

Reopening the Black Box:
Toward a Limited Effects Theory

by Herbert J. Gans

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Columbia Institute for Tele-Information
Graduate School of Business
809 Uris Hall
New York, NY 10027
(212)854-4222

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The question of media effects is truly "the perennial black box of communications research," as the call for papers for this *Journal* issue puts it. Social life being multicausal, sorting out the causes of any event can only be approximate—and the effects of a large set of diverse institutions like the mass media even more so. As a result, the effects question also remains a virtually automatic source of intellectual vitality. Since no final answer can probably ever be achieved, the continuation of effects studies will assure the continued "fragmentation" of media research, thus preventing the development of a gangrenous consensus that kills off new ideas.

The effects question is also of major public importance, for people want to know whether the media on which they depend for information and entertainment have good or bad effects—on them, their children, and on America in general. Consequently, the social usefulness of media researchers is measured in part by the extent to which they try to answer such questions.

This is all to the good, for researchers who are not socially useful to the general public from time to time risk not being supported by governments, foundations, or commercial firms. If the researchers are academics, their books will not sell as well, their courses will not attract as many students, and their universities will then be more reluctant to allocate resources to them.

The interests of the general public create yet other intellectual reasons for reviving the study of media effects. In the absence of such study the public looks for other, generally less satisfactory, ways of answering such questions. For example, after the early years of effects research, when the so-called hypodermic or strong effects model was replaced by the limited effects model, and then by frustration when empirical studies did not produce significant effects of media exposure and usage, essayists serving the general public found answers elsewhere.

Many such essayists proposed what I think of as an *automatic effects*

Herbert J. Gans is the Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at Columbia University. Some ideas in this article come from unpublished papers written when he was a senior fellow at the Gannett (now the Freedom Forum) Media Studies Center, Columbia University.

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theory, which argues that the media *must have* effects simply because they are all around us all of the time. Politically conservative writers resuscitated the strong effects model in order to attack what they perceived as overly liberal news and entertainment media that were out of sync with the allegedly conservative values of the general audience. Left critics attacked the media from a reverse but otherwise not very different perspective.

All of these analyses view the media as more influential than they really are. The believers in automatic effects imply that the media possess magic power. Critics from the Right and Left assume that the media so brain-wash both the elite and the masses as to regularly bring about vast social, economic, or political changes. However, these approaches are not only wrong, but they raise false expectations about what the media can do—and meanwhile also blind people to the real holders of power. Conversely, blaming the media for consequences they have not caused turns them into scapegoats, which diverts attention from the real villains, if such exist, and “chills” people who work in the media. Consequently, increased research on the effects question would also help to produce a more thoughtful assessment of the influence of various media in American society.

Limiting Factors on Media Effects

The rest of this article discusses some of what ought to go into a more thoughtful assessment. It identifies and raises research questions about agents and structures that limit the potential effects of the mass media on the behavior and attitudes of people, and on the actions of institutions. I discuss eight limiting factors which seem to me the most important.

1. *When and how do media have what we call effects.* One still not fully resolved issue is the determination of when effects have actually taken place. Some researchers and lay writers equate effects with correlation, but correlations are not, and do not prove, causes. Simulated violence has long been popular on entertainment television (and in the older electronic mass media) but America's high rates of violence have other causes. Violent television could even itself be an effect of these other causes—even while concurrently acting in a cathartic fashion to help keep down actual violence.

Whether significant effects can even take place also needs further consideration. Much media content goes in one eye or ear and out the other, at least judging by how well people remember commercials or the names of high federal officials. There is no evidence of visible behavior change in the nation's courts on the day after “L.A. Law” is on television. Besides, courts and judges can and do enforce rules that suppress television role models. Even young children know where reality ends and entertainment begins, so that only the very gullible and pathological allow the former to affect them significantly. Otherwise, many among the millions of Ameri-

can and especially foreign youngsters raised on U.S. western and detective fare would have looked for weapons to kill local villains.

Perhaps there are covert long-term effects of the media, but if so, no researcher has yet glimpsed them. To be sure, life is different than before the mass media were invented, but so much else has changed that tracing what the media have caused would be difficult. Some observers believe they are amusing us to death, but in actual fact we do not even know who is amused by the television sitcoms.

Finally, most media effects are probably partial. For example, television is often said to have helped the civil rights movement win major political victories in the 1960s, but that help was also shaped by movement leaders' awareness of how the already existing popular support for the movement might be increased further by marches and demonstrations that television could show. Even so, the medium's effect would have been far less had Southern sheriffs not felt they could attack black marchers with dogs and cattle prods even while the TV cameras were rolling. Whether this reflected Southern white overconfidence, intransigence, or ignorance of television's political power is still not clear.

2. *"The media" is a buzzword, not a cause of effects.* If effects are to be studied seriously, they must be connected with, and traced to, overt and covert elements of *content, symbols, characters, etc.*, in *formats, genres, etc.* transmitted by *specific* mass media as experienced by actual viewers with different perspectives and predispositions. Even the distinction between news and entertainment media is dubious, for what television producers construct as entertainment may be treated as informative by some parts of the audience. Tabloid TV's "infotainment" may in fact be neither. Perhaps much of the audience views it as morality plays about the violation of traditional familial and other social norms.

3. *Effects are limited by the intentions of the audience.* Intended effects are often the satisfaction of conscious wants, vaguely felt predispositions, or the workings of "selective perception," by which people tune out much, if not all, undesired content—and perhaps potential effects. Indeed, the common sense definition of media effects is largely limited to unintended ones.

Furthermore, such effects often go into operation only when they connect to social conditions external to the media. Television or movie "action" appears to evoke stronger effects among poor youngsters than more fortunate ones, just as cocaine seems to be far more addictive among very poor people than among middle-class users. Presumably, the emotional vulnerability that leads to addiction, to drugs, television, or violence is an effect of poverty itself.

Also, media research must leave more room for noneffects, when people "tune out" commercials, for goods and politicians, or if they treat routine sitcoms and their characters as surrogate or vicarious company. These, like regularly visiting friends or relatives, may have no visible effects at all.

ceptible. (Equally faulty is the assumption that modern society would be very different without modern news media, as if the latter were not part and parcel of what makes society modern.)

In any case, most people judge the economy, including levels of unemployment, by how they, their relatives, and friends are faring. And when the media do play a role, we still need to discover how much effect belongs to the messages and how much to the way the messengers package the messages, and which they omit.

6. *Another limit on news effects is that news organizations are messengers for their major sources.* Journalists get most of their news from regular sources which, as study after study has shown, are usually speaking for political, economic, and other establishments. As a result, political news is not so much about politics as about what elected and appointed officials want to communicate about politics: the political performance they want to put on for their constituencies, and the political effects they would like to have on them. This is especially true when investigative reporting—or even time for normal legwork—is scarce, and conflicts within establishments are hidden or minimal enough to prevent journalists from finding regular and authoritative sources on several sides.

7. *Effects are limited further by the vast amount of news and the sparse amount of social change.* If news audiences had to respond to all the news to which they are exposed, they would not have time to live their own lives. In fact, people screen out many things, including the news, that could interfere with their own lives.

In addition, we know that most people do not make drastic changes in their lives unless they are exposed to unusual incentives or intense economic or social pressures that force them to change their ways involuntarily. Moreover, giant media firms, private or public, are almost always cowardly in the face of controversy—including support of change—for fear of alienating audiences. For example, sexual “liberation” came to network television characters and content long after it had arrived in the real world—and then in part because network television was trying desperately to survive against competition from already liberated movies, cable programming, and cassettes. Agenda-setting theory notwithstanding, sexually liberated viewers have indirectly affected network television, not the other way around.

8. *The mass media may have greater effects on institutions than on individuals.* Some of the limits on media effects may be relaxed in the cases of large and seemingly powerful institutions, especially when they run scared about the loyalty of their audiences, customers, and constituencies. Thus, the political parties have altered themselves comprehensively because of television, and precisely because they had lost most of their old constituencies. In fact, political parties now exist mainly to raise money for television commercials, and to hold annual conventions on which they can advertise themselves and their candidates on the small screen.

The Pentagon ran so scared after the news coverage of Vietnam that it virtually took over the news coverage of the Grenada, Panama, and Gulf wars—an impressive, if unappreciated, compliment to the effects it ascribed to uncensored television news. Institutions, especially large ones, seemingly move quickly to alter their ways if they feel that they must protect themselves against threats.

Effects of Researcher Ignorance

A very different factor influencing research on media effects is the continued ignorance of researchers about how people use, and live with, the mass media. Because media organizations are few and often accessible to researchers, we know a good deal about the production of news and entertainment content, and there are some quantitative and laboratory data about the audience. In recent years, social and cultural historians have also analyzed archival data to assess the long-range effects of major television genres, and important running news stories such as Watergate and Vietnam.

But researchers still know almost nothing about the processes by which people choose what to consume in the various media; how they consume it, with what levels of comprehension, attention, and intensity of affect; what, if anything, they talk about while using the media at home; whether and how their uses of various media connect to other aspects of their lives—and which; and what kinds of traces, if any, these media leave in their psyches and lives, and for how long.

Because media researchers make a living from the media, they pay close attention to them, and probably closer and more intensive attention than anyone, including perhaps even many of the people involved in the creation of media content. As a result, media researchers may also be more affected by the media than anyone else, and it is possible that they project that effect on the “normal” consumers of media content. In some respects, this projection is all to the good, for it has stimulated researchers' imagination about the varieties of possible effects of the media on people and institutions. However, their projection could also have overstimulated their imagination, insofar as they may have overestimated the nature and extent of the roles that the media play in people's lives. Whether this is so can only be tested by studying how people use, and live, with various media.

This means getting close to the media audience—and nonaudience. One method is depth interviewers talking with people. Better still would be ethnographic community researchers who are able to be with people as they use—and ignore—the available media, and talk with them about these media, especially in relation to the other institutions that affect their work, family, and community lives.

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can report what analysts see in the content, and sample surveys, focus groups, and laboratory experiments can result in neat, bounded answers, these all maintain some distance from people and from the lived world of media use. Until researchers enter and understand that world sufficiently, and provide a bedrock of interview and ethnographic findings, media researchers cannot judge the validity and reliability of the more distanced methods. Nor can they begin to develop a proper assessment of the true effects of the media.