attention on what a "media effect" means at a more general level of conceptualization. That is, we have clear definitions for many specific effects (such as agenda setting, cultivation, third person, and so on), but we lack a clear conceptualization about the idea of "mass media effect" in general. Given the length of time we have now been studying mass media effects and the size of the empirical literature, it is possible to abstract some organizing principles that tend to capture the essence exhibited across all the specific effects. This set of organizing principles could then serve as a conceptualization of mass media effect in general.

The term "mass media effects" continues to be used widely despite the fact that many media scholars struggle with the term "effect." For example, Wright (1986) points out that "it should be apparent that we speak of the 'effects' of mass communication only as a convenient expression" (p. 11). And Morley (1992) says that " 'effects' is thus a shorthand, and inadequate, way of marking the point where

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audiences differentially read and make sense of messages'' (p. 86). Traudt (2005) argues that ''the word *effect* is something of a misnomer, used by many because of its economy and convenience as a label encompassing a complex and varied field of theory and research'' (p. 11).

In the introduction to their *Handbook of Media Process and Effects*, Nabi and Oliver (2009) assert that the most important conceptual issue facing the field of mass media studies is: ''What do we mean by 'media effects'?'' (p. 2). They argue that media scholars have paid little attention to this fundamental question for two reasons. One reason is because junior scholars are under pressure to pursue grants and to publish a large number of studies so that they develop habits to replicate past research methods and topics ''often at the expense of the more sophisticated, theoretically rich work that we value as a discipline'' (p. 2). A second reason is that the scholarly field has been primarily motivated to identify specific harmful effects along with the factors that would increase the probability of those harmful effects occurring. Wartella and Reeves (1985) have also made this observation when they pointed out that as each new mass medium has developed, the first question the public asked has been about how the medium might influence behavior in a negative manner. The scholarly field has been much less motivated to develop conceptualizations about the nature of mass media effect in general—one that would allow for positive and neutral effects in addition to the focus on negative effects and shift the focus to what they all have in common.

To the two reasons for why scholars have not produced more conceptual work on the nature of ''mass media effect,'' I add a third reason—the complexity of the phenomenon. This complexity is revealed in the different ways that reviewers of this literature have struggled to organize their presentations. An analysis of the major reviews of the media effects literature suggests that there are nine conceptual issues raised about the nature of mass media effect (see Table 1). Perhaps, the most prevalent of these issues is the concern about type of effect, which almost all reviewers acknowledge (Basil, 1992; Grossberg, Wartella, & Whitney, 1998; Jeffres, 1997; Lazarsfeld, 1948; McLeod & Reeves, 1980; Roberts & Maccoby, 1985; Weiss, 1969). However, the reviewers vary considerably about what the effect types are. For example, Grossberg et al. (1998) say there are three types: cognitive, affective, and conative; Lazarsfeld (1948) argued for four types: knowledge, attitudes, opinions, and behavior; Bryant and Zillmann (2009) say there are five types: behavioral, attitudinal, cognitive, emotional, and physiological. There is also a difference of opinion on each of the other eight issues listed in Table 1.

It is understandable why there is a range of opinion on each of these nine conceptual issues. As different scholars approach the examination of this complex phenomenon, they focus on different parts of it. For example, psychologists focus on effects on individuals, whereas sociologists focus on effects on larger aggregates of people and economists focus on effects on resources rather than people. Laboratory experimenters focus on short-term effects immediately after exposure to particular messages, whereas ethnographers focus on effects that take much longer to accumulate

Table 1 Definitional Considerations

"*Type of effect issue*: Do the effects show up as behaviors only, or do they also show up in variety of other ways such as cognitions, attitudes, beliefs, affects, physiology, etc.? (Basil, 1992; Grossberg et al., 1998; Jeffres, 1997; Lazarsfeld, 1948; McLeod & Reeves, 1980; Roberts & Maccoby, 1985; Weiss, 1969)
Level of effect issue: Does the effect take place at the microlevel, the macrolevel, or both? (Basil, 1992; Grossberg et al., 1998; Hovland, 1954; Jeffres, 1997; McLeod & Reeves, 1980; Perse, 2001; Weiss, 1969)
Change Issue: Does the effect show up as an alteration or a stabilization of something already existing? (Grossberg et al., 1998; Hovland, 1954; McLeod & Reeves, 1980; Perse, 2001; Weiss, 1969)
Influence issue: Must the media have a direct influence or can it have an indirect influence? (McLeod & Reeves, 1980; Roberts & Maccoby, 1985)
Pervasiveness issue: Do the media exert effects on everyone or is their influence conditional, such that different people are influenced in different ways? (Baran & Davis, 2000; Grossberg et al., 1998; Littlejohn, 1999; McLeod & Reeves, 1980; McQuail, 2005; Roberts & Maccoby, 1985; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Wartella & Reeves, 1985; Weimann, 2000)
Type of media stimulus issue: Do the media exert a diffuse-general influence on the culture because of their form and the nature of their channels of transmission or is the influence keyed to content-specific factors in their messages? (Basil, 1992; McLeod & Reeves, 1980; Perse, 2001)
Intentionality issue: Should scholars be concerned with effects that were not intended by senders of receivers or only intended effects? (Basil, 1992; Grossberg et al., 1998; Hovland, 1954; Jeffres, 1997; Perse, 200; Weiss, 1969)
Timing of effect issue: Should scholars be concerned with effects that take a long time to show up and difficult to trace to media influence or only those effects that occur during exposures? (Grossberg et al., 1998; Hovland, 1954; Jeffres, 1997; Lazarsfeld, 1948; Perse, 2001; Roberts & Maccoby, 1985; Weiss, 1969)
Measurability issue: Should scholars be concerned with latent effects or only those manifest effects that can be more easily observed? (Grossberg et al., 1998; Hovland, 1954; Weiss, 1969)

and manifest themselves in more subtle ways. This focusing on one part of the phenomenon helps scholars reduce the complexity to a point where the task of designing a research study becomes more manageable. However, it is also important that scholars periodically think about the bigger picture of our growing understanding about the phenomenon in full.

The continual clarification of a field's central construct is an essential scholarly task. Metaphorically, the task of building a scholarly field is like assembling puzzle pieces when we (a) must create the pieces, and (b) do not know what the big picture of the assembled pieces will look like. Instead we proceed by creating new pieces and trying different configurations of assembly until we begin converging on a vision of a big picture at which time the assembly (and the creating of the missing pieces) proceeds more efficiently. Mass media effects scholars have created a great many

pieces to the puzzle of mass media effects; however, we have spent much less effort on thinking about the big picture and speculating about how the pieces could be assembled to reveal that bigger picture.

The purpose of this essay is to address the bigger picture by first reviewing how mass media scholars have conceptualized the idea of effect through the way they have presented definitions. Then I will synthesize a conceptualization of mass media effect by assembling the ideas in those definitions along with the issues that scholars have been struggling with over the nine decades the field has existed.

Forms of defining mass media effect

Definitions of mass media effect can be seen in review articles, edited books, and textbooks. At times, scholars will clearly present a definition for the concept, but most often the scholars' definitions for the concept have to be inferred from the way those scholars present the concept by critiquing it, by challenging assumptions about it, or by displaying examples of it. The analysis of these definitions is organized in this essay according to one of three methods that scholars have used to present the definitions in their own writings. These three methods—ostensive, primitive, and formal—are illuminated and critiqued below.

Ostensive method

The ostensive method of defining something is to present examples. An ostensive form of definition is typically used by scholars who publish reviews of the mass media effects literature (Basil, 1992; Bryant & Thompson, 2002; Bryant & Zillmann, 2002; Grossberg et al., 1998; Harris, 2004; Hovland, 1954; Iyengar, 1997; Jeffres, 1997; Lazarsfeld, 1948; Littlejohn, 1999; Lowry & DeFleur, 1988; McDonald, 2004; McGuire, 1986; McLeod & Reeves, 1980; McQuail, 2005; Perse, 2001; Roberts & Maccoby, 1985; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Sparks, 2006; Weiss, 1969). Rather than providing a formal definition with classification rules, these scholars present a list of things they regard as instances of mass media effects and leave it to the reader to infer what all of these examples have in common.

The ostensive method of defining things works extremely well in everyday life. When we are toddlers, a good deal of language acquisition comes from the ostensive method of defining things. Parents typically teach their children what many things are by simply pointing out examples and saying the word—for example, "dog." When children see enough examples, they will understand what a dog is. They infer what the classification rules are without having to learn a formal definition.

The ostensive method of defining things also works well in the scholarly realm up to a point. When a research field is new and looking for boundaries, structure, and meaning, scholars take comfort in the concreteness of examples, so the ostensive type of definition is valuable. But beyond a certain point, the presentation of more examples loses its value and we need to think beyond the individual examples and infer patterns. Through trial and error these inferred patterns become more useful as

they develop into classification rules that help us decide what new examples should be included or excluded. Also over time, these inferred patterns provide us with a clearer conceptualization of the nature of the phenomenon we are trying to define.

Primitive method

The primitive method of defining something assumes that others share substantially the same meaning, so there is no reason to articulate a formal definition. However, the danger with the primitive method is that other people might not share the same definition, and this is especially the case when the definition has several elements that vary in the degree to which they are shared. With mass media effects, the assumed shared meaning is that the mass media exert a pervasive causal influence that shows up in a variety of significant effects. For example, Perse (2001) claims that the primary assumption of mass media scholars has been that the ''media and their content have significant and substantial effects'' (p. 3). McQuail (2005) says ''the entire study of mass communication is based on the assumption that the media have significant effects'' (p. 456).

This assumption shows up most clearly in the challenges to it. Perhaps, the most prevalent challenge has been in the form of a debate over whether the media exert an influence and if so how strong that influence is. Many scholars write about the historical disagreement on this point (Baran & Davis, 2000; Grossberg et al., 1998; Littlejohn, 1999; McQuail, 2005; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Wartella & Reeves, 1985; Weimann, 2000). For example, McQuail (2005) explains that the early history of thinking about mass media effects was a debate about whether the media exerted a powerful or no effect and that we have evolved to a point where scholars generally assume that the audience negotiates meaning. Although the media messages are important as stimulating those negotiations, the audience members' personal interpretations are even more important.

What is most interesting about the writings on this debate is that scholars have assumed that other scholars have accepted this assumption about media effects. Therefore, the assumption is more than the media exert an influence; the assumption is also that other scholars accept this assumption. This is what reveals most strongly that these scholars are approaching the idea of media effects in a primitive manner, that is, rather than providing a conceptualization, media scholars assume a conceptualization that already exists and it is widely shared.

Other challenges to this assumption take the form of additions to and subtractions from the assumption. This too is evidence of a primitive approach to defining mass media effects, because these scholars present their addition or subtraction without providing a clear conceptualization of the core to which they are making the addition or subtraction. That is, rather than provide a formal definition of mass media effects, scholars will either challenge a feature and argue for its subtraction or argue that an important feature is missing and suggest an addition. An example of a subtraction is provided by Wright (1986) who contends that causation should be eliminated from the assumed definition. He warns that mass media influence is not simple

or direct when he asserts that it does not cause any ''of the social phenomena in which mass communication is implicated. From our sociological perspective, an analytical model of direct cause and effect is inappropriate and unproductive.'' He adds, ''we seek to understand the kinds of contributions that mass communication and interpersonal communication together make to important social phenomena, including both socially differentiated and commonly shared knowledge, beliefs, and behavior'' (p. 163).

As for additions to the assumed definition, Webster and Phalen (1997) argued that too often ''the traditional form of the effects question asks, what do media do to people. But this is not the only way that media effects can be conceived'' (p. 188). They add that social institutions and the media themselves are targets of influence. Implied in this addition is an assumption that the mass media influence only individuals and not larger social aggregates. Other examples of additions are provided by Traudt (2005) who calls for more attention to individual differences when he asserts that ''audience members are unique in that they bring a personal set of filters to the mass media experience and that these differences are a function of prior life experiences'' (p. 11) and these must be taken into consideration when examining media effects. Traudt also adds that often what researchers claim as effects are temporary and therefore call into question whether an effect occurred or not when he says, ''The results from key and influential studies never demonstrate in absolute terms a total and lasting relationship between the exposure to media content and consequent attitude or behavioral changes'' (p. 11).

Looking across these primitive forms of definition, it appears that mass media scholars believe that there is a shared assumption that defines effects as outcomes among individuals as a result of pervasive exposure to media messages, usually negative. This assumption begs for a conceptualization that could address questions like the following: What qualifies as an outcome? Must an outcome be a change or can it be a reinforcement of something already existing? What is the timing of effects, that is, must it be observed during the media exposure or can it be observed much later? If it can be observed much later, how can it be attributed to media influence? Does it need to be observable in order to be considered an effect? These are important questions if we are concerned about conceptualizing mass media effects in general and trying to understand big picture patterns that span across the wide variety of individual effects we have identified so far.

Examples of formal definitions

There are a few examples where scholars provide a formal definition of mass media effect. These definitions address the assumption about media influence and elaborate this central idea by providing details on some of the nine definitional issues from Table 1. These articulations serve to convey a more complete sense of the nature of the phenomenon of mass media effect as well as provide a sense of classification rules. For example, Jeffres (1997) in *Mass Media Effects* argues that before defining effects, he first needs to define mass media, communication, encoding, channel, and decoding

process. Although he provides a formal definition for each of these concepts, he concludes his definitional section by saying, ''The issue of what constitutes effects is difficult to resolve because it means different things to different people. 'Effects' may refer to the relationship between encoding and decoding activities within mass communication. . . . 'Effects' may link mass communication processes with other systems and the larger society. . . . Media effects may refer to the impact of media 'as a whole.' '' (pp. 4–5).

Bryant and Zillmann (2009) say that ''when scholars talk about media effects, they are considering the social or psychological changes that occur in consumers of the media message systems—or in their social milieu or cultural values—as a result of being exposed to, processing, or acting on those mediated messages. Five classes of media effects on individuals are often considered: behavioral, attitudinal, cognitive, emotional, and physiological'' (p. 13).

Arguably the clearest example of a formal definition of mass media effects is offered by McQuail (2005). In his glossary to the fifth edition of *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, McQuail defines effects of media as ''the consequences or outcomes of the working of, or exposure to, mass media whether or not intended. They can be sought at different levels of social analysis. There are many types of effect, but it is usual to distinguish at least between effects that are behaviourial, attitudinal (or affective) and cognitive. Effects are distinct from 'effectiveness', which relates to the efficiency of achieving a given communicative objective'' (p. 554). Thus, he deals explicitly with the definitional issues of intentionality, level, and type.

Now that we are close to a century of empirical work on mass media effects, it is time to move beyond assuming that there is a shared definition for mass media effect in general. It is time to move beyond ostensive definitions and try to develop a formal definition that would provide a more clearly articulated conceptual frame for all the specific media effects.

Toward a conceptualization of mass media effect

The task of conceptualizing ''mass media effect'' requires synthesis. Moreover, I began this task by analyzing the literature to identify the key definitional ideas. The next step is to decide which of those many ideas to employ in assembling a conceptualization that captures the essence of the phenomenon. There are two strategies that can be used to select elements—a prescriptive strategy and a descriptive strategy. The prescriptive strategy directs the synthesizer to select a subset of definitional elements from the literature using some criterion, such as utility. The scholar filters through the ideas to select only those that meet the criteria. In contrast, the descriptive strategy tries to include as many elements as possible in order to illuminate the full range of ideas existing in the literature. The prescriptive strategy is most useful when a general conceptualization already exists and a scholar believes that conceptualization contains faulty elements; the scholar then presents a vision different than the existing conceptualization and argues for an alternative conceptualization

that subtracts out the elements she regards as faulty and adds other elements she thinks were missing from the older conceptualization. Thus, she prescribes an alternative conceptualization that is argued to be superior to the older conceptualization. Because I am not challenging an existing conceptualization, but rather the lack of one, and because I want this conceptualization to be as inclusive of all perspectives as possible, I will use the descriptive strategy to select definitional elements.

The purpose of this conceptualization then is to incorporate as much of the thinking about the phenomenon as possible and to organize it in a way so as to make a set of clear statements that reveal its essential nature as well as its boundaries. As for its essential nature, the central question is: What kinds of general effects are there and how are they similar and different from one another? As for its perimeter, the central question is: What are the classification rules that can be used to distinguish between mass media effect and noneffect?

The definition

Building from the main themes in the mass media effects literature, I propose the following formal definition: A mass media effect is a change in an outcome within a person or social entity that is due to mass media influence following exposure to a mass media message or series of messages. Let us examine each of this definition's key terms. It makes most sense to examine these key ideas in this order: social entity, outcome, change, mass media, influence, and exposure.

Social entity refers to both an informal collection as well as a formal organization of individuals. Informal collections are typically ad hoc groups that happen to form during a media exposure then dissipate, such as audiences in movie theaters. Formal groups typically have a history, social norms, and structure. This would include audiences for massively multiplayer online computer games that form around mass media messages; it also would include groups that form for nonmedia purposes, such as institutions (especially the family, criminal justice system, educational system, religion, and the political system including elections), cultures, and the public.

This definitional element addresses the issue of level, that is, it suggests a range of choices about the unit of measurement (at what level should researchers gather evidence for an effect) and unit of analysis (can the evidence be aggregated and how should it be contextualized to look for patterns of effects). Writing about the phenomenon of communication in general, Chaffee and Berger (1987) said that researchers have typically used one of four levels of analysis: intraindividual, interpersonal, network or organizational, and macroscopic societal levels. They argued that this distinction across levels is important because each level attracts a different kind of researcher, suggests different goals for the research, and relies on different theories as well as different methods. More recently, McLeod, Kosicki, and McLeod (2010) point out that the "number of levels distinguished by social scientists varies from two (e.g., macro/micro) to many. One common scheme used in sociology is a three-level system: macrostructural (social institutions and patterns of social behavior), meso-interactional (relationships among individuals interacting

with others), and microindividual (psychological processes and properties of human experience'' (pp. 188–189).

Clearly, the issue of level is important. With mass media effects, it appears useful to make a distinction across three levels: individual, aggregate of individuals, and human creations. The individual level uses the person as the unit of measurement and unit of analysis. Aggregates of individuals are collections both informal and formal (i.e., task oriented work groups in organizations); measures at this level would include group dynamics, group cohesion, public opinion, public mood, and the like. Human creations would include formal organizations, institutions, and culture; measures at this level would include things like openness (willingness to respond to new information and points of view) and rigidity (fixedness of structures). Thus, this conceptualization uses the basic structure of Chaffee and Berger, but collapses their distinction between interpersonal and organizational into one category called aggregate of individuals. With the mass media rather than communication in general, the Chaffee and Berger distinction between interpersonal and networks seems less important because the media essentially influence individuals who then influence others through their conversations, actions, organizational rules, and so forth. Thus, the media influence on nonexposed people either in interpersonal or organizational interactions is indirect, but still important to study.

Outcome requires the consideration of type of effect. Given the concerns for types of effects in the literature, it seems useful to list six types: cognitions, attitudes, beliefs, affects, physiology, and behaviors. Although these six types have come largely from studying effects on individuals, they would seem to have utility as a structure for thinking about effects at other levels of measurement. All of these except for physiology have outcome analogs in the larger social entities. For example with the public, cognitions show up as public knowledge; attitudes show up in public opinion polls as evaluations of public figures and issues; beliefs show up as aggregate public beliefs; affects show up as public mood or public emotions such as grief, fear, or happiness; and behavior shows up as public habits of voting, product purchases, exposure patterns, and so forth. This definitional element addresses the issues of type of effect and level.

Change can be in the magnitude or weight of an outcome. Typically, change is regarded as a shift in magnitude of a measure, and when there is no shift, change is not regarded as occurring. However, that type of conceptualization disregards reinforcement effects where there is no shift in magnitude, but where there is a shift in weight. For example, a series of media messages might serve to reinforce a person's existing attitude; thus it appears that no change has taken place because the attitude is the same; however, the weight of the attitude has increased, making it more difficult to alter in the future. This suggests three properties of an effect: kind, magnitude, and weight. To illustrate these properties think of a person's voting preference during a political campaign that is heavily covered in the media through news and ads. At one point in time, the person might favor candidate X, but then over the course of a week shift to favoring candidate Y; this is a change in kind, because there is a shift from one attitude to a different attitude. Or the person might change from a mildly

supportive attitude toward candidate X to a strongly supportive attitude toward candidate X; this is a change in magnitude of the attitude from mild to strong. Or a person might have a strongly supportive attitude based on acceptance of a significant other's strongly supportive attitude, but then add reason after reason to support that strong attitude; this is a change in weight of the strongly supportive attitude making it harder and harder to effect a shift in either kind or magnitude. This definitional element addresses the issue of the nature of change.

Mass media is a term, like media effect, that scholars have struggled with over the years (see Potter 2009a for a critical analysis of definitions of mass media). Sorting through the definitional issues, I proposed that the ''mass media'' be defined as organizations that use technological channels to distribute messages for the purpose of attracting an increasingly large audience and conditioning those audiences for repeated exposures so as to increase one's resources such that the enterprise is at least self supporting. This definition has three key classification rules of technological channel, purpose of using the channel, and economic viability. Each of these three qualifications is necessary, but none of them is sufficient (see Potter 2009a for a description of how this definition was developed).

Notice that the definition does not focus on channels themselves, because with digitization of messages, the differences across traditional channels (i.e., film, recordings, television, computers) is blurring to a point where they are losing their discriminating power; thus, a list of channels no longer serves as a good ostensive form of definition because each channel can be used in both a mass as well as a nonmass manner. The definition focuses less on channels themselves and more on *how* they are used. The emphasis is on the sender. In order to be a mass medium, the sender is typically an organization (but can also be an individual) and the sender's main intention is to condition audiences into a ritualistic mode of exposure, that is, the mass media are much less interested in coaxing people into one exposure than they are in trying to get people into a position where they will repeatedly and regularly be exposed to their messages. When an organization uses a technological channel of communication to create and *maintain* an audience, it is a mass medium. Thus, *mass* media want to preserve their audiences so that they can maintain their revenue streams and amortize their high initial costs of attracting the audience the first time over the course of repeated exposures. Also, the organization strives to generate resources through subscription fees for access to messages, outright sales of messages, or advertising revenue in order to at least cover all expenses and therefore be self-sustaining or to make a profit. This definition allows for nonprofits to qualify as mass media as long as they can continue to generate enough resources to sustain themselves. Thus, this definition would classify a person's Facebook page as nonmass while classifying Facebook itself as mass media.

Influence of the mass media is conceptualized broadly as including both direct and indirect, long term as well as short term, and conscious as well as unconscious. The mass media exert a continual influence on individuals through direct exposure to their messages. The mass media also exert a continual influence on individuals

indirectly through other people, groups, and institutions that have been influenced by the mass media. Thus, the challenge in considering mass media influence lies in determining the degree and nature of their influence as it is exerted through a constellation of many nonmedia factors such as a person's states, traits, motives, interpretations of meaning under conditions when individuals are active processors of messages and meaning as well as when they are passive acceptors of media conditioning (see Potter 2009b).

Causation is too simple a concept to apply to mass media effect. Causation requires the cause to precede the effect in time, whereas mass media influence is cyclical, thus acknowledging a reciprocal structure where a factor of influence may precede an outcome then in turn be itself influenced by the outcome. Also, causation requires the ruling out of "third variables" beyond the causal and effect variables. But with mass media effects, there are always multiple variables in constant interaction. Therefore, the purpose of effects research is not to establish causation, but rather to calibrate the degree of mass media influence acting in concert with many other variables.

Exposure to media influence can be either direct or indirect. Direct influence occurs when people physically encounter a media message. Indirect is when people do not physically encounter a message, but when elements of that message are transmitted to them through other people (through conversations, way of dress, way of acting, etc.), objects (encounters with media advertised products), or procedures (rules of institutions that have been shaped by mass media). Also, exposure can take place in an unconscious as well as a conscious state. Thus, people do not need to be paying attention—or even be aware—of a particular media message or media messages in general in order for them to be exposed to the influential elements in those messages. Furthermore, the outcome need not be intended by either the sender or the receiver. These definitional elements address the issues of nature of influence, pervasiveness, type of media stimulus, and intentionality.

This definition is based on two assumptions. The first assumption is that mass media exposures are constant, and thereby media influence is constant. Patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving are continuously being created, altered, and conditioned by the continual stream of media exposures. Therefore, media effects are ongoing and in a constant state of flux. Some effects occur immediately during a media exposure session, whereas others take a while to show up. Some effects are temporary and dissipate after a few seconds, whereas other effects once they are manifested last a lifetime. This assumption addresses the issue of timing.

The second assumption is that some media effects are manifested, whereas others are latent. Latency does not mean that effects do not exist, only that there are effects that cannot be observed at a given point in time. These latent effects in this conceptualization are referred to as baseline effects. This assumption addresses the issue of measurability.

As can be seen from the above definition, all the positions on each of the nine conceptual issues are included. Thus, this conceptualization is very broad and does not rule out any perspective in the literature.

Implications of this conceptualization

There are some interesting implications that follow from this proposed conceptualization of mass media effect in general. First, this conceptualization suggests that there are four general kinds of mass media effects. Second, the conceptualization provides some clear classification rules for what constitutes a mass media effect. A third implication deals with theory and how this conceptualization can be used as an organizing device to structure our understanding of the many theories that have been offered for various parts of the overall phenomenon of mass media effect. A fourth implication concerns how the data from empirical research need to be analyzed to make a case for an effect.

Kinds of effects

Given the properties and assumptions outlined above, the mass media can exert four possible patterns of influence: gradual long-term change in magnitude, gradual long-term nonchange in magnitude, but change in weight (reinforcement), immediate shift, and short-term fluctuation change. Thus, there are four general kinds, because all mass media effects follow one of these four patterns. These four patterns are illustrated in Figure 1: (a) gradual alteration of a baseline, (b) reinforcement of baseline, (c) sudden alteration of the baseline, and (d) sudden fluctuation from the baseline with a return to the baseline. Let us examine these patterns in a bit more detail.

The idea of baseline is key to this conceptualization. At any given point in time, the baseline indicates the relative magnitude of the effect. The baseline reflects the degree of influence not just from the mass media, but also from a constellation of other factors about a person and his/her environment. Thus, the baseline indicates that the media influence does not act alone, but is embedded in a complex of other factors that interact to determine the direction and degree of magnitude of an effect. It serves as an essential context for interpreting the meaning of short-term fluctuation effects. Thus, the idea of baseline helps us move beyond the debate over whether the media in general exert a weak or powerful influence and serves to shift our focus into more productive activities where we calibrate the differential degree of media influence over a wide range of specific effects and across a variety of people.

With a long-term change type of effect, the messages from the mass media gradually alter a person's baseline. Figure 1a illustrates this pattern. The line in the figure represents a person's baseline on a particular effect. Over time there is a slow gradual upward slope that indicates an increasing degree of the effect. An example of this would be a cultivation effect where over time a person is more likely to believe the world is a mean and violent place. In contrast with a long-term reinforcement type of effect, the media influence serves to maintain the status quo with the particular effect (see Figure 1b). There is no slope to the baseline—it is flat. An example of this would be when a person continually exposes herself to the same political point of view in magazines, newspapers, television, and the Internet. Her political attitude

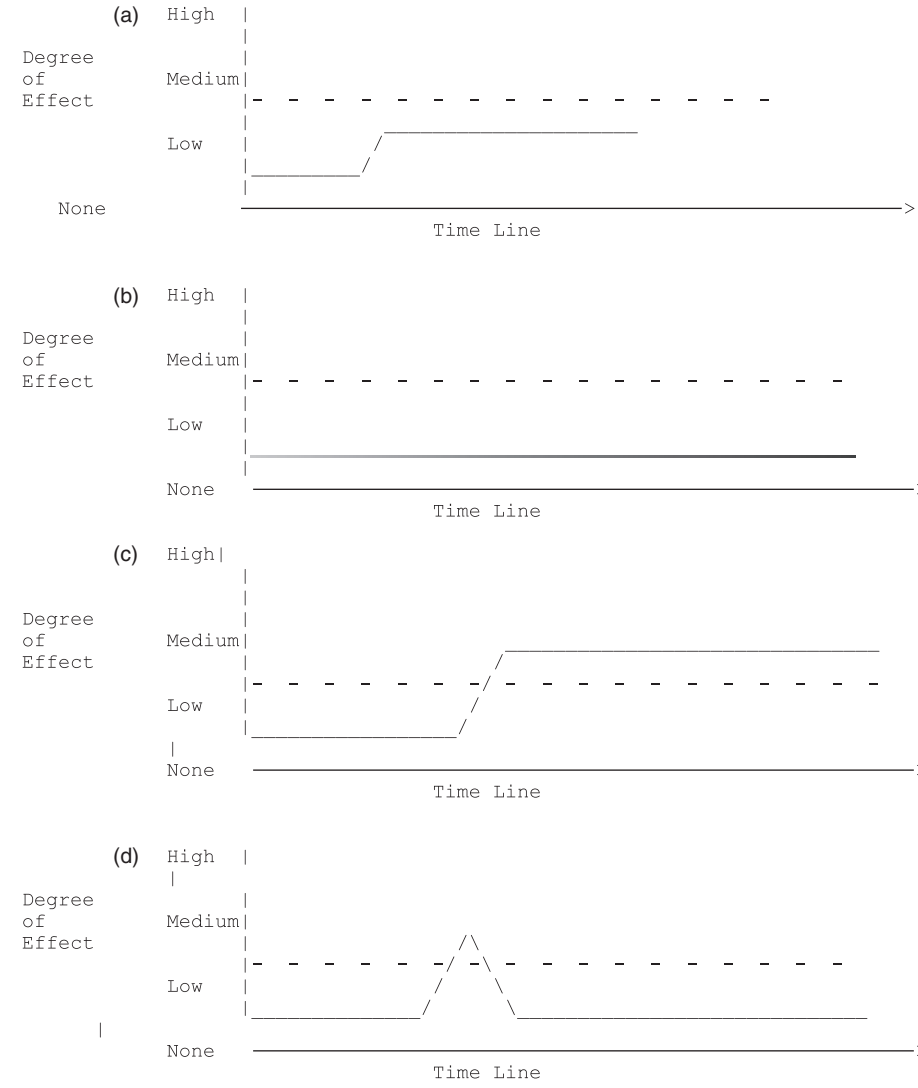

Figure 1 Types of media influence patterns. (a) Long-term alteration of baseline; (b) reinforcement of baseline effect; (c) immediate shift of baseline effect; (d) short-term fluctuation.

experiences greater and greater reinforcement, that is, it becomes more and more fixed and hence much more difficult to alter. With a reinforcement effect, the change is in the weight rather than in the magnitude.

With an immediate shift type of effect, the media influence serves to alter something in a person during an exposure or shortly after a particular exposure, and that alteration lasts for a relatively long time (see Figure 1c). That alteration may be fairly minor. However, there are times when the degree of change might be

fairly dramatic. An example of a dramatic immediate change effect might be when a teenager watches a movie about an attractive person in a particular career—say a heart surgeon—and the teenager decides she wants to be a heart surgeon, talks about this career choice continually, and alters her study habits to earn the grades necessary to go to college and medical school.

With a short-term fluctuation change type of effect, the media trigger a fluctuation off the baseline during the exposure or shortly after. The change is short-lived and the person returns to the baseline level quickly (see Figure 1d). This is a fairly prevalent finding in a lot of studies of public information/attitude campaigns and with most laboratory experiments. Researchers find a spike up in knowledge, attitude change, or behavioral intention as a result of exposure to some media material, but this change is not observed in subsequent measurement periods beyond a few days after the exposure.

Baselines differ in terms of slope and elasticity. Slope refers to angle (an upward slope indicates a generally increasing level of an effect whereas a downward slope indicates a generally decreasing level of an effect) and degree (a sharp angle reflects a relatively large degree of change in effects level, whereas a flat slope reflects a continuing level in the baseline). Elasticity reflects how entrenched the baseline is. Over time a baseline that has been reinforced continually by the same kind of media messages will become highly entrenched (more weighty) making it less and less likely that there will be fluctuations off the baseline, and when there are fluctuations, those fluctuations are smaller and smaller over time.

Fluctuations have three properties: duration, magnitude, and direction. The duration refers to how long the fluctuation lasts before returning to the baseline. Magnitude refers to how far the fluctuation deviates from the baseline. And direction refers to whether the fluctuation moves upward (thus representing an increase in the magnitude) or downward (thus representing a decrease in magnitude). Thus, the baseline provides the essential context for interpreting fluctuation scores.

Notice the dotted line in each of the four graphs in Figure 1. These dotted lines represent the manifestation level. In the first graph (a), notice that the baseline remains below the manifestation level. This indicates that the degree of the effect has not reached a level where there are spontaneous observables. By this I mean that the research participants exhibit something that clearly indicates a change that can be attributed to media influence. In two of the other three graphics, there are examples of the baseline breaking above the manifestation level; with those three patterns we have clear manifestations of a media influenced effect.

Should we limit our conceptualization of media effects to only those effects where manifestations occur? I would answer no; we should also be sensitive to what occurs below the manifestation level—what can be referred to as baseline effects. Returning to Figure 1a, notice that the baseline has a positive slope which indicates a gradual long-term change. The line does not move above the manifestation level, but something is happening that indicates media influence. For example, let us say a young girl exposes herself to lots of print messages on a particular topic.

Over time these exposures gradually increase her reading skills and increase her interest in that topic as her knowledge base grows. Her baseline moves close to the manifestation level. Then one day she picks up an article on the topic, and begins telling all her friends about what she has just learned (this activity takes place above the manifestation level because it is spontaneous and easy to observe her knowledge, attitudes, and emotions as she exhibits them to her friends). However, is it accurate to conclude that this one exposure to the article is responsible for the manifestation? That conclusion is too simple and undervalues the complexity of the media influence process. We must account for the long-term media influence that allowed her to practice her reading skills and grow her interest in this topic. The magnitude of the manifestation level is a combination of the initial level on the baseline and the magnitude of the fluctuation itself. Contrast this with a young boy who did not have this pattern of practicing his reading skills or growing his interest on this topic; his baseline would be far below the manifestation level. If he were to read the same article, he is not likely to manifest the same indicators as did the girl; however, the boy could still have been influenced by his exposure to the article (change in level) although he did not manifest that effect.

Baseline effects are changes that take place below the manifestation level. It is likely that most of the mass media influence is in the form of baseline effects rather than manifest effects. If we do not pay attention to baseline effects, we will limit our ability to understand media influence. Baseline effects present a more difficult measurement challenge than do manifestation effects. This challenge parallels the challenge of social scientists who wanted to break through the limits imposed by behaviorism; it was much more difficult to measure attitudes, cognitive states, and other internal hypothetical constructs and make strong cases for their validity compared to behaviors. We are indeed fortunate that social scientists have accepted the challenge of measuring hypothetical constructs. Now it is time for mass media effects scholars to rise to the challenge of more clearly documenting baseline effects in addition to manifesting effects.

At this point I must offer a caveat. The graphics in Figure 1 are presented as metaphorical illustrations of the ideas of baseline, fluctuations, and manifestation level. They are not intended to be literal representations. It is unlikely that we will get to a point where we will have developed measurement tools that are capable of generating accurate plots of the magnitude of an effect with high precision. However, these graphics can be useful in guiding our thinking about effect patterns, the need to consider constellations of influence as baselines, and the critical importance of interpreting fluctuations as movements from baselines.

Classification rules

The conceptualization developed in this essay is very broad. However, we need to be careful not to be overly broad and thus lead us to classify everything possible as a mass media effect; instead, we need classification rules that can also rule certain things out.

The proposed conceptualization suggests two classification rules. One classification rule is that there must be a clear outcome that evidences change. Recall that the change can be in magnitude or weight. If there is not a change in either magnitude or weight, there is no mass media effect.

The other classification rule is that the media must be demonstrated to have exerted an influence. This influence can be direct or indirect. The direct influence is a fairly obvious one to document. For example, in a two-group experiment where one group is exposed to a media message as a stimulus and the second group is not (the control group), we look for a greater degree of evidence for X effect as a dependent variable across the two groups. If the treatment group exhibits more X than the control group we conclude that the media treatment influenced the difference. If there is no difference in X across the two groups, then we must conclude that there was no direct media influence exerted. The indirect effect is more challenging to document, because it relies less on empirical evidence and more on a reasoned argument.

Organize theory development

Over the last several decades, scholars have developed a vast array of theories to suggest different mass media effects and to explain how the media exert their influence in bringing about these various effects. For example, Potter and Riddle (2007) conducted an analysis of mass media effects literature published in 16 scholarly journals and found 144 different theories in the 336 articles that featured a theory. How do we organize so many theories? One way is to ask if these theories deal with 144 different mass media effects or if perhaps they all deal with the same effect, but present 144 different competing explanations for the set of factors that bring it about. Or perhaps it is a combination of the two. Until we can apply an organizational scheme to the landscape of theories we cannot know the extent to which we are ''inventing the same wheel'' over and over or even how many ''wheels'' we have.

The proposed conceptualization of mass media effects can be used as a template for organizing the theories. To illustrate the way this can be accomplished, let us consider eight of the most prominent theories of mass media effects: agenda setting, cognitive capacity, cultivation, framing, media priming, social cognitive learning, third person, and uses and gratifications. When we analyze these theories purely for their effects, we can see that cultivation, agenda setting, social cognitive learning, media priming, and framing all deal with the long-term effect on cognitions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Third-person theory is a subset dealing with the special condition of conflicting first person and third-person beliefs developed over the long term. Uses and gratifications as an effects theory deals with media usage. Cognitive capacity as an effects theory focuses only on how the human mind processes different amounts of information at a given time during media exposures. So these eight theories deal with essentially three conceptualizations of effects: (a) long-term shaping of cognitions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors which are interdependent; (2) long-term shaping of media exposure habits and those habits influence on

immediate decisions; and (3) cognitive processing of information during media exposures. There is a good deal of overlap in those conceptualizations. Some are more general (such as cultivation) than others (such as agenda setting) which in turn are more general than others (such as third-person effect).

Given the size of the empirical literature as well as the number of theories for mass media effects, the field is in danger of fragmentation where further efforts contribute more to clutter than to systematic advancement of explanation. To avoid this danger we need efforts to organize our past work and present a clearer picture of how our scholarly literature is building strong and clear answers to questions such as: How many types of media effects are there? What is the relative prevalence of different kinds of media effects in society? and Which units of analysis are most susceptible to which effects? The beginning point for such an analysis is a general conceptualization of mass media effect.

The general conceptualization presented in this essay can be used to determine the extent to which theories overlap or are nested by categorizing theories according to baseline reinforcement, baseline alteration, temporary fluctuation, or long-term fluctuation. Theories can be further compared according to type of effect: cognitive, attitudinal, belief, affective, physiological, behavioral, or some combination. For theories that are found to focus on the same effect, we can then examine how they differ in their explanatory mechanism, that is, specifying which factors are responsible for bringing about their focal effect. This procedure will result in identifying theories that need to be tested together to determine which explanatory mechanism is most useful—thus eliminating the need for the lesser explanatory systems and directing resources in the direction of the stronger explanatory system. In short, a general conceptual definition of mass media effects provides not only a more clear foundation for the scholarly field, it also provides a means of mapping the scholarship and orienting the field toward a more efficient use of its limited scholarly resources and thus accelerating the movement toward providing compelling answers to the most important questions about our focal phenomenon.

Design of empirical research

This conceptualization of mass media effect makes a distinction between ''effect'' and ''prevalence of an effect.'' This might at first seem like a subtle distinction, but it is a rather important one, especially when we see how the two are continually confounded in typical analyses that focus on mean differences across groups. To illustrate, think of an experiment with 50 participants in a treatment condition and 50 participants in a control condition. Now let us imagine two different scenarios for results. First, let us say that one person in the treatment condition has a high score on the effects outcome variable, but when that score is averaged together with the outcome scores for the other 49 participants in the treatment condition, the resulting mean score is no different (statistically) than the mean score on the outcome variable in the control group. In this case, the experimenter concludes the treatment had no effect, but this is a faulty conclusion because the treatment *did* have an influence, albeit on only

one participant. Second, let's say that 15 people in the treatment condition exhibited a very high outcome score and another 15 people exhibited a very low outcome score, but the average mean for the treatment group was no different (statistically) from the mean of the control group. In this case, the experimenter concludes that the treatment had no effect; again this is a faulty conclusion. Given the proposed conceptualization, there were effects observed in both scenarios described above, but because the effects were not prevalent enough in the first scenario, the experimenter concluded there was no effect. In the second scenario the effect was not prevalent enough in only one direction, so the experimenter concluded that there was no effect. Because prevalence is confounded with effect, the experimenter drew a faulty conclusion from his/her results.

This proposed conceptualization of ''effect'' requires a sharp focus on the unit of analysis (i.e., the individual, the group, the institution, etc.) then looking for evidence of a change (in magnitude or weight) over some period of time—at minimum before and after a particular exposure to a media message. The statistical procedure of analysis of variance is too crude a tool to illuminate effects because it aggregates outcome scores into group means, and by so doing it elevates the importance of prevalence beyond the importance of change. In contrast, the proposed conceptualization requires the computation of change scores as the outcome measure then using another statistical procedure such as multiple regression to explain the change variation. With this proposed conceptualization of mass media effects, the examination of media influence is focused on changes in the unit of analysis over time rather than in computing averages across grouped units at one point in time.

Conclusion

This essay addresses the need to develop a conceptualization of mass media effect in general. The synthesized conceptualization incorporates a full range of elements across nine definitional issues of type of effect, level, change, influence, pervasiveness, media stimulus, intentionality, time, and measurability.

This proposed conceptualization of mass media effects can be useful in three areas. It can clarify the essence of mass media effects by focusing attention primarily on four general kinds of effects. It can provide classification rules that serve as a formal definition. It can serve as a template for helping to organize the great many of theories that have been developed over the years to explain mass media effects. And it can shift the research focus away from comparing group means and onto analyzing change and then explaining the role that mass media exert in bringing about that change.

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将大众传播效果概念化

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【摘要：】

在九十余年的研究中学者们总结了各种各样大众传媒影响的证据。虽然这些影响都被以相对明确的方式定义,但是关于究竟如何将媒介效应概念化的研究还不充分。很少有学者提供一个对媒介效应正式的定义，相反，他们大多选择以基于事实的，原始的方式定义。本文综合以前的定义文献，在最一般的层面提出了“大众传播效果”的定义。提出的概念假定了四种大众传播效果：在数量上渐进的长期变化，加固，立即的转变以及短期波动变化。

Une conceptualisation des effets des médias de masse

Les chercheurs ont découvert une grande variété d'effets des médias de masse au cours de presque neuf décennies de recherche. Si chacun de ces effets a été défini d'une manière relativement claire, ce qui constitue un effet des médias de masse en général a été beaucoup moins conceptualisé. Les chercheurs ont rarement offert une définition formelle des effets des médias de masse, préférant plutôt fournir une définition soit ostensive, soit primitive. Dans cet article, une conceptualisation de « l'effet des médias de masse » au plan le plus général est synthétisée à partir de ces travaux de définition antérieurs. La conceptualisation proposée postule quatre sortes générales d'effets des médias de masse : le changement en magnitude graduel à long terme, le renforcement, le changement immédiat et le changement fluctuant à court terme.

Mots clés : effet des médias de masse, conceptualisation, définition, synthèse

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Ein Entwurf massenmedialer Wirkungen

In den letzten 90 Jahren haben Forscher Evidenz für eine breite Vielfalt an massenmedialen Wirkungen gesammelt. Wurden für einzelne Effekte klare Definitionen geliefert, gibt es bislang nur wenige Konzeptarbeiten zur Frage, was eine massenmediale Wirkung im Allgemeinen ausmacht. In ihren Arbeiten bieten die Autoren eher selten eine formale Definition von massenmedialer Wirkung an, stattdessen entscheiden sie sich für eine Definition der anschaulichen oder primitiven Art. Dieser Beitrag erläutert ein Konzept für die Wirkung von Massenmedien auf der allgemeinsten Ebene, das als Synthese aus früheren definitorischen Arbeiten hervorgeht. Diese vorgeschlagene Konzeptualisierung umfasst vier allgemeine Arten von massenmedialen Wirkungen: graduelle Langzeitveränderungen in der Stärke, Verstärkung, plötzliche Veränderung und kurzfristige Fluktuationsveränderungen.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Wirkung der Massenmedien, Konzeptualisierung, Definition, Synthese

매스 미디어 효과의 개념화

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요약

학자들은 지난 90 년동안 다양한 매스 미디어 효과들에 관한 증거들을 산출해냈다. 이러한 효과들은 각자가 상대적으로 명확한 상황에서 정의된 반면, 매스 미디어 효과를 구성하는 것이 무엇인가는 일반적으로 덜 개념화되었다고 할 수 있다. 매스미디어효과의 공식적인 정의를 제안한 학자들이 매우 드물며, 겉치레적이거나 초보적인 정도의 정의를 제공하는데 그치고 있다. 본 에세이에서, 가장 일반적인 수준에서의 매스 미디어 효과의 개념이 기존의 연구로부터 합성되었다. 제안된 개념은 4 가지의 매스 미디어 효과들을 이야기하고 있는바, 정도에 있어서의 점증적인 변화, 재강화, 즉각적인 변화, 그리고 단기적인 유동적변화들이다.