
The effective media

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We are dubious of the arguments which have been advanced to suggest that television has no effect on viewers' behaviour. Many of the points that have been made could be applied with an equal lack of validity to any element of the socialisation process – for example the influence of peer groups or parents on behaviour. If we applied the arguments on TV influence to the relationship between parents and children they would look something like this:

Despite the widespread view that parents do influence how their children grow up, a number of theoretical problems have been raised with this crude 'effects' approach, in what is obviously a very complex and highly mediated area. Research results have been inconclusive. In laboratory conditions many children were observed to be given instructions by their parents and then not to do as they were told. In other tests, children were asked if they always obeyed their parents and replied, 'No way man' and, 'You must be joking'. It was therefore concluded that children were 'rejecting' and 'negotiating' parental messages. Some commentators have gone further, arguing that the manner in which children are brought up has 'no effect' on the subsequent growth and development of the child. Indeed, they assert that the whole 'effects' debate may have been wrongly constituted. It seems likely that children only 'agree' with parents in those areas to which they are already pre-disposed. Thus parental 'effects' can be seen merely as the reinforcement of existing systems of beliefs and attitudes. Theorists were also concerned that the popular obsession with parenting and its influence derives from a general propensity to look back to a mythical golden age when children obeyed their parents without question. Such dwelling on a mythical past is part of the powerful ideological package assembled by the New Right in its attempt to 'blame parents' for wider social ills. Parents thus become one more in a long line of scapegoats such as the theatre or horror comics which have been blamed for alleged increases in violence, crime or the corruption of youth. The moral panic around parenting is a mask for the reactionary social fears of moral campaigners. We might therefore conclude that, despite an

enormous research effort, no link between so-called parent socialisation effects and the subsequent behaviour of children can be found.

We can see that when the 'anti-effects' arguments are applied to other areas of social life, they look extremely dubious. The inadequacy of laboratory experiments, or the fact that politicians have their own agendas, says nothing of itself about the nature of the socialisation process or the specific influence of either parents or media. It is easy to be critical of crude laboratory tests which provide a simple stimulus and then attempt to measure changes in behaviour. But it is clear that the socialisation of children by parents develops at a much deeper level than simple commands about what children must do. Children can absorb patterns of behaviour, potential responses to situations, a sense of what is funny and what is fearful, and are often not aware of having done so. This may be true of how they relate to television as a socialising influence, but it is an issue which needs to be researched in its own right.

Both parents and media have been used in political polemics as scapegoats for wider social problems. But this of itself says nothing of the actual influence of media or parents in the development of different types of behaviour. To argue that the media are being scapegoated, or that all media (including theatre and comics) suffer this treatment, is simply a diversion from the central issue of understanding the nature of any impact which they might have. Yet the 'scapegoat' argument is put forward quite frequently as if it proves something about the non-existence of media influence. Robert Potts, writing in *The Guardian*, repeats the familiar arguments:

The fact is that, once again, film and video are becoming the scapegoats for the horrors which they only represent. There have been countless examples of such reactions; and the history of such examples effectively gives the lie to the idea that a new popular medium poses a unique threat to society suddenly poisoned. Theatre, cheap paperbacks, music hall, rock and roll music, punk, horror comics, and the cinema have all, in their turn provoked fears of the corruption of youth and the disintegration of public order, until a new medium claimed the attention. (22 March 1996)

It is strange that a journalist attempting to convince his readers should write about the media's lack of influence. In our view, the media are powerful channels for the development of new ideas and potential behaviour. There are many examples in which 'the authorities' have been quite correct, in their terms, to see that new media were calling for the 'disintegration of public order'. The radical press in nineteenth century Britain was profoundly revolutionary as far as the authorities were concerned, which is why they attempted to proscribe it. Does anyone imagine that the plays of Brecht or, for that matter, Dennis Potter are intended to be anything other than subversive? From the point of view of the powerful, new ideas *are* dangerous and new or old media can certainly develop them.

Problems of empiricist research

It is clear that some laboratory experiments and other straightforward stimulus/response researches are seriously inadequate. Limitations of such approaches are well known and are rehearsed extensively in the literature (e.g. Barker and Pelley 1997). Briefly, we can note that such models attempt to measure human behaviour as if it were a chemical or biological process. Attempts are made to analyse media content by means of static and *a priori* categories which relate to the degree of graphic or explicit portrayal of 'violence'. Few attempts are made to examine the meaning systems surrounding portrayals of violence, such as whether it is portrayed as 'legitimate' or 'enjoyable'; nor are they able to deal with questions of fantasy in fictional formats. Such research, which emerges out of positivist social science, is unable to study the processes of sense-making which inevitably occur between the media and their audiences. Perhaps, most importantly, such accounts tend to be entirely innocent of the concept of 'culture' in which representations circulate, and audiences understand and interpret meaning.

Ironically, much of the research which concludes that there are no (or limited) 'effects' depends on similarly limited positivist methodology. Much of this comes from social psychology and, as Willard Rowland shows, has been associated with the broadcaster's in-house audience research departments (Rowland, 1983: 293-4). Limited effects were of course conducive to the legitimisation of the television business:

Whenever public and congressional concerns about possible deleterious effects, especially in the area of violence, reached critical levels, the work of the social research offices could be trotted out. As a result the industry could make claims about maintaining a serious commitment to basic communication research, reassuring the public by trafficking in the popular, authoritative system of the scientific age and thereby diffusing that part of the criticism holding that it neither cared about nor investigated its impact. (Rowland, 1983: 295)

The critical response

The major problem for alternatives to such research has been the very lack of critical work in this area. Sociologists have tended to leave the field to the psychologists and behaviourists, whether of the strong or weak effects approaches (Tulloch and Tulloch, 1992: 183-4). Questions of television and violence have been ignored, played down and regarded with weary disdain (Murdock and McCron, 1979: 53). Part of the reason for this is the rise of theories of the 'active audience' which has pushed 'questions of influence almost entirely off the agenda' (Corner *et al.*, 1990: 108). Reception

theory has tended to emphasise the ability of media audiences to interpret what they see and to bring their own experience and critical faculties to media texts. However, these have often been emphasised at the expense of questions of influence or effects, which have become objects of derision in some quarters. 'Active' audience theory inhibits the investigation of the role of the media in forming and changing people, societies, cultures and governments. Even critical theorists have tended to go along with the argument about audience 'activity' when discussing violence. This is odd since in different areas their work depends on assumptions (and explicit statements) about media power and the reproduction of ideologies.

The advertising analogy

The reluctance to acknowledge any media effects in this area pushes otherwise critical authors into inadequate arguments about media power. One recurring theme is a counter-argument against the advertising analogy:

It is commonly argued that 'the media must have effects, or advertisers would not spend so much money on advertising products'. Sadly, this is a desperately bad argument – not because it is necessarily untrue, but because it makes the absurd assumption that there is only one kind of 'effect' that a programme, or an advertisement, can have. With advertisements, for example, we know that among their most likely 'effects' are to make consumers *aware* of the product, to make them feel that if they *belong* to a certain group then this product might be part of their lives, and to make them *make associations* between the product and other things which they value, or aspire to. There is nothing as simple as 'causing people to go out and buy'. If we therefore relate that to 'violent films', it becomes quite clear that this is no argument at all for seeing films as 'causing violence'. We would have to fail any student who could not see the crude fallacies in that argument! (Barker, Cumberbatch and Petley, 1994)

Luckily for us we are not students of the authors, or we too would have our assignments failed. We cannot see the crude fallacies here, nor are we able to avoid the conclusion that the authors really do think that advertisements have 'effects' or 'consequences'. For example if consumers are made aware, to feel that they belong, and to make associations with a product, these are already consequences of advertising. If they then go out and buy the product, as many of us in fact do, something further is added. Let us call this a consequence of the advertisement if necessary, but the key point is that once we acknowledge the intervening process of meaning and interpretation, it is still the case that some people (all of us at some time?) buy advertised products as a result (an effect?) of the advertisement.

Reception theorists emphasise the centrality of meaning in the production and circulation of beliefs and ideologies, and maintain that meaning depends

on interpretation. But this says nothing about the possibility or existence of effects (Corner, 1995: 156). Languages are systems of meaning, yet it would be a foolish analyst who concluded that, because interpretation is necessary, the use of language has no effects. Whether we think about this in terms of orders being issued and followed, or in terms of identification and positive evaluations of role models, it is clear that 'language' has consequences on belief and behaviour.

It is also argued that people are able to easily distinguish between factual and fictional media. This is supposed to show that fictional representations could not influence perceptions and behaviour. Such approaches are also connected with arguments about fantasy and reality, as if fantasies of power and control (or victimisation and subordination) had no place in 'real' events and actions. But the ability to recognise that fantasies are not the same as reality in no way invalidates questions about processes of influence, or that fictional models might extend what people believe could be possible in practice.

Furthermore, it is argued, such fantasies or 'pleasures' are intrinsically or usually a positive feature of imaginary worlds in which problems can be solved and resentments and aggression dissipated. In relation to children, this type of argument is often predicated on notions of 'play' as an inherently positive, creative and assimilative form of learning. Stephen Kline, in his study of toy marketing, argues that if this ever was the case, it is now no longer so:

play activities exhibited with contemporary toys reveal evidence of imitative learning in which children accommodate their mental schema to prevailing attitudes and norms in society. Two aspects of toy marketing seem to stress these imitative aspects of pretend. The first is the narrow scripting of the associated television animations to elicit carefully targeted play values. The second is the way most toy advertisements model repeatedly a style of play which replicates the television scripts in the depiction of children's play behaviour. (Kline, 1993: 329)

Furthermore, as Ros Coward has argued in relation to children's programming (and especially in programming associated with advertising toys), weapons and power establish key elements of masculine identity:

violence and owning weapons is seen as a vital part of masculine identity. . . Films and TV programmes currently directed at boys teach about power. Power in these fantasies is to be different from girls; power is the possibility of annihilating opposition and frustration; the means to that power is through guns and the military. For feminists the whole question of the relationship between fantasy and reality has always been a . . . pressing political question. . . Women feel that many aspects of the cruel and unfair treatment which they receive at the hands of men is precisely because, in interpersonal relationships, men live out socially approved fantasies of what women are and what women want. (Coward, 1987: 26)

Hidden agendas

There is an apparent anomaly in that critical theorists study the media because they think that they are powerful, but won't say so when discussing violence. The reason is that the debate about effects is seen as a cover for a reactionary political agenda. Those who advance arguments for media effects are assumed to be doing so for undisclosed ulterior motives on censorship:

Again and again it has been shown that attacks on the 'influence of the media' act as masks for other kinds of social concern. . . . It must be a matter for serious concern that much that calls itself 'research' has been distorted by an inability to see beyond the vague categories and embodied fears of moral campaigners. (Barker *et al.*, 1994)

The tendency is thus to displace the argument onto the terrain of censorship. Here, as Ros Coward has noted, the Left has tended to ally itself with liberals and libertarians in an anti-censorship position, while critics of that position are caricatured as 'moral' campaigners (Coward, 1987). Yet addressing the question of the influence of the media is separate from decisions about regulation and censorship, and cannot sensibly be diverted on to such normative questions.

As a consequence of this diversion, no coherent alternative is advanced about the relationship between social institutions, the media, the public and *outcomes*. In response to the Newson report (Newson, 1994), Martin Barker argued explicitly for an alliance based on a negative position:

We are aware that inevitably, and rightly, there will be differences and areas for debate among many of us about precisely how to frame our own positive positions. That is why it seems right, in the first instance, to take up an essentially negative position [emphasis in original].¹

Amongst the negative arguments are critiques of political agendas and framing of debates on violence. The key areas here have been the theories of 'respectable fears' and the 'moral panic'.

The Moral Panic and the history of 'respectable fears'

Key texts in the evolution of this approach are Stan Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972) and Geoff Pearson's *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (1983). However, both of these classic texts have been rather overplayed in the development of defences against censorship and, moreover, are themselves limited in their explanatory power. Pearson's *Hooligan* is a key text in the deconstruction of the 'law and order myth'. It exposes:

the myth of the 'British way of life' according to which, after centuries of domestic peace, the streets of Britain have been suddenly plunged into an unnatural state of disorder that betrays the stable traditions of the past. What

I hope to show, by contrast, is that the real traditions are quite different: that for generations Britain has been plagued by the same fears and problems as today. (Pearson, 1983: ix)

As Pearson carefully notes 'I should say at once that I am not trying to promote a "flat earth" version of history according to which nothing ever changes: social circumstances do change, undeniably' (1983: 207). Also, Pearson does valuably point out the regularities and absurdities of some media and public debate on violence in society, in particular in the peculiar historical forgetting of the intimate part which violence has played in British history, both in the sense of 'law and order' so well described in *Hooligan* and in the sense of the imperialist violence upon which British status and power were built. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to suggest that the past is *always* viewed with a rosy tint. As Pearson concludes:

Without a shadow of doubt, each era has been sure of the truthfulness of its claim that things were getting steadily worse, and equally confident in the tranquillity of the past – although, significantly, there have always been those who questioned whether the problem had enlarged in the public mind. Each era has also understood itself as standing at a point of radical discontinuity with the past. But when we reconnect these bursts of discontent into a continuing history of deterioration, must not the credibility snap – unless, that is, we judge ourselves to be in a worse condition than the poor, brutalised human beings who suffered the worst effects of the Industrial Revolution? (Pearson, 1983: 210)

This is suggestive, but untrue. We do not always 'look back' to a mythical past which is better or more orderly than our own is presumed to be. For example, at the end of the nineteenth century British society was widely seen to be calmer and more settled than during the earlier periods of industrialisation. Thus, HCG Matthew writes of a 'great change in manners':

Though political rioting did not altogether disappear, it became infrequent enough to encourage widespread comment. Crime on the mainland, both in the form of theft and of acts of violence, declined absolutely as well as relatively – an extra-ordinary development in a rapidly expanding population, firmly contradicting the adage that industrialisation and urbanisation necessarily lead to higher rates of criminality. The Criminal Registrar noted in 1901 that, since the 1840s, 'we have witnessed a great change in manners: the substitution of words without blows for blows with or without words; an approximation in the manners of different classes; a decline in the spirit of lawlessness'. (1992: 32–3)

Furthermore, the judgement about whether we perceive ourselves to be in a worse condition than the 'brutalised' human beings of the industrial revolution is of a quite different order than a judgement or analysis of the prevalence of interpersonal violence.²

It is clear that there are differences and similarities between the 1890s and the 1990s. But the 'mythical past' argument is not in itself evidence that the level and type of violence and the extent of social disintegration in

contemporary society has not changed in the last twenty years. In the end the incidence of murder, child murder, assault or rape is an empirical question. Certainly many people, including academics, perceive a difference in their own personal vulnerability to violence over the course of the past 15 years. Stuart Hall is reported as saying that, 'There can be little doubt that the character and pattern of violence has changed. Most people, including myself, now feel personally more vulnerable than they did in the more recent past' (cited in Coward, 1993). Part of the reason for this, according to Hall, is that social conditions for most of us have declined under successive Conservative administrations.

For Hall, such changes are not simply at the level of the material but also at the level of culture and representation: 'There have been 15 years when there's been no way – verbally or in practice – of representing how we are connected to each other as a community. And when social bonds fray, they go first among men. Men do not have the same stake in the community which women's role in the family gives them.' We do not have to endorse all of what Hall says here to recognise the intimate way in which the production and circulation of representation and imagery is intimately bound up with material factors in the reproduction and transformation of cultures. However, the mythical past model puts such sentiments perilously close to the outpourings of 'respectable fears'.

What is left of the anti-effects argument is that levels of violence and crime are exaggerated in public debate (i.e. in the media), usually in order to further the ends of the powerful. The concept of the moral panic is regularly used as a shorthand to dismiss fears about links between the media and violence.

The moral panic is a mechanism by which inegalitarian societies reinforce social control in reaction to perceived threats to societal order. According to its originator, Cohen, the moral panic occurs when:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests: its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to. (Cohen, 1972: 328)

Such a model assumes a functional relationship between the priorities of moral campaigners, the state,³ media coverage, public opinion and decision-making in society. It is an instrumental model which, in the debate on violence, assumes the following states of affairs (with each causally linked to the next): (1) a unity of interest, or at least tacit alliance, between moral campaigners and the state; (2) that this coalition is successful in placing the issue on the public agenda; (3) that media coverage exaggerates the problem; (4) that the public are misled and that as a result reactionary social change is legitimated.

We are not suggesting that such a causal chain could never operate, but it seems clear that it has not done so in relation to recent 'panics' on media violence. Most obviously, such a model finds it difficult to explain one of these states of affairs (for example, sensational media coverage) without another, or the fact that sensational media coverage (often the only evidence used to identify a panic) may not have the anticipated effect. The tight and linear causal chain between these events is, we contend, an artefact of the method used to study panics by both Cohen and, later, Hall and his colleagues (Hall *et al.*, 1978). The analysis of press coverage is not a sufficient basis from which to extrapolate the actions of the 'control culture', public belief or decision-making. Most importantly, the use of the moral panic to dismiss concerns about media effects is contradictory, since the concept assumes that the media have straightforward and direct effects on public opinion⁴ and decision-making. In this case we are expected to believe that the media have no effect upon children, but have a major effect on their parents.

What is the relationship between media content, socialisation, public belief and societal change?

People in society really do change, according to a variety of influences. It seems strange to us that the potential impact of media on behaviour in contemporary society is dismissed by some in such an off-hand fashion. Our own research suggests that film and television do have powerful influences on audiences. There are a number of specific findings from this work which we can point to:

The information environment

Media information can strongly influence perceptions about events and actions in the world, and questions of causation and blame. A study of beliefs about the 1984/5 miners strike showed that no-one who had actually been at a picket line (either police or pickets) believed that picketing was mostly violent (Philo, 1990). Yet, in a general sample of audience groups, 54 per cent believed that picketing was mostly violent and overwhelmingly cited the media, especially television, as the source of their beliefs. Some of these audience group members could accurately reproduce the language of news headlines over a year after they had seen them. The news headlines had suggested that a 'drift back to work' by miners was followed by an 'escalation of violence' on the picket lines. When members of the audience groups were asked to write their own news stories, the same words were used involving the same assumptions about the supposed escalation in violence and its causes. The impact of this was to reduce potential support for those on strike, and in some cases to weaken the existing sympathies which had been held towards the miners.

Similarly, in a study of the Northern Ireland conflict (Miller, 1994a, 1994b, 1997), many British participants were shown to believe wholly false information about the killing of three members of the IRA in Gibraltar in March 1988. In particular, some respondents believed that the IRA members had been armed, had planted a bomb and had made suspicious movements when challenged. In addition, the allegation that a central witness was, or was possibly, a prostitute was believed by around 45 per cent of the sample. All of these details were false, but had been supplied by the media and government sources.

However, it is also the case that media information can raise awareness of problems which had previously not been thought of as important. For example, in relation to AIDS the overwhelming emphasis in media coverage has been on the official line that heterosexuals were at serious risk from HIV. There were challenges to this view in the scientific community and in sections of the media, yet the public was overwhelmingly convinced of the official view (Miller *et al.*, 1998).

Personal fears and risk assessments

Judgements on factual information also influence assessments of personal risk or safety. In the work on Northern Ireland, it was found that a large proportion of respondents from Britain (42%) were unwilling to visit the province. Almost all of them said this was because they were afraid of the threat of violence. The clearest reason for this was news reporting of the conflict. As one respondent said 'because of what I hear on TV I believe it to be very violent' (Miller, 1994b: 243).

Fictional media accounts can also structure and shape perceptions and beliefs, and may in some cases be a more powerful influence than factual accounts. In research on the media and public beliefs about mental illness, both factual and fictional media representations were key sources of popular understanding (Philo, 1996). Beliefs about schizophrenia, for example, were related by audience group members directly to fictional characters such as Trevor Jordache from the soap opera *Brookside*. As one audience group member commented:

A lot of things you read in the papers and they've been diagnosed as being schizophrenic. These murderers – say Denis Nilson, was he no schizophrenic? – The Yorkshire Ripper . . . In *Brookside* that man who is the child abuser and the wife beater – he looks like a schizophrenic – he's like a split personality, like two different people. (cited in Philo, 1996)

It is in fact very untypical for people who are mentally distressed to be violent. This contrasts sharply with media representations of mental illness. A key finding of our study was that the level of fear generated by media accounts was such that they could overwhelm direct experience in the formation of beliefs. An interesting illustration was given by a young woman who lived near a psychiatric hospital. She had worked there at a jumble sale and

mixed with patients. Yet she associated mental illness with violence and commented:

The actual people I met weren't violent – that I think they are violent, that comes from television from plays and things. That's the strange thing that people were mainly geriatric – it wasn't the people you hear of on television. Not all of them were old, some of them were younger. None of them were violent – but I remember being scared of them, because it was a mental hospital – it's not a very good attitude to have but it is the way things come across on TV, and films – you know, mental axe murderers and plays and things – the people I met weren't like that, but that is what I associate them with. (Cited in Philo, 1996)

We also found that fictional television could produce very strong affective responses towards specific characters. For example, in the soap opera *Coronation Street*, the character Carmel was an Irish nanny portrayed as having an erotic obsession with the partner of a regular character, Gail. In the story, the nanny attempts to destroy Gail's relationship and to abduct her partner's son. We asked members of our audience group what they would have done in Gail's position. Most advocated a violent response. Their replies included:

1. Killed her.
2. Battered her bloody mouth in.
3. Kicked hell out of her.
4. Scratched her eyes out.
5. I would have killed the cow.

Replies suggesting that Carmel needed medical help came from those who had direct experience of mental illness. The Carmel example shows how television can produce strong emotional responses among audiences. But it does not show that the TV programme generated an original propensity to violent behaviour in those who saw it. In other words, the audience members could have developed elsewhere the potential for violence in interpersonal responses. The impact of television in this case was to generate new feelings of anger and to channel at whom they were directed.

An essential question for further research is then: How does violence become part of the human vocabulary of potential behaviour and do the media in contemporary society have an influence in this?

Violence can be seen as efficient in achieving goals or it can be seen as pleasurable in its own right. A key question is, therefore, do media images encourage or develop such perceptions in the viewer – and how are such elements of personal response constructed? How, for example, are links made between sex, violence and power at the level of individual understanding, perception and desire? In other words we need a sociology of the development of motivation, belief and interpersonal response.

We need to be clear that societies do change and that all sorts of factors might promote social cohesion, disintegration or transformation. A key

reason why debates about media violence tend to be dominated by crude stimulus-response models is that there is no alternative being advanced. It is incumbent on critical scholars to make *positive* contributions to the debate rather than sticking to vague negative assertions that 'there is no evidence'.

Notes

¹ Letter from Martin Barker circulated with the 'proposed text of a statement', in response to the Newson report 11 April 1994.

² As Pearson himself acknowledges in a later piece, the fact that such debates regularly recur does not 'necessarily' mean they are wrong (1984: 102).

³ Although it is never very clear if it is either the campaigners or the state, or both.

⁴ For example Cohen refers to 'mass delusions' (1972: 200). See also Kirsten Drøtner's statement that 'media panic's . . . can be understood as tacit or explicit means of social regulation' (1992: 57). They can, but only if a strong model of media effects is used.