

Minimal effects

Since the 1950s we have rejected the idea that the media have immediate, direct, and powerful influence on their audiences. Should that be revisited in the light of recent cases involving YouTube, Facebook, and blogging? (Jane Brown, Virginia Dodge Fielder and Sharon Polansky)

Minimal effects

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The corollary of minimal effects is an active audience. An active audience is an audience that is in control of their media exposure. They pick and choose what they want to watch, listen to, read, interact with when they want to, and, increasingly, where they want to. After they choose, they accept some of it, ignore or refute the rest.

I now have an iPhone and can watch YouTube videos or send emails in the palm of my hand while waiting at the dentist's office. My daughter downloads old Beatles songs as well as current hits on her iPod and plays them while swinging in the backyard, and watches movies on it during long airplane trips.

It's not clear at all that effects are any more minimal with this kind of consumer control than they were when we had only three TV channels and record players. The difference now is that effects are as segmented as the audience. Effects depend much more now on who the consumer is and in what context he or she is using the media. Effects also depend on what the audience is looking for and how they are feeling in the moment of consumption. And, we should be thinking of all kinds of effects, not only behavioral, but cognitive, emotional, attitudinal, as well.

I have spent most of the last decade observing how adolescents are using and are affected by the media. I've seen that teens today have so much media available in their own bedrooms and even in their pockets, that they have to choose what to pay attention to. Their choices are often driven by identity needs, as they take on the central task of adolescence: "Who am I?" "Who do I want to be?"

My son was a skateboarder and, thus, chose a media diet of a specific genre of hip-hop music. He downloaded videos of other skateboarders skating so he could study their tricks. I subscribed to two skateboarding magazines for him so he would at least be reading something.

Alex wasn't a passive receiver of this material. He critiqued the other skaters, often out loud, as he and his fellow skaters used the media as a source of "super peers." Alex and his friends also often tried to reproduce what those guys in the videos did, as well as how they looked. The drugs of choice for skaters are marijuana and beer, so he took up both.

I've interviewed "girly girls" who are devotees of the celebrity gossip sites, who go in big groups of their friends to watch chick flick movies while their brothers are playing violent video games and going to the movies to see "Rambo." The girls work hard at looking like their favorite celebrities, the boys train themselves in being hyper-masculine and as tough as the tough guys they're seeing on their screens.

As has always been true, the media are only one part of the way our young people learn about the norms and expectations of the world around them. Those who are blessed with even temperaments and intelligence and who grow up in homes with clear values and watchful parents will take less from

the media. Those who are born with less ability to regulate their emotions, less engaged parents and/or who fall in with the wrong crowd, may be more affected by what they see, hear, and read.

The multitude of channels and the unprecedented consumer control over exposure certainly makes the job of the media effects researcher more difficult. We need to develop much different measures of media use. It is no longer possible to measure media use simply by asking how many hours of television is watched per week. Now we need to know if watching a TV show on an IPOD is the same as watching in the bedroom or family room or dentist's office? And, what about multi-tasking? Some estimate that kids are spending up to one-third of their time using multiple media simultaneously. Does that reduce the effect of any one of the media or enhance effects in some way? We need to know the range of an individual's media diet. What kind of content are they choosing? Is it a narrow or diverse selection? Is it all skateboarding, sports in general, or primarily celebrity gossip? NPR or Rush Limbaugh?

It may be, in fact, that the media are more powerful now than they've ever been. Now we and our children can pick just what we want, when we want it, when we're interested, and most likely to be engaged. As active rather than passive consumers, we actually may be more affected than we used to be.

MINIMAL EFFECTS: “England swings like a pendulum do...

Virginia Dodge Fielder

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So begins Roger Miller’s popular song from 1966, the year I finished high school. (In case you’re too young to remember, or need a reminder, you can see Miller perform live at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eq5piiRPohM> and even comment on his performance.)

Why start a discussion on “Minimal Effects” with this old Roger Miller lyric? Because that’s how many scholars describe the history of mass media effects – a pendulum swinging from “all-powerful” to “limited” to “moderate” to “powerful” effects.

Yet our assignment for this symposium honoring Knight Chair Philip Meyer suggests we still largely subscribe to the theory of “Minimal Effects.” Specifically, our assignment reads: *“Since the 1950s, we have rejected the idea that the media have immediate, direct, and powerful influence on their audiences. Should that be revisited in the light of recent cases involving YouTube, Facebook, and blogging?”*

A quick review of the history of mass media effects shows things are much more complicated than our assignment suggests. And to complicate things even further, Bryant and Thompson (2002) reject the notion of a pendulum swinging from “all-powerful” to “limited” to “moderate” to “powerful” effects:

“Instead, our history emphasizes the body of research that has, from the beginning, found overwhelming evidence for significant effects from mass media communications on audiences, based for the most part upon scientific methods and traditional statistical models. Additionally, the recounting of history makes apparent an immediate need for clarifications, standardizations, and much additional research in the field of mass media effects.

So, let’s briefly summarize where we have been, before we think about where effects research should be going in this era of YouTube, Facebook, MySpace and other highly interactive digital media.

ALL-POWERFUL MEDIA. Sparks (2006) describes the 1920s and 1930s as a time largely dominated by the “magic bullet model” or “hypodermic needle model” of mass communication. Accordingly, “the communication of a message in a mass medium can be compared to shooting a gun that contains a magic bullet or to injecting someone with a hypodermic needle. Once the message reaches the audience, it will exert powerful, relatively uniform effects on everyone who processes it.”

According to McQuail (2005), this view of an all-powerful media was based “not on scientific investigation but on observation of the enormous popularity of the press and the new media of film and radio that intruded into many aspects of everyday life as well as public affairs.” Nevertheless, several important studies during that period set the stage for later research on media effects: the Payne Fund studies to determine the impact of movies on children and adolescents; Lasswell’s analysis of *Propaganda Techniques in the World War*; and a postmortem of Orson Welles’s radio adaptation of “War of the Worlds” conducted by Princeton University researchers (Sparks, 2006; Bryant and Thompson, 2002).

MINIMAL EFFECTS. McQuail (2005) describes this phase of media effects research as the “theory of powerful media put to the test.” During this period, research methods improved dramatically, particularly the use of panel studies and control groups. Using these new methods, empirical studies – most notably Hovland’s research with the U.S. Army; Cooper and Jahoda’s Mr. Biggot study; and Lazarsfeld’s voting studies in Erin County, Ohio and Elmira, New York – indicated that mass media had only minimal effects on their audiences (Bryant and Thompson, 2002).

Joseph Klapper’s *The Effects of Mass Communication*, published in 1960, summarized media effects studies from the 1920s through the 1950s. According to McQuail (2005), Klapper’s still-influential work “concluded that ‘mass communication does not ordinarily serve as a necessary or sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions through a nexus of mediating factors.’ It was not that media had been found to be without effects or influence; rather there was no direct or one-to-one link to be expected between media stimulus and audience response. Media were shown to operate within a pre-existing structure of social relationships and a particular social and cultural network.”

Sparks (2006) notes the irony of this timing: “Klapper’s comments about the minimal influence of the media came at just the time when scholars were starting to explore the impact of the new medium that had virtually exploded on the scene in the 1950s: television. As it turned out, the advent of the limited-effects model of mass communication is a good example of how theories of mass communication about social phenomena can change as society changes.”

POWERFUL MEDIA REDISCOVERED. In their timeline of mass media effects research, Bryant and Thompson (2002) list several examples of the “Moderate Effects Model” from the 1970s, including some of the theories to be re-visited in this symposium: Tichenor, Donohue and Olien’s “knowledge gap” hypothesis; McCombs and Shaw’s “agenda-setting” hypothesis; Noelle-Neumann’s theory of a “spiral of silence”; and Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur’s “dependency” theory. Subsequent research in the “Powerful Effects Model” included the NIMH Report on Television and Behavior (which found positive correlations between viewing TV violence and subsequent aggression among children and teens) and Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach and Grube’s Great American Values Test (which demonstrated the powerful effects of viewing a 30-minute television program on values).

Bryant and Thompson conclude their nearly seven-decade timeline with this summary:

“The intense debate about the power or limits of media effects still rages to this day, but knowledge in the field continues to advance. For example...we have discovered that media effects may be cognitive (affecting attitudes or learning), behavioral (affecting behavior), or affective (affecting attitudes and emotions). Effects may be direct or indirect, and they may be short term, long term or delayed. They may be self-contained or cumulative. We have learned much about individual differences, psychological factors, environmental factors, and social group characteristics that cause audience members to perceive and react to media messages in specific ways. Still, much remains to be discovered [and] interesting landscapes [are] waiting to be painted by media effects researchers in the 21st century.”

WHAT NOW? If things were complicated before, they are really complicated now! As I reviewed the history of media effects research, I was struck by how digital media, in general, and the Internet, in particular, pose new challenges and opportunities for researchers and theorists:

- The Internet is an entirely new medium, unlike any we’ve seen before. Not only does it incorporate elements of both interpersonal and mass communication, but also of most media

coming before it – print, film, music recordings, radio, television, even telephones. We need to focus our theory and research attention on the Internet as something entirely new. We must not view it as an extension of old media, but as someplace we have never been before. That's the only way we can truly understand what is going on in this fast-paced technological world.

- The Internet puts unprecedented power in the hands of the user. Actually, the Internet sets the notion of sender vs. receiver, source vs. audience and other classic communication constructs on their ear. If nothing else, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace and blogging demonstrate that users have taken control. They also demonstrate how users are constructing their own communities, their own places of communication, even their own reality. To re-visit the 1960s one more time: "Power to the People" has finally arrived!
- The Internet and the capabilities it enables absolutely have changed our lives. All one has to do to realize this is to think about things the Internet has made common-place today – email, online banking, distance learning, music downloads, and e-commerce, just to name the most obvious. To say the Internet has had "minimal effects" on society would be ludicrous, unless one defines "effects" so narrowly as to be useless in the real world. And this says nothing about what symposium participant Jane Brown and colleague Joanne Cantor have called "perpetual linkage" or the tendency for youth to be constantly connected with each other through some type of technology (Brown and Cantor, 2000).
- The Internet puts unprecedented pressures on all "old" media from an economic point of view. I'll use my old company, the once-proud Knight Ridder, as an example. We spent many hours trying to figure out what to do about classified advertising, and we always seemed to come up with the same result – how best to turn a \$500 million business into a \$50 million one. Why talk about this in a paper on media effects? Because economics, more than anything else, drives what traditional media companies are able to provide in terms of content and approach. Wishful thinking about credibility and authority and trust won't make it any less so in today's Internet world.

Given all this, I can't even begin to think what this means for media effects research. I do know that the title of this symposium couldn't be better posed: "Raising the Ante: The Internet's Impact on Journalism Education and Existing Theories of Communication." And I know I'm very glad that I'm retired! All I have to do is sit back and watch the fun -- or participate in it virtually!

SOURCES:

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Minimal Effects

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Media effects never really were minimal; perhaps, media effects researchers were minimal.

Of course the media shape attitudes. Earlier research has not been able to detect powerful effects not because the effects are not present but because of the inability of researchers to detect the effects (John Zaller, *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change*, The University of Michigan Press, 1996). This inability is derived from poor measurement of both the dependent and independent variables and on the need to depart from the linear statistical models found in much of the research. Even though the total media effects might net out to be zero, this does not suggest that the media have minimal effects but rather that the conditions under which they can be detected are difficult to come by, e.g., competing messages may neutralize effects.

What about the Internet, easier or harder to detect media effects? Minimal or maximal?

Now that we have more tools (*analytical methods*) and more sophisticated theories that encompass more complexity (*uses and gratifications, agenda setting, framing, priming, spiral of silence...*) and understand that mediating factors (*demographics / nature [social influence, opinion leaders], behaviors (e.g., media consumption and purchase experience), psychographics / attitudes / nurture [personal relationships],*) mediate and thus impact media effects, perhaps the time has come for a rebirth of minimal effects.

Perhaps, we were right with the hypothesis, just not with the measurement, and therefore the findings. It's maximum effects; it probably always was, even if we couldn't detect it.

Now, with the cell phones, cell phones with Internet access, and Sidekicks and texting and the Internet and YouTube, Facebook and blogging, not to mention IM'ing, parsing the effects of media impact is exponentially complicated by quality and quantity and the interaction of true media convergence (*all media is, at least in part, being concentrated on the Internet: television; books; music; movies; radio; newspapers; magazines; journals; business publications; advertising;*

AND,

even as traditional media converge on the Internet, blogs and websites and wikis and e-books and social networking and tagging applications also are converging within that convergence to create a multi-sensory jazz extravaganza of overwhelming and discordant voices, words and pictures), compromising the illusion of developing a grand unifying theory of media effects with any pragmatic value.

So, let's measure what we can and where we can, and keep the presumption at bay.

In the applied world, we have been moving from large-scale audience metrics (*audience size/eyeballs, to demographics, to psychographics and now to engagement*) to micro measurement of micro segments, reflecting both the decreasing effectiveness of mass media but also the increasing effectiveness of consumer conversation made possible by the Internet and its various forms of interaction. Each of these metrics, necessary foundational tools, yes, but not sufficient to capture media effects.

The long-standing media effects model that has served as both the framework and success metric for marketers is the purchase funnel. This model is based on subtraction: the idea that if a brand message

persuasively reaches many consumers frequently enough, some proportion of them will purchase. That model is inconsistent with the way consumers operate today.

If we look at the traditional product purchase funnel where awareness leads to consideration, preference and then purchase, (*and at each step of the funnel, fewer consumers show up, hence audience subtraction*) and turn it upside down, where social psychology and interpersonal skills develop brand relationships in an additive audience accumulation model (*the first step is a dialog between two, that then intensifies by incorporating more people into the conversation, and then integrates with yet additional people, ultimately yielding bonding in a larger group of like-minded people who then become advocates*), we potentially can measure media effects of the Internet and its many manifestations with a fresh perspective, where effectiveness is not necessarily linked to behavioral change.

Now, the communications model must factor in the principle of multiplication. Instead of finding ways to interrupt and disrupt consumers' lives, communications increasingly strive for developing advocacy. Instead of focusing on reaching a critical mass of consumers and creating massive levels of awareness, marketers increasingly seek to build loyalty and create brand evangelists or advocates. Conventional wisdom is not up-ended; marketers still seek awareness and trial. But increasingly, marketers are abandoning the notion of massing a group of people together to shout at them and are looking to communicate their messages with micro segments. Marketing is increasingly becoming a way to generate conversation between consumers about a shared interest. The dollars haven't moved there yet, and the stakes are far too high to abandon the conventional metrics and audience measurement systems, but the lid to the box has been lifted and even those with the most to lose are peeking in.

What does this mean for the role of media and the objectives we traditionally have for it? And, what does this mean for measuring media effects on the Internet?

The Internet is media anarchy; it's amorphous, without borders, growing without seeming end and no enforcement agency to police it; some (*OK, my kids*) see Facebook as its own country. Is the Internet then the planet or the universe?

We don't know how the pieces will fit together or what yet is coming. Understanding the Internet therefore must be found at the edges; measuring impact of these places, these individual states, recognizing a dynamic model, is where we need to place our bets right now. But, like getting minimal effects wrong, we cannot extrapolate from these small-scale inquiries a total media effects model.

Niched and micro-segment communication.

Where the *Da Vinci Code* sold 25mm copies over a span of several years, a piece of electronic content could be viewed by 100mm people in a nanosecond. In an incredibly short time span, blogs have invaded our culture and left an indelible mark on society, offering an alternative to the homogenized AP wire feeds with creative and new perspectives that are transmitted and reacted to in nanoseconds. Blogs are reshaping our notion of how content is created and information is disseminated. Citizen journalism is making the world more transparent and accelerating the flattening of the world, shifting the one-directional media model into a bi- and multi-directional one. It's the telephone model on steroids, but this time, your community is one of interests not place.

And the Internet and its media effects, clearly enough to keep the next generation of mass communications researchers engaged and occupied for a very long time.