

I: Asking the Right Questions  
(Theory, History, Traditions, Context  
in Mass Communication Research)

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## The Media Book

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### **Different Theories in the History of Mass Communication Research**

**T**he study of mass communications has attracted scholars from many academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology, economics, politics, history, social anthropology, literature, linguistics, professional studies, mathematics and engineering. Different scholars look at different things, ask themselves different sorts of question. Research into media texts (often drawing on the intellectual heritage and the study of literary criticism) looks very different from research into media industries (often informed by a mixture of political studies, economics and sociology). A research focus on media contribution to 'social reproduction' (i.e. the maintenance over time of specific configurations of the distribution of capital in society) draws on a challenging vocabulary of Marxist political economy (Murdock, 1982; Bennett, 1982). It is very different from the focus of educationalists or psychologists when they research the potential of media for teaching, learning and cognitive development.

#### *Approaches to Media*

Boyd-Barrett and Newbold (1995) identified nine different major approaches to the study of mass communications. The term 'approach' was adopted on the grounds that the defining features of different bodies of media research are typically a mixture of four different components. These are: selective focus as to topic (e.g. news, women in the media, representations of violence); sometimes unexplored ideological presumptions as to the very nature of the topic selected, or

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Source: Chris Newbold, Oliver Boyd-Barrett and Hilde Van den Bulck (eds), *The Media Book*, London: Arnold, 2002, Chapter 4: pp. 20–25, Chapter 5: pp. 25–28, Chapter 6: pp. 29–40, Chapter 7: pp. 40–54.

why it is important; theories about media in society; and preferences for specific methodologies in finding answers to the questions that have been raised. Any major approach or theory, in common with the construction of any 'text', is a selective process that reflects particular views of the overall field, its boundaries and judgements about the most significant previous contributions. Many media academics nurture a strong sense of the history of their own intellectual discipline and, as the first section of that 1995 volume demonstrated, there have been significant controversies about the ways in which the field has been and should be defined. The cluster of approaches identified were not all of the same kind: some were specifically linked to particular theories, others to particular areas or topics of study. In particular, it should be noted that the classification is not a priori, based on first principles, but reflects areas and movements that have seemed to their proponents and others as distinctive in certain ways, even if the original justification for such distinctiveness may have eroded over time.

### **Approaches to media (Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 1995)**

- Mass society, functionalism, pluralism
- Media effects
- Political economy
- The public sphere
- Media occupations and professionals
- Cultural hegemony
- Feminism
- Moving image
- New audience research

#### Mass Society, Functionalism, Pluralism

This cluster of theories and approaches focuses on how the media contribute to the overall social system. It incorporates two radically different views of society. In one view (the **mass society** thesis) modern society (identified at the time principally with North America and western Europe) has been shaped by industrialization and urbanization. Principles of industrial rationalism are applied to the production of cultural goods, including the media, and the shaping of public tastes for such goods result, in this view, in a process of cultural standardization. An alternative view sees the media as reflective of the many different social groups, cultures and interests of a democratic and heterogeneous society, and consequently as a force for social cohesion and stability.

#### Media Effects

Throughout the history of media research, a prevailing concern has been with whether the media have an influence upon knowledge, beliefs and behaviour. This focus on the individual or group, and its presumption of a one-way 'transmission'

of messages that have corresponding impacts on those exposed to them, is in sharp contrast with a great deal of the rest of the research literature.

### Political Economy

Mosco (1995) has 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 applied to the communications media, political economy studies tend to focus on how the work of media institutions relates to the other major institutions of society – particularly the political, financial and industrial – and how these influences account for media industrial and professional practices.

### The Public Sphere

The concept of **public sphere** was coined by Jurgen Habermas in 1962. McKenna (1995) defines it, at its simplest, as a 'forum of public communication: a forum in which individual citizens can come together as a public and confer freely about matters of general interest'. Studies within this approach attempt to identify the role of the media in fostering or in impeding the development, operation and survival of such public communication, as well as to explore the conditions that help account for why some manifestations of public sphere appear effective and others not. If the media are controlled by large corporations, for example, and run mainly for their benefit, can the media also function to serve the common good by providing a forum for the exercise of open discussion? Or is such opportunity always tainted and limited by media goals of revenue maximization? Or by the heavy intervention in public communication of media professionals whom nobody has elected and few have chosen?

### Media Occupations and Professionals

This descriptive title is self-evident in its area of concern, but invites a variety of different theoretical perspectives. Some studies start from an interest in the analysis of media production and performance, roles and role-relationships – for example, among sources, colleagues, management (see Tunstall, 1971). Others focus on the ways in which media practice is conditioned by institutional economic interests. Still others concentrate on how media workers absorb and recreate prevailing ideas and representations that contribute to the maintenance of a cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony occurs through the privileging, in the semiotic universe of signs, of ideas and images that reflect the perspectives, interests and ideologies of the ruling class or the ruling alliance of major centres of social power. Such studies also identify areas for authorial freedom, independence or discretion. These are sometimes explained as the spaces created when there are conflicts or dissonance between different sectors of the ruling class, or that are tolerated as commercial efforts to meet audience tastes for novelty, challenge and authenticity.

### Cultural Hegemony

Hegemony is defined by Derrida (1995) as the totality of relations of domination that are not visible as such, relying for effectiveness not on coercion but on the voluntary consent of the dominated. The analysis of cultural hegemony is actually but one phase of an intellectual movement that is known as cultural studies. The term hegemony is equally common in political economy; in cultural studies, however, it has a particular inflection – namely, the ideological function of mainstream media texts. Cultural studies is a meeting point in media research, between traditions of study that have grown out of literary analysis and film studies, and traditions of study that have come from the social sciences (principally politics, economics, sociology, anthropology and psychology). Loosely, it may be said that the literary tradition in cultural studies has tended to focus attention on how texts are constructed to make them capable of rendering meaning. The social science tradition has focused more on the significance of texts within specific cultural contexts and the ways in which culture influences the strategies that consumers, audiences or readers employ in order to make meaning of texts.

The cultural hegemony variant of cultural studies was primarily concerned with 'how media contribute to popular consciousness the language, symbolic and cultural codes in which media frame the world' (Newbold, 1995), and in so doing how they reproduce the social relations in which their own power is invested. The media are seen to work principally as conservative forces that reinforce inequalities of power in society. The focus here is on the 'ideological work' of media. For Althusser (1971), individuals are the constructs of ideology, defined as a set of discourses and images that constitute the most widespread knowledge and values – 'common sense'. Ideology turns what is in fact political, partial and open to change into something seemingly 'natural', universal and eternal. It achieves this transformation partly by obscuring real connections and replacing them with a picture of social relations that overemphasizes individual freedom and autonomy. This encourages individuals to make sense of the world by flattering their sense of importance and autonomy within it (Derrida, 1995: 187). Ideologies are realized in part through what Bourdieu (1986) has called the 'imaginaries' of the different fields humans typically occupy (family, work, peer groups, etc.), each of which contains particular promises and images of satisfaction and success. But individuals are never, or need never be, completely positioned or determined by the system of fields.

Cultural studies is sometimes seen in opposition to 'structuralist' approaches. That is to say, in cultural studies a great deal of power and influence is attributed to meanings, signs, ideas and language as among primary determinants of the human world. Structuralists, on the other hand, regard manifestations of culture as epiphenomena, merely incidental outcomes of the working of economic determinants through institutions and power relations. By extension of this idea, the term structuralism is applied to any explanatory approach that tends to explain the outer appearances of things by reference to deeper and usually invisible forces. An example would be Freud's explanation of human behaviour in terms of primary impulses such as sex. None the less there is evidence of

structural thinking in the analysis of texts. Examples would include the focus on binary oppositions in semiology, an approach which considers that texts achieve meaning by their play of explicit or implicit oppositions. Structural thinking also appears in the analysis of consumers' use of texts when there are references to social class and gender as determinants of the meanings that individuals generate.

In a process of transition from the study of cultural hegemony to a more general interest in cultural studies, there has appeared a dichotomy in the understanding of the relationship of reading to meaning. Cultural hegemony regards the meanings of texts as relatively fixed, while in cultural studies researchers are more inclined to see texts as polysemic – that is to say, open to an infinity of meanings or at least to a limited range of different readings. This transition parallels a change in media studies away from transmissional approaches to communication (in which communication study is essentially the study of how a fixed message gets from source, sent through a channel to a receiver). In more recent years, there has been a tendency to understand communication as something that is negotiated and in which there are no fixed messages, only a series of encounters between texts that have usually been multi-authored (and for whose authors the meanings may also be ambiguous), and readers, who 'read off' meanings from texts, in ways that are influenced by factors that range from cultural membership, immediate task or concern, to general experience and competence in decoding certain kinds of text.

### Feminism

The application of feminist theories and concerns to media study applies across the range of other traditions and approaches. It is most evident in cultural studies (which explores the relative importance of sex and gender in relation to social class and patriarchy, and studies gender representations in media texts). It is also evident in 'new audience research', which applies ethnographic methods, involving long-term observation of a community, to study of the ways in which women take meaning from texts and of how their reading practices have been influenced by gender and role. Through these enquiries, feminism has helped to energize and radicalize audience research.

### Moving Image

The only approach to media study that is identified by reference to media category, study of the moving image, is intended to refer to the analysis of film, television and video products. It reflects the strength of an independent field of study and practice that for a long time focused solely on film, maintaining a parallel existence with media study. It is largely through film studies that concepts such as genre and narrative were developed for application to media content. Outside the study of literature, it was mainly in film studies that media scholars allowed themselves the luxury of detailed scrutiny of media content, while other approaches to media dealt with content rather summarily, often reducing it to nominal categories. Moving Image scholars came mainly from literature and

similar humanistic backgrounds, and they generally felt more comfortable with literary techniques of textual analysis than with the social science techniques of audience analysis. Developing from auteur theory, which regarded the director as the most significant film artist, study of the moving image progressed to theories of genre (as ritual, as ideology, as aesthetic), and narrative (defined by Newbold, 1995, as the 'devices and strategies, the conventions and sequencing of events with characterization, which constitutes a story'). On the way, it introduced, among other things, such considerations as inter-textuality (references in media products to previous products) and the influence of audience expectations and pleasure upon how audiences 'read' film, and on how film is made.

### New Audience Research

This is defined largely by its rejection of the role attributed to the audience in traditional media effects studies. These had positioned the audience either as passive receivers in a 'transmissional' model of communication, or as marginally more active receivers whose media preferences were identified mainly by reference to broad categories of content and gratification, and broad categories of membership of social and cultural groupings. New audience research, drawing on ethnographic methodology, regards the processes whereby both authors and readers make sense of texts – their encodings and decodings – to be complex, culturally derived competencies, and that extend to the factors that bring individuals to texts in the first place. The process of 'reading' is influenced by many different factors; these include the structure of the text itself, the social context within which the text is read, the cultural affinities of readers, and the ways in which cultural factors influence their reading competencies, predispositions, opportunities, likes and dislikes.

### Administrative and Critical Traditions

Before going on to discuss the above 1995 categorization by Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, I want to look at an important dichotomy in the field between what has been called 'administrative' and 'critical' research (cf. Lazarsfeld, 1941). **Administrative research** was described by Halloran (1995) as a characteristic of most mass communications research in the USA up to the early 1960s. As in the case of other branches of social science, mass communications research had developed, says Halloran:

essentially as a response to the requirements of modern, industrial, urban society for empirical, quantitative, policy-related information about its operation [that was] geared to improving the effectiveness and profitability of the media, often regarded simply as objects of study, or as neutral tools in achieving stated aims and objectives, usually of a commercial nature. (Halloran, 1995: 64)

Halloran's criticism of such research was less about its focus or its motivation, than about its methods. Too often these were media- rather than society-centred,

neglected theory, used crude conceptualizations, were superficial in their analysis of content, and neglected the ways in which the media are linked with other institutions, including political and economic institutions.

There were few, if any questions about power, organization and control; there was little reference to structural considerations, and rarely were attempts made to study the social meaning of the media in historical or sociological contexts ... tending to concentrate on one aspect of the process [effects and reactions], to the neglect of the factors that influenced what was produced. (1995: 64)

Research focused on answers that were seen to be useful in the short term. It measured that which lent itself to quantitative measurement rather than that which was important. It focused on the individual, and limited the scope of media influence to imitation, attitude and opinion change.

In contrast to the administrative tradition, Halloran counterposes a tradition of 'critical, problem and policy-oriented' research. This tradition addresses itself to major issues of public concern. It questions the values and claims of the system, by applying independent criteria of effectiveness, suggesting alternatives with regard to both means and ends, and exploring the possibility of new forms and structures. Critical research does not ignore problems that are central to the media, but it tries never to accept without challenge the ways in which problems are defined as problems by media practitioners or politicians. It deals with communication as a social process. It studies media institutions in social context, and does not take the existing system as sacrosanct. It recognizes that research itself is not carried out in a social or political vacuum, but is influenced by a range of factors.

With this in mind, therefore, let us return to the Boyd-Barrett and Newbold (1995) classification that was outlined in the previous section. Overall, the classification is more heavily weighted towards the critical than the administrative tradition, with the important exception of the media effects school, which is home to much of the research in such topic areas as advertising or campaign effects. This critical weighting is only to be expected in a book about theory, in as much as administrative research is not typically oriented to the refinement of theory.

Notwithstanding Halloran's observation that critical research does not ignore problems that are central to media, the weighting in favour of the critical suggests a potential problem with the 1995 classification, and possibly a problem with the field. Halloran has defined his terms to indicate that 'administrative' is not so much a matter of focus, but also of the quality of thinking, analysis and research, particularly with reference to whether the social context is adequately taken into account, as this will affect the way in which questions are asked and answered. The problem with this formulation is that we are in danger of being left simply with a dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' analysis, and that in itself is too broad to be useful. For much of its history, critical media research has had little time for media-related problems as these have been defined by governments, by the industry and even by many consumer groups that have tried to take action on issues to do with children, violence or media access.



In part this is an academic reaction to the failure of much 'administrative' research to take due account of critical research and of the full social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which the media operate and in which people receive or consume them. It also has to do with different agendas of concern between sociologists and 'administrators', and with a corresponding tendency for sociology to deprecate the value of detail in such matters as policy and ethical issues on the grounds of their irrelevance to the grander sociological project of explaining rather than judging society.

The study of media goes a long way beyond sociology (unless we want to argue that sociology encompasses every discipline). Many who work in the study of media, even if they recognize that media operate in a social context, do not share the grander sociological project, but are concerned to achieve certain limited goals for the operation of media systems. I want to argue that their concerns should be as central to the field of media research as the concerns of those who have come to media research through sociology. I also believe that in relation to many of the research questions posed by sociologists, immersion in the details of media policy and organization is increasingly necessary for the demonstration of professional competence, in terms of appropriate knowledge and credibility, in dialogue with the industry and with society at large. This is precisely the area in which social concerns are generally most prevalent and most clearly articulated through government reports, policy discussion papers and enquiries.

Following on from this view, I would argue in favour of including within the 1995 classification a section that could be described as 'media policy', an area in which there is growing interest in teaching and research. Although they could conceivably be subsumed within the notions of 'public sphere' or 'media occupations' or 'political economy', issues of media policy and media regulation are very substantial topics, and the literature comprises many weighty government-sponsored policy and regulatory papers, as well as reports and legislation. I agree that immersion in policy-related research should not be at the expense of a regard for the holistic social context and a 'meta-awareness' of the factors that drive policy-oriented research. I do not believe it is necessary or practical that all industry research should adopt a sociological framework in order to be effective, or even to be useful to sociology. At the same time, 'administrative research' may be the source of much of the data that is available for reworking and reinterpretation by critical researchers.

I will conclude this assessment of the 1995 classification with reference to two other issues. The moving image category did acknowledge in a practical way that film studies has been to some extent a separate tradition in media research. As a discipline it has been informed by the tools and concepts of literary and film analysis, and this background has also contributed fresh and original insights for the analysis of all texts. The moving image tradition has had to come to terms with the specific vocabulary of film, the rich variety of visual and non-linguistic means by which meaning is created and which, until recently at least, have been unique to the media of film and television. None the less, it can be argued that all media represent unique combinations of semiotic systems, some of which

owe their genesis to the range of possibilities for sign creation that a particular technology allows. Therefore moving image media are no different in principle to print, say, or to hypertext computer communication. Furthermore, many of the applications of film analysis, relating to such issues as auteur theory, narrative and genre construction, are equally applicable to other media. Rather than thinking of moving image as one of the main categories of a classificatory system, it may be better in future to work with categories that refer in a general way to textual structure and construction.

The 1995 classification did not include a separate category for international communication. This was in part because the book in which it was discussed was one of a series, and a second volume dealt with media in global context. Study of international communication, it might be argued, is not in itself different from the study of media in general. The questions that are asked about media in international or global contexts are much the same as those that are asked of media in national contexts. In both, the main questions have to do with issues of production, content and reception, drawing on a similar range of theories for elucidation.

In practice, the study of international communication has constituted a distinctive thread of investigation in media research for the past 50 years. By the 1990s the term 'international' had become problematic because it implied that political relations between nation-states were the most appropriate focus for a study of media in their full global context. Such a focus would seem to underestimate the importance, for example, of diasporic media (e.g. the Indian cinema's appeal for Indians living throughout the world), or of media that serve ethnic or religious communities. In its place, therefore, the concept of media in a global context is now often preferred. The principal approaches to media in a global context have to do with the following factors.

- Media regulation (e.g. the allocation of radio or broadband spectrum) of transnational or multinational media activity.
- Relations of dominance-dependency that arise from the unequal exercise of power between local, national and transnational media (captured most succinctly by the term 'media imperialism').
- Media in relation to national or economic development. While development may be thought of as an intra-national issue, developmental studies tend to have broader regional or global dimensions. This is in part because development scholars have often investigated groups of countries, as indicated in the phrase 'developing economies', and in part because development scholars have typically been based in western institutions while studying the developing world.

### **Theory Circles and Spirals**

Theoretical models of society, media power and communications process, with indications of prevailing focus, tone and method, 1930s–1990s

<b>Society</b>	<b>Power</b>	<b>Communications</b>	<b>Tone</b>	<b>Characteristic method</b>
		<u>Mass Society, 1930s–1950s</u> (focus on society)		
<i>mass</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>one-way</i>	<i>negative</i>	<i>deductive reasoning</i>
		<u>Pluralism, 1940s–1960s</u> (focus on individual)		
<i>plural</i>	<i>moderate</i>	<i>intervened</i>	<i>positive</i>	<i>empirical</i>
		<u>Cultural Studies 1 (cultural hegemony), 1960s–1970s</u> (focus on society)		
<i>class relations</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>ideological</i>	<i>negative</i>	<i>literary criticism</i>
		<u>Political Economy 1 (neo-Marxist), 1960s–1970s</u> (focus on society)		
<i>class relations</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>ideological</i>	<i>negative</i>	<i>institutional analysis</i>
		<u>Political Economy 2 (public sphere), 1980s–1990s</u> (focus on individual, institution and sector)		
<i>State/capital/ public</i>	<i>moderate</i>	<i>negotiable</i>	<i>positive</i>	<i>policy studies</i>
		<u>Cultural Studies 2 (new audience research), 1980s–1990s</u> (focus on individual, group and culture)		
<i>plural</i>	<i>low</i>	<i>interpretative</i>	<i>positive</i>	<i>ethnographic</i>

*Phase 1: Mass Society, Mass Media*

McQuail (2000), Curran *et al.* (1982), and Boyd-Barrett and Newbold (1995) detect certain cycles in the development of media theory. There has been a tendency for one prevailing approach or theory to be supplanted by another, and then for the new dominant theory to be replaced by something that is similar, in certain ways, to a theory that had appeared earlier in the cycle. It has been rare for a theory or approach to completely disappear – rather, the repository of theoretical directions grows richer, or at least more populated, even though at any time one particular theory or approach may be more fashionable than others. In the decades that led up to the Second World War – a period during which scholars and intellectuals began to give more attention to the new ‘mass’ media (in particular, the press, cinema, and radio broadcasting) – we can say that the prevailing mood was one of patrician angst over the allegedly pernicious effects of the mass media on society. Society itself was conceptualized largely as a nation-state in the process of ‘massification’. This came about, it was argued, as the product of the combined forces of industrialization and urbanization, and among the key features of such a society were widespread alienation, a sense of loss of community, and the disappearance of mediating institutions such as trades unions, churches and voluntary associations, which had held society together in pre-industrial times (Kornhauser, 1968). The media’s role in this ‘mass’ society was to offer diversion for the masses, to distract them from political action, to provide a surrogate sense of community, and to manipulate mass consciousness in the interests of the ruling classes.

There were at least three significant versions of this way of thinking about the media. One was a moral or religious anxiety that exposure to the popular media

encouraged licentiousness and other immoral behaviour. A different concern, from the intellectual right (best represented by F.R. Leavis (1952; also see Leavis and Thompson, 1948), was that the mass media threatened to undermine the civilizing influence of great literature and high culture that was thought to have played a significant role in helping people make sense of and adjust to social change. A concern among the intellectual left (e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979) was that the mass media represented the interests of the powerful, and debased the critical and sensory faculties of those who consumed them. Both the intellectual left and right agreed that popular culture was the product of the industrialization of culture. All versions attributed considerable power to the media, and this presumption was reinforced by perceptions of the use of media by governments to influence other countries, notably in wartime but also in the service of imperialism and trade relations. In brief, this first major phase of media research was characterized by a mass society model of society, by a focus on the impact of media on the moral robustness of the community as a whole. It viewed the media as very powerful, and its model of the relationship between media and readers or consumers was a transmissional one, sometimes described as the 'hypodermic needle' model of media effect. Its tone was overwhelmingly negative in its appraisal of the role of at least the popular media. Prevailing methodology was deductive reasoning on the basis of evaluative premises of the nature of human beings and of their potential.

### *Phase 2: Pluralism and Reinforcement*

From some time preceding the Second World war, and in particular during and after it, there developed a more empirical approach to questions of media and their effects. This approach was largely spearheaded by psychologists and social psychologists working for the US armed services to investigate the potential of wartime propaganda to bring about alterations in knowledge, attitude and behaviour of readers, listeners or viewers. This approach was also fostered by politicians and advertisers intrigued by the possibility of predicting the relative impacts of different kinds of media message. Among the leading names of this period those of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), among others, stand out. During this period there emerged a number of important findings that have never been effectively challenged. These were that media power is dependent on many 'intervening' factors, not least of these having to do with the educational and other characteristics of audience members, their interpersonal networks and their perceptions of the authority of different media. Reviewing this tradition, Klapper (1960) concluded that the most important outcome of exposure to media was one of reinforcement, not change of existing attitudes and opinions. Reinforcement occurs because audiences are not masses, but are made up of individuals who are located in cultural, social class, community, family and occupational groups. Their choice of media, their perception of what they choose to look at, listen or read, and the things they remember, are significantly filtered by the values and norms of the cultures and groups to which they belong. Even when they are subject to media influence, the influence is likely to be indirect, working in a 'two-step' flow sequence of interpersonal channels. Reinforcement was the combined result of: selective exposure (people choose

what they want to read, and they read what they are already comfortable with); selective attention (they attend to that which best fits with their perceptions and expectations); and selective retention (they best remember facts and opinions that fit with their existing views of the world).

This second major phase of media research was characterized by a more 'pluralistic' view of society (i.e. a society in which there are many different centres of power, and in which there are checks and balances, or countervailing forces, that maintain a certain degree of equity between the different centres). The model was supported by the emergence of richer sociological evidence of the diversity of cultures and communities (strongly associated with differences in social class) and the survival even in cities of established, traditional working-class communities. In the work of Hoggart (1957) and Williams (1958; 1961), for example, we find evidence that people have sustained distinctive cultures in the face of industrialization and urbanization, and that they can appropriate mass culture products within the framework of their own cultures. In many ways this model of media analysis is reassuringly empirical, sophisticated, subtle. Yet at the same time it is less critical. In sociology this was the period of the rediscovery of one of the founding fathers of sociology, Max Weber (1965), who had argued that economics was secondary to culture and belief as an explanation for social structure. The leading contemporary sociologist was Talcott Parsons (1949), for whom society was an integrated and self-sustaining system. In the approach to media, the prevailing focus was on the impact of media on individuals, in particular on individual knowledge, belief and behaviour, particularly to do with matters related to politics and consumption. The power of media was seen as limited and conditional, a power that was 'mediated' by an ever-extending range of factors. Greater subtlety of appreciation of media operation in the developed countries of the world, however, had not yet translated to the developing world, where the media were celebrated as the harbingers, through the one-way transmission of new knowledge and attitudes, of modernization and democratization. In general, the relationship of media to their consumers was now seen as more 'negotiable' than before and mediated by many factors. The overall tone or attitude towards media and the relationship between media and society was a good deal more positive than in the first phase.

#### *Phases 3 and 4: Cultural Studies and Political Economy*

The third and fourth major phases run roughly in parallel. These are the political economy and cultural studies phases or traditions, and they emerge into mainstream intellectual thought from the 1960s. They are both linked to the rediscovery of a more humanistic interpretation of Marx (1992) that followed translation of the early Marx in the *Grundrisse*. It may be said that both phases went through 'Marxist' and 'post-Marxist' periods.

#### The Influence of Neo-Marxism

Even though cultural studies rejected the reductionism that is inherent in the classical Marxist notion of a cultural superstructure that is determined by an economic base, its title to the Marxist tradition rested on its focus on culture as

an expression of the unequal relations between social classes. Its early contribution to the field of media study was its exploration of ideology in the maintenance of class relations. The emergence of neo-Marxism during this period may be linked to a variety of factors. Among these was the coming to power in the newly independent excolonial countries of leaders who were well versed in Marxist thought. This was also the coming of age for the post-war baby-boomers. In response to their needs, the developed world saw a huge expansion of university systems to incorporate the growing demand from middle- and working-class students. These newcomers to what had previously been enclaves for the offspring of aristocratic elites, were less born to rule than coopted as functionaries to help make the existing social order work on behalf of the rulers. Alongside all this was the radicalizing influence of the Vietnam War, particularly in the United States where young men were drafted in an elusive cause of containing the alleged 'domino effect' of communist expansion. Alternative ways of imagining social order fired new left-wing aspirations and were to be observed in various embryonic, still to be evaluated, socialist experiments in countries such as Chile, China, Cuba, North Vietnam and the then Yugoslavia. Older certainties about patriotism, just war, the desirability of capitalism, the work ethic and economic growth, came under critical attack. In sociology, the structural *functionalism* of Talcott Parsons (1949) and the role analysis of Robert Merton (1958), whose overriding missions had been to explain social stability, gave way to the critical dissection of the power elite by C. Wright Mills (1956), and the radical economics of Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy (1968). These described an economy that was comprised not of multiple entrepreneurs competing in a free and open market, but of monopoly capitalists who were able to determine both the prices they paid to suppliers and those they charged to customers, and for whom aggression on international markets was the inevitable outcome of domestic market saturation. This line was aptly developed in relation to the media by Herbet Schiller (1969), one of the first scholars to examine in detail the inter-linkages between leading media institutions, the defence industries and the political elite.

The central question was no longer 'How do social systems function to maintain equilibrium?', it was the problematic of 'How do societies in which resources and rewards are so unevenly distributed continue to survive at all without revolution?' The answers were to be found less in the exercise of overt power than in Weberian analysis of the different forms of authority. Part of this analysis requires consideration of the role of the production of ideas, information and cultural representations, and how these reflect the interests of the ruling class (as in Marx) or of the prevailing coalition of dominant interests (as in Gramsci, 1971). The authority of ruling classes in modern society is defined in terms of how successfully they secure the willing consent of the ruled to the conditions of their own oppression (Marcuse, 1964).

The work of a school of British scholars, principally Raymond Williams (1960), Richard Hoggart (1957) and Stuart Hall (1980), demonstrated how mass or popular culture was not something to be 'blamed' on the illiterate or uneducated tastes of working people; it was rather the product of the application to cultural expression of industrial practices. These were concerned with maximizing economy of scale, and hence profit, by reaching the largest number of people with identical product. At the same time, these scholars celebrated the continuing,

if diminished, vitality of working-class culture. They could even find reflections of that culture in certain mass media products, and they began to explore in a more positive way some of the nuances and traditions of popular culture itself. They showed how popular culture could sometimes function to subvert the authority of 'high culture' and act as a form of opposition to the values and ideas of the ruling classes.

#### A Western Focus

Both the political economy and cultural studies traditions in media research therefore started out predominantly as critiques of existing media systems within the western world, and of capitalist societies generally. Their critical purview strangely failed to incorporate the authoritarian press systems of the communist or the developing worlds. While these were not generally defended, they were largely ignored. This omission can be explained by a variety of factors, mostly to do with the dynamics of left-wing thought in the 1960s and 1970s. In the first place, not very much was known in detail about non-western systems. Such systems did not generate their own media research and access to them was difficult for journalists and scholars alike. The real diversity of the Soviet Union and of China was rediscovered by the West only after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990. In the 1960s and 1970s there was little opposition to the prevailing western view of communist media systems as deplorably subservient to their respective governments or dominant political parties. Outside of the traditional communist parties of the West, there was little sympathy with Russian and Chinese communism, although for a brief period of time the thinking of Mao was thought to offer some promise. These communist states were often regarded as 'state capital' Systems that had been betrayed internally by nationalist ambitions and the greed of party elites. The real promise was seen to lie elsewhere, as in Cuba, and in the revolutionary movements of South America and Asia.

As for the developing world, media scholars shared the general left-wing and liberal ambivalence about the early post-colonial history of countries that were struggling, with little resource, to establish national systems and national identities. Authoritarian press systems could be explained away sympathetically as a necessary evil in the transition to modern, integrated nation-states, or as another unfortunate legacy of imperialism. The real left-wing venom was directed at targets closer to home: at press systems that, according to the rhetoric of orthodox canons of journalism, were meant to function as fourth estates, representing the public interest *vis-à-vis* state bureaucracy, or as independent critical watchdogs of the holders of power. In reality, their news agendas appeared just as much swayed by dependence on advertisers for revenue. Advertisers dictated the media's mode of address to consumers, as did the business and political interests of media moguls or corporate owners, and webs of complicity between major news sources and news reporters. Many media businesses operated internationally. International and notably Anglo-American exports of media product, in particular Hollywood film and advertising, along with western innovations in communications technology, notably satellites and computers, helped to extend western media-society models around the world. The left-wing critique of western media systems was at the same time an international critique.

### The Political Economy Model Summarized

Political economy focused on the relations between media and other economic and political interests. It examined regulatory systems that governed such factors as ownership, cross-media ownership, competition and monopoly, public service broadcasting, controls over quantity and content of advertising. It looked at the internal workings of media systems, at different groups of media professionals, and at relations between news workers and news sources. Its principal overriding interest was in the consequences of these various dimensions of media operation for the general public good and for the health of democracy. Whereas the previous **pluralist** phase of media theory concluded that the influence of media was strictly limited, that its most important effect was a kind of non-effect – namely reinforcement – both political economy and cultural studies started from the premise that reinforcement was not neutral. 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, and whose media were increasingly driven by the need to ‘deliver’ audiences to advertisers (Smythe, 1977). Media content, according to this argument, functioned to provide an environment of information and entertainment that was positively conducive to the sale of goods and services. Promotion of goods and services, in addition, was predicated on the assumption of individual and family aspirations, largely illusory, for identities that would set them higher in the social hierarchy. In its vision of alternative modes of social arrangement, political economy did not reach far beyond the politics of social class. It looked for ways of creating voices for the working classes in mainstream media and of lowering barriers to market entry so as to make it more likely that new media, representing a wider diversity of the population, could be established.

The first, or neo-Marxist, episode of political economy, therefore, may be summarized as an approach whose model of society was defined by social class relations, in which order was achieved through the ‘manufacture of consent’ by means of institutions such as education, religion and the media. Its focus on media was on the totality of relations between media and other social and political institutions in society as a whole. It regarded the media as very powerful contributors to social integration. Its view of the relationship between media and individual readers or consumers reverted to a transmissional model – some political economists adopted Marxist ideas of ‘false consciousness’ to describe how the media persuaded people to adopt values and positions that were at variance with their ‘real interests’. Its overall tone was pessimistic. Befitting an approach whose focus was on institutions and institutional relations, the range of methodologies in political economy was much broader than the psychologistic and positivist-empirical models that had dominated the effects studies of the ‘pluralist’ phase. They incorporated social history, company research, participant observer, interview and survey.

Political economy has remained vigorous in media study to the present day. For a period during the 1980s it was displaced in visibility by a second or post-Marxist episode of cultural studies (as we shall see below). A reinvigorated and transformed political economy (in its second episode) has been inspired by major



shifts in the international communications industries, to which reference has been made at the beginning of this chapter, having to do with such phenomena as digitization, deregulation, convergence, concentration and competition, commercialization, proliferation of media product, and globalization. One particularly notable outcome of these trends for media research in general is the increasing pressure on scholars to widen the scope of their field to take into account telecommunications and computing as well as the traditional contented media industries such as publishing, broadcasting and cinema. In this second phase, it is much less common to encounter works that are rooted in classical Marxist vocabulary, as in the works of Garnham (1979), for instance, during the 1970s. In particular, the singularity of focus on class relations has disappeared. This can be ascribed to a variety of influences. Principal among these has been the contribution of feminism to an appreciation of the importance of gender relations. There has also been growing interest in and concern about ethnic relations, and the place of minority ethnic groups in society. Some, but not all, scholars argue that gender and ethnic divisions are in part nurtured under capitalism in order to weaken the proponents of class struggle, or as a safety valve for times of insufficient labour. Others, however, see in gender and ethnic relations independent sources of social division, rooted in value systems that predate capitalism, such as patriarchy and racism. A growing volume of literature has championed the causes of other minority groups. All these concerns help to focus attention on issues of representation in the media, and how issues of media organization and economics help to account for characteristics of representation of women, ethnic groups and minorities; but we can also say that a second episode of political economy has opened up to more practical strategies of change.

#### From Political Economy to Public Sphere (Phase 5)

Continuing attention to media in international and global contexts looks not just at the role of media in the formation of relations between countries, but at their role in the integration of nearly all countries and peoples of the world into a global economy. This is seen as driven by huge concentrations of capital, associated with large multinational corporations, most of them still associated with the United States and OECD countries. Another factor that helps to explain the shift from the first to the second phase of political economy has to do with transformations of global politics. The demise of communism in the Soviet Union, and in central and eastern Europe, the emergence of the Russian Federation, and the transformation of Chinese communism from a class-based and centralist philosophy to something more pragmatic, nationalistic and market-driven, have required a less Manichean understanding of the world, one that is sensitive to every form of diversity. Such trends have affected parts of the developing world that also once subscribed to authoritarian systems, some with socialist or communist philosophies, many of them now discredited. These changes have facilitated greater democratization. Around the world, political transitions after the cold war from communism to post-communism, from apartheid to post-apartheid, from dictatorship to democracy, have necessitated vigorous, practical debates about the role of media.

To these debates the Habermas (1989) concept of 'public sphere' has had much to offer. The concept does not carry the baggage of Marxist vocabulary. It has therefore been an aid to politicians, media managers and scholars in debate across a broad political spectrum. It extended a lifeline to scholars who had found themselves imprisoned in theories and vocabularies whose perceived legitimacy had been undermined. It offered a legitimate way to address fundamental concerns about the relationship between commercial, political and public interests and the communications media. There are limitations to Habermas's original historical model for the generation of a media-supported public sphere, but his concept highlighted the value and importance of forums of debate that are independent of church, state and capital. For Habermas, citizens should have equal access to media. The quality of argument in the public sphere should be judged solely in terms of rationality or (since we can no longer assume 'rationality' by itself is a neutral foundation for social judgement, for it privileges an epistemology that is closely associated with science elites and with patriarchy) in terms of their relevance to notions of public interest. In as much as political economy is characterized by a sense of moral commitment, as Mosco argues (1995), the concept of public sphere has provided a broadly acceptable framework for the expression of moral concern in the sphere of media studies. Technological transformations have also had an impact. The proliferation of media content, however commercialized it may be in the mainstream, is undermining the intensity of concern about older bottlenecks in the flow of ideas imposed by notions of scarcity.

#### Content and Reception: Achilles Heels of Political Economy

Focusing on media institutions, political economy's weakest links have been in the areas of content and audience reception. Analysis of media institutions, their links with other social, political and cultural institutions, goes a long way to identifying their interests as business institutions and/or as strategic components within larger corporate portfolios. Such analysis suggests, more often than it actually proves, a direct link between the business and other corporate interests of the media, media content and the influence of such content. The political economy tradition has not had a good purchase on content analysis, other than fairly crude categorizations. These were based on older quantitative methodologies that were barely able to encompass such subtleties as narrative structure, generic convention, and characterization, and which proceeded on the assumption that quantitative repetition was equivalent to semiotic and/or affective significance. It is quickly evident to even a casual observer that there is a great deal of variety even within mainstream media product, to an extent that does not conform with what institutional analysis would lead one to expect. Explanations for such discrepancy are various, and there is empirical evidence to support most of them. These include the exercise of independent influence of media workers, protected by a culture of professionalism. A need is sometimes imputed for media to secure audience credence by dealing with a broader universe of representations than would be permitted by a narrow definition of self-interest, or by allowing the appearance of some controversy and discordance. It may be argued that real-world divisions of interest and viewpoint between the main centres of power create spaces for content that is ideologically challenging.

It is also possible that the suffusion of signs and messages contributes to a form of consumer apathy that is less and less propelled to action upon learning of injustices, scandals and outrages. Apart from explanations for the variety of media content, research also has to take account of the actual meanings that receivers make of the media products they consume. This is a further challenge for political economy, which is not commonly associated with methodologies that are appropriate or effective for audience investigation.

### Cultural Studies and Social Anthropology (Phase 6)

It is with respect to these two areas of weakness that cultural studies best complements political economy. Cultural studies is a blend of two different traditions. On the one hand there is a tradition of literary and cinematic analysis. This brings to the study of content a variety of intellectual and conceptual tools, semiotics included, that in general does better justice to the subtlety of actual texts and their construction than the crude categorizations of content that were for a long time common in positivistic social science. For this tradition within cultural studies the central question is 'How are texts constructed so that they have the power to mean?' The challenge of this question also draws upon the fields of linguistics and socio-linguistics, disciplines that were not well established in media studies even in the 1990s. Language studies had primarily focused on interpersonal communication; only relatively recently did this discipline come to terms with the extent to which human communication is technologically mediated. Language studies have only recently given sustained attention to the incorporation of non-linguistic features in media texts, to move beyond the more obvious audio-visual grammars of moving film, to the communicative potential of media forms such as typeface, pitch and intonation, and the visual rhythms established in the play between texts and illustration (see Kress, 1995; Kress and Leeuwen, 1996). Contemporary socio-linguistics its focus on the dynamics of interaction between context, purpose, relationship and content in any speech event, has a great deal to contribute to establishing the holistic semiotic significance of media texts (see van Dijk, 1985; 1998).

On the other hand, there is also within cultural studies a socio-anthropological or ethnographic influence. This is to be expected in a tradition that has as its primary purpose the exploration of human culture, a tradition that relates uneasily with cruder a priori categorizations of society offered by positivistic sociology. This is a tradition that looks in depth at human relationships in their full social contexts, and that searches for its own categories emerging from the 'thick' data of sustained participant observation. Applied to media, this tradition has provided a far more subtle appreciation of the ways in which media technologies are used in everyday life and the multiple ways in which audiences as cultural members take meaning from texts.

### The Cultural Studies Model Summarized

In an early, neo-Marxist, episode cultural studies focused principally on issues of representation in texts in order to demonstrate the links between textual construction and cultural **hegemony**. It did this through the application of

methods of literary analysis, with particular reference to genre, narrative and characterization, and their relationships to mythologies and folklore, as well as to psychoanalytic categories. In this period it might be said that cultural studies adopted a view of society in which the meanings embedded in textual construction reflected the struggle between the social classes but were essentially supportive of the dominant culture. Although its focus was on the text, therefore, its purpose was the illumination of the relationship between text and society and the understanding of society through the text. In this approach the media are seen as powerful, operating through ideology, working to construct perceptions of the world that do not challenge its basic social structures of inequality, and that lead readers either to believe that the way things are is the way that they must inevitably be, or to perceive the world in a way that does not reflect the way in which things actually are. Surprisingly, this model of relationship between text and reader was still essentially transmissional, there was little room here for deviant 'readings'. The methodologies were primarily tools of textual analysis. The overall tone of the analysis was pessimistic.

In a later, post-Marxist, episode cultural studies has devoted more attention to contributions from the social anthropological tradition. Sometimes referred to as the 'new audience research', this approach demonstrates and celebrates the diversity of ways in which media technologies are put to use in different family, social and cultural contexts, and also the diversity of meanings that people draw from the media they consume. The process of meaning-making has been shown as surprisingly subtle, with people quite capable of conforming with prevalent social disapproval or deprecation of certain categories of text, on the one hand, while continuing to take pleasure from those same texts on the other. Carrant (1980) has argued that this exploration of the negotiation of meaning in the encounter between textual products and actual readers was simply a rearticulation of Klapper's (1960) **reinforcement effect**, the combined result of processes of selective exposure, attention and retention. However, there is an important difference. In this second episode of culture studies, the approach to the understanding of meaning is social-anthropological, not psychological. It is more concerned with the ambient contexts of culture, tradition, group and family, and with what Radway (1984) has called 'interpretative' communities, whose shared values influence how people use texts, how they take meaning from them, and through what rituals of interaction, perception and conversation. This approach demonstrates the different interpretative skills that are prized by different cultures. In its analysis of the social ways in which audiences often make meaning from texts (Moss, 1995) it finally shatters the problematic of the language of media 'effects'. People are unlikely to be influenced in a once-and-for-all way by a single media text. All human beings are engaged in multiple projects of meaning-making from the moment of birth; it is from within the vortex of these projects, which are interminable and whose every phase is lived in a more or less tentative and hypothetical mode, that media products are selected, perceived and interpreted. Those interpretations themselves are sustained in hypothetical mode and have the status merely of fleeting contributors to the larger lifetime context of meaning-making. Furthermore the interpretative process is not only, or even mainly, conducted on the cognitive, ratiocentric plane, but also on the affective plane, linked with the pursuit of holistic mind-body sensation, emotion and pleasure.

The second episode of cultural studies encompasses, but is not reduced to, movements of post-structuralism or post-modernism. These concepts refer to new epistemologies that shy away from older structuralist traditions that were characteristic of analytical systems such as those of Marx or Freud and that reduce the epidermal complexity of phenomena to the rule-governed operation of a small number of irreducible explanatory concepts. Post-modernism recognizes no 'surface' that is of greater or lesser significance than imputed essence. It resists the impulse to dichotomization of phenomena (e.g. masculine/feminine, colonial/post-colonial, dominance/dependence), on the grounds that the characteristics of one extreme of a social dichotomy are as they are because of the way in which the other extreme is. In some senses, therefore, one pole or extreme incorporates, subsumes or transforms the 'other' that it supposedly is not. On the other hand, where structuralism posits unities, such as the 'self, or the 'text', the post-modern sees fragmentation. The 'self fragments into different identities that are called into play by different contexts of culture, purpose and relationship. Texts' reveal themselves to be multiples of different voices, with echoes of the different audiences that those voices once addressed, each voice following different rules of lexical choice, grammatical structure and semantic inflection. Even a single speaker will reflect fragments of different discourses, traceable to a variety of debates, philosophies and experiences, some of them very ancient. No wonder, then, that in the post-modernist perspective texts should be polysemic, available for the making of many different meanings by different readers. Readers do not make sense of texts as isolated individuals. Rather, they do so socially, in relation to previous texts they have experienced, in relation to the language, concepts and semantics they have absorbed as members of families, groups and cultures from childhood, through previous relationships they have lived, and through conversation. At the same time, texts are cultural and historically situated; in particular they embody, in the production, format, address and availability to audiences, relations of power. Post-modernism holds out no hope of stability, fixity or certainty: it catches fleeting moments of phenomena that are in perpetual movement and transition.

#### Towards an Integrative Model

In the 1990s and into the new millennium it is becoming more common for studies to integrate political economy and cultural studies traditions. This is in part attributable to the internal dynamics and processes of synergy observable in any intellectual project, where the strengths of initially different traditions are bridged and fused. It may also in part be attributable to changes in the external world, again suggestive of the importance of examining the evolution of theory in relation to both the immediate context of intellectual discourse and also to its broader social, cultural and political context. Part of this context has to do with the insistence and magnitude of the turbulence of communications industries and their global spread. This has undermined any temptation to complacent acceptance of the polysemic openness of texts, if such exists, as exonerating media industries of accountability for their exploitation of global communications space (Boyd-Barrett, 1998; 1999). While cultural studies in its post-modern mode has

introduced us to the subtleties and variegation of communications phenomena, processes of globalization simultaneously generate variety at the local level as they produce homogeneity in globalized spheres of social life, especially those related to production and employment, consumer goods and related behaviour. These processes then cry out for explanation and meaning. Competing theories variously press upon us competing causes for this dialectic of heterogeneity/homogeneity. These include global capitalism (an economic explanation: e.g. capitalists need to produce a variety of goods to attract and fascinate consumers, but too much variety interferes with economies of scale), and westernization (a culturalist explanation: e.g. white Anglo-American traditions think their ideas are the best and militantly export them).

### **The ‘Big Three’: Further Observations**

In broad-brush terms, the current complexity of the field can be accommodated within three of the most significant movements of media study: effects studies, political economy and cultural studies. The trajectory of media effects studies and its transformations has culminated in the second phase of cultural studies, namely in a radically new way of conceptualizing the relationship of texts to readers. I shall look first at the movement from ‘effects’ to the study of texts and readers within the cultural studies tradition, while recognizing that a complete fusion or integration of the different approaches, agendas and disciplines has not been achieved. I shall also look further at political economy.

#### *From Effects to Culture*

Do media have the power to change people? Well, yes, of course. What could be simpler? I hear on the radio as I drive to work along the 10 Free-way that a collision further down towards Los Angeles on the intersection with the 625 has created a complete log-jam. This knowledge is new to me, so we already have a demonstration of media effecting a change in cognition. The bulletin goes on to identify two alternative routes. Since I want to get to downtown Los Angeles I weigh up the two alternatives, and make a decision in favour of one of them. This decision takes into account personal preference, consideration of time pressure, even driving style. None the less, we have a clear-cut case of the media effecting or at least contributing to a change in behaviour. Do the media help to change affect? Of course they do. The Hollywood motion picture industry is superbly skilled at eliciting intense emotional reactions to fictional narratives, and there can be scarcely anyone who reads this who cannot quickly recall a recent instance of being moved emotionally by the power of film.

So what is all the fuss about with ‘media effects’; why has this label attracted such a negative image in a great deal of writing on media theory? The problem begins whenever there is a desire to attribute to the media causal responsibility for a specific good or bad effect, to say that a particular event, act or feeling is the result of a particular kind of media content. This is problematic whether responsibility is attributed historically, in explanation for some past incident

or event, or predictively, in reference to things that it is thought will happen as a result of exposure to specific kinds of media content. Such discourses tend to elicit deeply felt passions or touch on controversial concerns such as the levels of criminal violence in society, the school performance of children, male and female role-modelling, the norms that govern sexual behaviour, racism, and so. As it turns out, it is very difficult to predict with certainty just what effect a particular message will have, in what way, and for whom.

If we look at the entirety of the effects tradition we see a movement away from a view of media audiences or readers as passive, towards a view of them as active users and interpreters of all kinds of media text. Simultaneously, there has been an increasing sophistication in what is understood by the term 'text', be it a novel, a campaign message, a television broadcast or film. This is not the kind of progression where later advances entirely cancel out everything that has gone before. From the earliest days of media research this intellectual journey has contributed to a rich pool of empirical research, conceptual resources and insight that is permanently available, that offers potential points of departure, building blocks and links in the development of new research, theories and explanations.

The first principle advance in the study of media effects was the discovery of intervening variables – that is, extraneous factors that influence in some way the relationship between text and audience, and that thus work to 'mediate' the impact of the effect of the media. There are a great many intervening variables; of the most important, some pertain to the technology itself (e.g. the complexity of semiotic systems available – film is a more complex semiotic system, in this respect, than traditional print). Others pertain to prevailing social perceptions of certain kinds of text (e.g. that some newspapers or media are more 'authoritative' than others). Others pertain to the viewer (including ascribed characteristics of sex, age and ethnic identity, and achieved characteristics such as education, marital status and income). Some refer to the social and cultural context within which the encounter between text and reader occurs (e.g. the formality of context – at work or at home; the presence or absence of other people, the motive – to solve a problem, perhaps, or for relaxation).

In as much as 'effects studies', especially from their early years, acquired a bad image among 'critical' media researchers, it was because they tended to ask the 'wrong' questions, used inappropriate methods, and therefore solicited wrong or irrelevant answers. The limitations of the tradition relate principally to the following sets of problems. This is particularly true of the early years of **effects research**, when the tradition was dominant by psychologicistic approaches; as we shall see, this tradition has yielded more fruit as it has taken more account of sociological factors. In the points focused on below, I have drawn to some extent on the work of Gauntlett (1995) in identifying the major problems of the psychologicistic approach to media effects.

- *Problems of range.* The early media effects studies were generally psychologicistic. They focused on the effects of media on individuals at the expense of asking questions about the ways in which media impact on society as a whole, or on institutions, or on cultural practice. Thus an appreciation of 'effects' in this

tradition could scarcely deal with the case of the arrival of print and its general social, political and economic consequences for fourteenth-century Europe. Nor could it handle the impact of mass broadcasting on the organization of the political process in democracies. Nor did it have a research vocabulary that could examine the impact of media on the social organization of time. Furthermore, if we ignore questions at the levels of society, institution and culture, then we are even less likely to achieve satisfactory answers to questions we ask about the impact of media on the individual level.

- *Problems of linearity.* The underlying model of media effects studies has been transmissional, the assumption that some kind of message or impact travels through some kind of delivery system from the producer to the receiver. Yet precisely the opposite may occur. Viewer characteristics, reflecting political, social, religious and cultural identities, may determine how and when media are used, and for what kinds of content, thus influencing what producers produce, and the kinds of effect they will anticipate in their structuring of texts.
- *Problems of cause-effect.* The transmissional model is a causal model. It gives insufficient space to intervening variables, as we have seen, or to third-party causes that may account for both the media message and its alleged 'effect'. If a television documentary about starvation in Ethiopia provokes a massive response to charitable campaigns, is this a media effect? Or should we not say that a certain western ethic, nurtured in part by the influences of organized religions and charities, widespread perceptions of the history of colonialism, and facilitated by western economic prosperity, accounts for both the documentary and for the audience reaction to it? A media-centred analysis that looked only at properties of the documentary as a likely 'cause' would have poor predictive value.
- *Problems of methodology.* The principal kinds of method employed in classical effects; studies have included correlational studies of media content (e.g. television violence measured against social indicators such as criminal violence), natural experiments, laboratory studies, experimental field studies, longitudinal surveys. All of these are associated with difficulties of one kind or another. Laboratory studies have caused the most controversy, perhaps best exemplified by Bandura's (1973) invention of the 'bobo doll', an inflatable plastic doll, about 1 metre tall. This has been well critiqued by Gormley (1998), as follows. The research team showed experimental groups of young children a film of another person (the model) beating such a doll with a baseball bat. The children were then 'frustrated' by having their favourite toys removed, and left in a room with a bobo doll and bat similar to the one they had seen represented in the film. This research, Gormley notes, failed to take account of the difference between beating a doll with a baseball bat, on the one hand, and actual violence on the other: its conceptual model could not distinguish between 'violence' and 'play'. Those who had been shown the model being slapped, the research demonstrated, were less 'aggressive' subsequently. Yet those exposed to such 'punishment' were the only experimental groups to have witnessed actual violence portrayed on screen. Cumberbatch (1995) has observed that this kind of research does not



focus on what subjects think when they take part in laboratory experiments, nor does it engage in normal talk with children in a natural and humanistic way about their experiences of television.

- *Problems of definition.* Concepts such as ‘Violence’, ‘aggression’, ‘arousal’ (sometimes confused with aggression) and ‘frustration’, are elusive and require careful operationalization (i.e. the finding of physical indicators that are precisely reflective of concepts that have been precisely defined). Is representation of an actor striking a doll with a bat as violent, or violent in the same way, as representation of an actor being slapped? It is not so much a given kind of behaviour in a text that should be our focus, perhaps, as the significance that the text, through narrative and style, invites us to attribute to that behaviour. Are incidents of violence in a television crime genre necessarily more important or as important, for example, as other features of the text, such as strong camaraderie and teamwork between policemen, or retribution for wrong-doing? Texts typically represent socially positive as well as socially negative attributes, and to isolate only one kind of feature out of the overall textual context invites misinterpretation as to semantic significance. It has been suggested that entertainment output in general (i.e. not just violence) may cause frustration. Cumberbatch (1995) quotes Gadov and Sprafkin (1989) who observed that while aggressive film content often produces elevated levels of anti-social behaviour, the control (non-aggressive) material produces sometimes even greater amounts of aggressive behaviour. Even television programmes that are specifically produced with the aim of encouraging pro-social behaviour in children may actually encourage aggressive behaviour. These findings should not be taken to be conclusive – they certainly are not – but they indicate that researchers working in this tradition have often failed to ask the right questions; they have failed to ask questions that take account of the nuances of content (see below), viewer experience and context, or whose vocabulary of ‘effects’ is subtle enough to capture the nuances of behaviour and their social significance.
- *Problems of content.* In the effects tradition, the approach to content has typically been crude. There is little attention to the relative contributions of music, speech, natural sound, shading, camera movement, montage and so on to the way in which a text is experienced. Equally there is little attention to narrative structure and characterization.
- *Problems of research support.* This touches on the reasons why research gets carried out in the first place. In the field of effects, especially, research has been driven by groups with special agendas or interests. These include advertisers and political campaign managers, who want to demonstrate a predictive knowledge of ‘what works’. Broadcasters and filmmakers want to show politicians, advertisers and the public that what they do has no harmful impact on society or individuals. Certain consumer or citizen groups want to demonstrate that the media have strongly negative impacts on morality and behaviour.
- *Problems of focus.* The early field of media effects was captured by an absurdly limited research agenda, mainly to do with violence and advertising – especially in relation to young people – and political campaigns. A broader portfolio of issues over time has extended the list to sexual behaviour,

representations of women and ethnicity, etc.; but, overall, the range is still narrow. The emphasis has also been on the cognitive and behavioural, and less on the affective dimension, including pleasure.

- *Problems with models of personal identity and 'effect'*. There is an understandable modernist tendency to accept the integrity of the 'self'. This reduces our capacity to understand how the significance of media experiences may be negotiated between different identities of a single self. More fundamental, however, is the common presumption of a 'one-off' media effect, within the broader context of lifelong projects of meaning-making, and this presumption is a travesty of the dynamics of how human beings engage, intellectually and affectively, with their world.

At worst, therefore, the media effects tradition narrowed the field of media research to issues of effects on individuals. It asked an absurdly limited range of questions that touched on a tiny fraction of the range of possible effects (focusing mainly on issues of violence and political or commercial persuasion). It employed dubious methods, used concepts that were ill-defined, and demonstrated an equally ill-defined grasp of the key dynamics of the nature of the 'stimulus' (media content) that was thought to induce the supposedly observed effects.

Though it has deservedly suffered a bad press in the critical tradition of media theory, effects research has also on many occasions seemed to ask the right questions, or at least it has asked questions that by common consent have seemed to move the field forwards in important respects. This is particularly true where effects studies have incorporated sociological methods. To the media effects tradition, therefore, we should acknowledge the important contribution of the concept of 'intervening variable'. This, as we have seen, posits that any influence of media content on a given individual, group or institution is likely to be mediated by factors relating to consumer or reader characteristics and the whole context in which texts are consumed. The concept of 'two-step flow' (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) has also been fruitful even if the research on which the concept was first posited was problematic (Gitlin, 1978). This posits the likelihood that media and non-media communications are sometimes interrelated. One of the intervening variables of media influence of which account needs to be taken has to do with the personal information networks in which individuals are situated. Media influences may be conveyed indirectly through such networks, and networks also form part of the whole context in which media content is read or consumed. A related and fruitful line of enquiry (Rogers, 1955) explored the different rates of adoption of different innovations ('diffusion research'), and attributed these in part to the intervention of interpersonal networks. In the 'spiral of silence' theory, Noelle-Neuman (1974) argued that a propaganda message achieved greater power the more that its message was presented as something with which the majority of people were in agreement, thus raising the social cost to individuals who wished to express alternative views.

The concept of 'agenda setting' (McCombs, 1974) pointed to a new level of effect, relating less to what people think than to what they think about. It engaged researchers in a productive evaluation of the relative importance of the media themselves as origins of media messages, as against significant and powerful sources of information on which the media depend. Who sets the agenda, and what is

the agenda they set? Readers or consumers may resist the invitation to share a particular opinion or position on a subject, but if the agenda of information the media provide simply does not include certain issues or topics of which readers may have no direct experience, what does that say about the leverage the media hand to the powerful to determine currents of thoughts in society? 'Cultivation analysis' (Gerbner, 1973) focused on relationships between prevailing forms of representation of the world on television, and the beliefs and behaviours of people who are heavy consumers of television product. On the subject of media violence, cultivation theorists threw a cat among the pigeons when they suggested that the most likely consequence of media violence was not one of aggressive behaviour but one of fear. This line of research argued that media violence was a form of social control that favoured the interests of 'legalized violence', namely the forces of law and order. The 'uses and gratifications' school (McQuail, 1984) reversed the classic question of media effect from 'what effect do the media have on people' to 'how do people use the media' and thus helped to turn around or modify previous assumptions of linearity and cause – effect in thinking about media and audiences.

Uses and gratifications was one of several steps in media research towards defining the audience as having an active rather than a passive relationship with media (although the dichotomy between 'activity' and 'passivity' does not stand up to too much scrutiny). Empirical research did establish that viewers were conscious agents in choosing when and what to Watch, in the case of television, and that typically they were far from 'glued' to the set. Extending the notion of 'active reader', Hall introduced the concept of 'critical reader', identifying the major different ways in which viewers could react to political or social documentary, from acceptance of a programme's basic premise to outright rejection or indifference. Hall's (1980) contribution to cultural studies as a whole has been to set it against the crude economic reductionism of some of the early political economy work. He developed a theory of ideology which allows that texts are 'polysemic', which is to say that they offer the possibility of a diversity of readings, even if a 'preferred reading' is inscribed within the text by its producers. Through the work of Morley (1980; 1986), in particular, this crucial insight has been further explored to reveal the divergent meanings that different groups, whether defined in terms of social class, gender or ethnicity, could draw from texts.

At this juncture the study of media effects moved from the notion of critical individual reader to that of the 'ethnographic reader', which is to say the reader as representative of a social and cultural context who responds to media content through frames and categories of thought, language and social practice. This movement took audience research from the level of cognition, political opinions and ideas, to a far more inclusive level, commensurate not just with sentiments of feeling as well as thought, but of everyday behaviour. Moss (1995) turned her attention less to the what of the interpretation of media text, than to the how, the processes whereby people take meaning from texts. She proposed that people construct their meanings of media experiences in part through conversation with others.

Thus we see that the tradition of media effects has undergone a number of transformations, above all in the past two decades. These transformations may be

summarized ‘as movements away from ‘transmissional’ models of effect towards the study of media within contexts of the 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, their backgrounds and previous media experiences. Previous media experiences lead to ‘inter-textual’ readings – that is to say, readings that draw on previous exposure and memories of other texts and values.

The process of meaning-making therefore has increasingly been seen to be a cultural property, as Shirley Brice Heath (1983) observed in her study of print in the lives of children in three communities of South Carolina. Middle-class children, for example, were enveloped in a very special kind of experience through the ritual of the bedtime story, an experience that brought together parent and child in the context of reading a book, looking at its pictures, and talking about the story and about its pictures in a very special kind of way. The nature of the talk lost some of its conversational properties and turned into something that was itself more ‘bookish’ in its grammar and mode of address, anticipating no less the kinds of talk about books that these children would encounter in the school system. At the same time, however, the talk was more exploratory and inviting of imaginary worlds than was the case with the use of books in a working-class white community, where books were principally regarded as functional repositories of information. In the working-class black community, no special attention was given to children to help them decode literary texts; this was a community with a strong oral tradition that prized the skills of oral story-telling, and in which even private letters were read out, discussed and exclaimed upon. Through studies like this, therefore, we come to an understanding of ‘media effects’ also in relation not just to culture, but to the skills of literacy, as defined very broadly to refer to ‘the making of meaning from texts’. Heath (1983), Radway (1984), Morley (1980) and others have all helped us., understand the important interplay between roles, relationships, kinds of media content and literacy practices. Literacy practices include not only preferred ways of decoding texts, but ways of displaying and utilizing the texts. Where the television is, what it looks like, who turns it on and off, when it is turned on and off, all these things convey meanings about such things as identity, wealth, textual experience and preference, relationship and power.

### **The effects trajectory**

- Hypodermic needle
- Intervening variable
- Two-step flow
- Diffusion of innovations
- Spiral of silence
- Agenda setting
- Cultivation analysis
- Uses and gratifications
- Active reader
- Critical reader
- Ethnographic reader

*Cultural Studies*

Following the trajectory of media effects therefore, as it has moved from psychological through to sociological and social anthropological premises, we find we have moved well into cultural studies and the position within it of 'new audience research'. But cultural studies is much more than the study of meaning in relation to practices of consumption, reception and text. It is about meaning in and through the text itself. Throughout the time of the effects tradition, there developed a growing sophistication in our understanding of textual construction. In summarizing approaches to the question 'How are texts structured to make meaning possible?', Cook (1992) begins with the work of F.R. Leavis (1952), for whom there was 'great art' and the rest. Great art was either mimetic/realist (imitating life and experience), or pragmatic/legislative (art as moral exemplar), or expressive/creative (the work of special creators). The rest was merely mass-produced and of 'only sociological interest'. The Leavisite endorsement of the separation of high and low art in effect endorsed an art created largely by the wealthy for the wealthy. This separation of great art and the rest has been undermined by the growth of interest in popular culture – spearheaded by Hoggart (1957) and Williams (1960), among others – and the growing acceptance that both elitist and popular cultural forms are available for sociological and aesthetic analysis.

In film analysis, an important debate developed in the 1970s. On the one hand there were those for whom the presence of a 'special creator' (usually the director) was the key to great work – auteur theory – and who considered that judgements about art were judgements about life. On the other hand, there were others who were uncomfortable with the critic's Assertion of personal value judgements in assessments of film quality, and who looked for more systematic and transparent methodologies to determine the structures and mechanisms in any work that enable meanings. Arising from this second point of view there developed an interest in 'genre' studies that focused on the conventions of iconography, narrative and theme, and that clustered films into recognizably similar groups such as western or gangster movies. Interest grew in industry studies, which provided insight into how the conditions of production (financing, technology, distribution) influenced content.

Cook (1992) discusses debates around key concepts that in the interpretative tradition help to account for how texts are enabled to represent the world meaningfully to audiences. His narrative shows that in this tradition, too, there has been a discernible movement from a focus on the text itself to a focus on the reader and the act of reading. There is also a movement from a view of meaning as something immanent, or fixed within a text, to a view of meaning as residing in the psyche, in history or in culture. These debates he identified as follows.

- *Realism*. Realist narrative employs techniques that create an illusion of coherence and plausibility. Some critics, following Brecht, argued that illusion distracted audience attention from the artificiality of textual construction, and therefore called for anti-realist, self-reflexive texts, 'which would draw attention to their own constructedness and hence become resistant to easy identification with character, freeing the reader to reflect on the underlying

causes of, for example, a character's situation' (Cook, 1992: 158). Others contended that such devices were not necessary, that what mattered were reading strategies, not textual constructions. Lovell (1980) distinguished between realist intentions (properties of the text) and realist effects (properties of the reading).

- *Semiotics, 'the science of signs'*. This aims to explain how it is that signs work to convey meaning. Signs work denotatively as representations of specific things and actions, but they also acquire more profound levels of meaning through the accumulation of usage within a culture and the associations they thus acquire (i.e. when they begin to function connotatively) (Eco, 1973). Meaning only occurs in the act of audience decoding of the signs, and is dependent on readers' abilities to recognize what is being constructed.
- *Rhetorical devices*. These refer to ways in which a text is structured to create the illusion of a plausible and coherent visual world – for example, editing cuts are 'always motivated by the ongoing cause/effect chain of narrative' (Bordwell and Thompson, 1976). Barthes (1972) proposed that meanings are produced through five 'codes of intelligibility', which the reader recognizes. For example, the cultural code invokes common sense or social knowledge to enhance the plausibility of the narrative.
- *The reader*. If texts are structured in certain ways to cue certain kinds of meaning, then the 'success' of a text depends partly on the 'competence' of individuals to read texts, and such competence is not evenly distributed in any society. Unevenness of competence yields the possibility of multiple meanings, the possibility that some people may choose to read against the grain of the text (i.e. against a preferred meaning that has been inscribed by the producers).
- *Readings*. Some alternative or oppositional readings are in part inscribed in the text by the text's own inability to reconcile its internal contradictions, sometimes the inconsistencies of a dominant ideology, which prompt audience resistance to positions (towards characters, for example) with which they would otherwise feel invited to identify. Hall (1980), as we have already seen, distinguished between dominant, opposition, negotiated readings. Mulvey (1975) argued with specific reference to gender that, both through narrative and visual organization, film has rendered women as the passive and inferior objects of a 'male gaze', which it invites of male and female viewers alike. Cook (1992) distinguishes between three different kinds of reading: ideological (e.g. 'a feminist politics applied to an understanding of how films work produces rereadings', p. 163); cultural historical (these readings seek to connect the cultural artefact with the culture within which it was produced, and which is thought to be essential to a full interpretation of a text); and critical radical, which addresses the relationship between artefacts and national identity, in particular the heterogeneity of positions within national identity that takes account of divisions between classes, gender, regions, ethnicity and so on.

### *Political Economy*

In assessing the distinctive characteristics of the political economy tradition, Mosco (1995) has emphasized that it foregrounds:

- social change and historical transformation – current changes are seen within much longer-term frameworks
- the ‘totality of social relations’, in particular taking into account the inter-relationships between politics, economics and ideology
- a commitment to moral philosophy – that is to say, to the values that help to create social behaviour and the moral principles that ought to guide it; various authors in this tradition have addressed values of self-interest, materialism and individual freedom, the acknowledgement of individual and social value in human labour, the extension of democracy to all aspects of social life
- social praxis – the unity of thinking and doing.

### **The principal characteristics of political economy**

- Analysis of media in historical, social and political context
- Addresses media relations to politics, economics and ideology
- Has a moral purpose
- Its end point is social action

The epistemology (or way of knowing) of political economy Mosco argues, is *realist*, in that it accepts as real both discourses and social practices. It is *inclusive*, in that it explains the present with respect to historical trends and broader social formations. It is *moral*, in that it is interested in moral issues. It is *constitutive*, in that it rejects economic explanations as sufficient for understanding. It is *critical*, both because it is interested in possibilities for improvement, but also because it recognizes and negotiates tensions between different intellectual positions.

In its approach to media, Mosco’s political economy focuses on processes as much as on structures, as the following points demonstrate.

- *The processes of commodification* involves the transformation of measuring value in terms of use, to measuring value in terms of exchange on the market. Communication practices contribute to the commodification of all goods and services (e.g. by ceding greater control to producers over the entire process of production, distribution and exchange). Commodification, as a response to global declines in economic growth in the 1970s, also affected the media, leading to increased commercialization of programming, privatization of public media, and liberalization of communication markets. This has implications for the commodification of the consumer, whose time spent viewing or reading is sold by media institutions to advertisers.
- *The process of spatialization* refers to the process of overcoming the constraints of space and time in social life. Communications contribute to capitalism by reducing the time it takes to move goods, people and messages over space. They expand the resources of time and space that are available for those who can make use of them; and they contribute to the redrawing of the space of flows according to boundaries established by flows of people, goods, services and messages. Within the media industries themselves, the transformation of space is structured by global horizontal and vertical integration strategies, and by patterns of both globalization and localization in the origination and distribution of media products.

- *The process of structuralization* reminds us of the Marxist dialectic that people ‘make history but not under conditions of their own making. This introduces into political economic analysis ideas of agency, social process and social practice. This includes the relationship between class and labour, gender and race, and the construction of hegemony, defined as ‘what comes to be incorporated and contested as the taken-for-granted, common sense, natural way of thinking about the world’ (Mosco, 1995: 160).

Both political economy and cultural studies are concerned with power in society, and regard power as something that is distributed very unevenly. In contrast with political economy, cultural studies, says Mosco, has been open to a more radical contestation of positivism, it has foregrounded the subjective and social creation of knowledge. It has demonstrated that culture is an activity in which all human beings are engaged, not just a privileged elite (hence Williams’ notion of culture ‘as a whole way of life’). In addition, it has gone further beyond issues of social class to embrace issues relating to gender, race and other social divisions. While it recognizes the importance of power, power is not the ‘only game in town’ for modern cultural studies, which has a broad agenda of issues and topics that contribute to, its basic mission of elucidating the many dimensions of human expression in society. Political economy’s strengths have been its firm hold on a realist epistemology, the value that it attributes to historical research, a mode of thinking in terms of concrete social totalities, a moral commitment and the goal of unification of thought with practice. Its moral commitment may be a problem, because it seems to lower resistance to at least some sources of ideology; proponents of political economy will argue that they offer transparency of value where classical scientific method obscures sources of ideological bias. In its favour, political economy has maintained a strong interest in the role of labour in media research. Cultural studies is particularly strong in the determination of what it is about texts that renders them capable of being meaningful, and of the strategies that real-life readers deploy to take meaning from texts. Political economy is strongest in its determination of the industrial production of culture and, therefore, the production and distribution of meaning.

### Conclusion

Having got this far, the reader will not be surprised by the assertion that no introduction to media theory is a neutral or pure narrative. This section is no exception. It is intended to provide a reasonably comprehensive overview of the major different approaches and theories of the field. But within any given area on which this section touches there is a great deal more material and complexity that can only be appreciated via a more thorough search of the literature pertaining to particular theories, issues and topics. This section is inevitably selective. The reader need not feel that it should be digested completely in a single sitting or indeed in any particular period. It is something to turn back to from time to time, particularly upon completion of other sections in this volume that will help place some of the content of this section in a broader context. Above all,



this section should be followed up by further reading, reading that is hopefully structured by a sense of the reader's own research priorities. Remember that all good theory, like life itself, is in a constant state of development.

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