

A Psychological Theory of Media Effect

George Comstock

- Post Surgeon-General's Report on Media and Violence
- The Rand Corporation 1973
- An attempt to integrate all existing empirical data to try and find a comprehensive scientific behavioral theory of the media
- The result:
 - Four volumes of data
 - George Comstock et al., *Television and Human Behavior*, 1978

The central thesis:

- The likelihood of a person behaving in conformance with a viewed action is a function of three factors:
 - **Saliency** - the degree to which the particular behavior exists psychologically for the person;
 - **Repertoire** - the summed saliency of all possible acts for the person in their present situation (any single act is a fraction of repertoire);
 - **Arousal** - the extent to which the person is activated to perform any act in their present situation.

Calculating effect

$$\text{action} = \frac{\text{salience}}{\text{repertoire}} \times \text{arousal}$$

$$\text{action} = \frac{\text{salience}}{\text{repertoire}} \times \text{arousal}$$

The extent to which
someone is influenced by
what they see in the media

The extent to which what is viewed
is psychologically relevant to the
person

$$\text{action} = \frac{\text{salience}}{\text{repertoire}} \times \text{arousal}$$

Saliency =
past consequences +
(perceived consequences x perceived reality)

$$\text{action} = \frac{\text{salience}}{\text{repertoire}} \times \text{arousal}$$

The number of other relevant options the person has for acting in a situation

The extent to which the person is motivated to act in the situation

$$\text{action} = \frac{\text{salience}}{\text{repertoire}} \times \text{arousal}$$

Arousal is highly situational and fluctuating.
Arousal is strongly influenced by opportunity.

Doing the sums

What is presented in the media is highly relevant to a person's situation

salience (10)

repertoire (1)

The person has few other options for dealing with the situation

x

The person is highly motivated to do something

arousal (10)

=

action (100)

It is highly likely that the person will imitate what they have seen

Doing the sums

What is presented in the media is highly relevant to a person's situation

salience (10)

repertoire (1)

The person has few other options for dealing with the situation

x

The person is highly motivated to do something

arousal (10)

=

action (100)

It is highly likely that the person will imitate what they have seen

What is presented in the media is not very relevant to a person's situation

salience (2)

repertoire (8)

The person has a lot of other options for dealing with the situation

x

The person is not very motivated to take action

arousal (2)

=

action (.5)

It is not very likely that the person will act on the basis of what they have seen

How television influences human behaviour

Television can affect salience by

1. Demonstrating particular actions that may be performed

2. Attaching negative or positive values to the act

salience

repertoire

x

arousal

How television influences human behaviour

salience
_____ x arousal
repertoire

Television can affect repertoire by

- 1. Changing the +ve or –ve salience of particular actions within a person's repertoire**
- 2. Adding new, salient alternatives to a person's repertoire**

How television influences human behaviour

salience
_____ x arousal
repertoire

Television can affect arousal by

- 1. Arousing people to act on something**
- 2. Depressing arousal**
- 3. Creating preference for particular actions that can be done close to the television set**

Strengths and weaknesses

- Strengths
 - Seems logical
 - Identifies relevant factors as a basis for analysis
- Weaknesses
 - Atomistic - reduces the problem to individuals
 - Ignores a range of other relevant variables, such as cultural context, meaning of what is seen, social problems, etc.
 - Categories are too complex to enable real prediction or planning.