

# Media Effects

COMM2112

Theories of Communication and Persuasion

Paul Emerson Teusner  
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# So far

- What is a theory of communication?
  - Course coordinator's own bias
- Process model of communication
  - Shannon and Weaver

# Effects tradition

- Asks the question:

**How do mass media affect us?**

# Why this question?

## Concerns of North America in 1920s & 30s

- New technologies & mass audiences
- Social consequences of migration, urbanization and industrialization
- Fears about society as relatively defenceless and susceptible to manipulation
- Fascist uses of media in Europe
- Build up of American war effort

# Orson Welles' 1938 Halloween broadcast



# Mass media are...

- communication/messages/information
- emanating from an individual or organisational source
- through electronic or mechanical coding giving multiplication of message
- to a relatively large heterogeneous and anonymous audience
- with limited and indirect means of feedback

# In a mass-mediated society...

...we are bombarded by symbolic messages...

...derived by others with power...

...who are generally inaccessible...

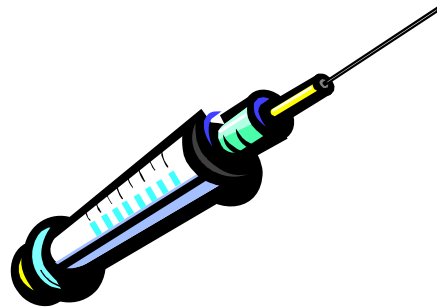
...in which individuality is not respected...

...over which we have little control through feedback or protest.

# Different Effects theories

- Hypodermic
- Social learning
- Psychological theory
- Uses and gratifications
- Cultivation analysis

# The “hypodermic” or “magic bullet” approach



- Based on the Shannon & Weaver model
- The broadcaster injects his message unhindered into the minds of people

# Assumptions of the hypodermic approach

- an atomised, weak and vulnerable mass audience of millions
- prepared to receive the message
- every message is a direct and powerful stimulus to action
- which elicits an immediate response

# Modifying the direct effect

## Intervening variables

- Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet - Election campaigns 1940s
- The effect of mass comm not as direct nor universal as earlier thought
- A “two-step flow” theory  
Media -> opinion leaders -> people

# More intervening variables..

- Other variables identified....
  - Exposure, access or attention to the media
  - Differential nature of media
  - Nature and organization of the content
  - Attitudes and psychological disposition of the audience
  - Personal relations of audience members

# Wilbur Schramm

- The dominant influence of media = reinforcement
- Long-term effects that are hard to measure:

Media messages do not bypass existing attitudes or norms, but over a long term “drip” into us and “help fill in the ground for the figures of our decision making.”

# Lab experiments

- Bobo Doll



# Lab experiments

- Bobo Doll
  - Children who viewed the adult film were more aggressive
  - They used the same type of behaviours as viewed
  - Reward increased aggression
  - More -> more
- Other experiments



# Results?

- It was believed that these experiments demonstrated a link between media and violence.
    - Direct imitation of play aggression
    - Vicarious consequences and the acquisition performance distinction
    - Studies of disinhibitory effects
- The aggression machine

# Reasons for effect?

## 1. Social learning theory

- Albert Bandura and Richard Walters, *Social learning and personality development*, 1963
- Children learn from:
  - Imitation
  - Identification and modeling
  - Motivation
  - Modified through inhibition or disinhibition
  - Observation and practice

# Reasons for effect?

## 2. Arousal

- Aggression becomes primed

## 3. Desensitization

- Included measures of justification and consequences

## 4. Moral threshold

- The natural - tempered by morals - reduced by viewing

# The U.S. Surgeon-General's Report - 1972

- The background 60s
  - Political assassinations: JFK, MLK, RJK
  - Civil rights movement
  - Student counter culture
  - Anti-Vietnam protests
  - Emerging studies on media violence and social aggression
- An anxious society

# The Research Program

- Range of issues studied and methodologies used
- Conclusions
  - None rejected the nil effects
  - No agreement on what effects
  - “TV violence held unharmed to youth”

# A crisis in “objective” research

- Human behaviour is too complex to explain and predict objectively
- The limitations of empirical methodologies
- Difficulty in defining “violent media”
- Policy is not made on the basis of data or even common sense alone