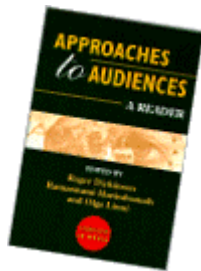


Ten things wrong with the 'effects model'

David Gauntlett



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About this article: This essay provides an overview and restatement of what I was trying to say in [Moving Experiences](#). The book examines all of the studies in detail, and generally concludes that the research has failed to show that the media has any kind of direct or predictable effects on people. This essay takes a slightly different approach, setting out ten reasons why 'effects research' as we have seen it so far seems to be fundamentally flawed and is often surprisingly poor. This leads to a slightly different (implicit) conclusion, that media influences are something that we still know very little about, because the research hasn't been very good or imaginative... and so, therefore, it's still an open question. At the same time, it remains true that no research is going to find direct or predictable effects. Viewers wondering what other approaches to media influences there might be, may want to look at [Video Critical](#), which demonstrates a new audience research method using video production, and discusses other alternative approaches.

It has become something of a cliché to observe that despite many decades of research and hundreds of studies, the connections between people's consumption of the mass media and their subsequent behaviour have remained persistently elusive. Indeed, researchers have enjoyed an unusual degree of patience from both

their scholarly and more public audiences. But the time comes when we must take a step back from this murky lack of consensus and ask - why? Why are there no clear answers on media effects?

There is, as I see it, a choice of two conclusions which can be drawn from any detailed analysis of the research. The first is that if, after over sixty years of a considerable amount of research effort, direct effects of media upon behaviour have not been clearly identified, then we should conclude that they are simply *not there to be found*. Since I have argued this case, broadly speaking, elsewhere (Gauntlett, 1995a), I will here explore the second possibility: that the media effects research has quite consistently taken the *wrong approach* to the mass media, its audiences, and society in general. This misdirection has taken a number of forms; for the purposes of this chapter, I will impose an unwarranted coherence upon the claims of all those who argue or purport to have found that the mass media will commonly have direct and reasonably predictable effects upon the behaviour of their fellow human beings, calling this body of thought, simply, the 'effects model'. Rather than taking apart each study individually, I will consider the mountain of studies - and the associated claims about media effects made by commentators - as a whole, and outline ten fundamental flaws in their approach.

1. The effects model tackles social problems 'backwards'

To explain the problem of violence in society, researchers should begin with that social violence and seek to explain it with reference, quite obviously, to those who engage in it: their identity, background, character and so on. The 'media effects' approach, in this sense, comes at the problem *backwards*, by starting with the

media and then trying to lasso connections from there on to social beings, rather than the other way around.

This is an important distinction. Criminologists, in their professional attempts to explain crime and violence, consistently turn for explanations not to the mass media but to social factors such as poverty, unemployment, housing, and the behaviour of family and peers. In a study which *did* start at what I would recognise as the correct end - by interviewing 78 violent teenage offenders and then tracing their behaviour back towards media usage, in comparison with a group of over 500 'ordinary' school pupils of the same age - Hagell & Newburn (1994) found only that the young offenders watched *less* television and video than their counterparts, had less access to the technology in the first place, had no particular interest in specifically violent programmes, and either enjoyed the same material as non-offending teenagers or were simply *uninterested*. This point was demonstrated very clearly when the offenders were asked, 'If you had the chance to be someone who appears on television, who would you choose to be?':

'The offenders felt particularly uncomfortable with this question and appeared to have difficulty in understanding why one might want to be such a person... In several interviews, the offenders had already stated that they watched little television, could not remember their favourite programmes and, consequently, could not think of anyone to be. In these cases, their obvious failure to identify with any television characters seemed to be part of a general lack of engagement with television' (p. 30).

Thus we can see that studies which take the perpetrators of actual violence as their first point of reference, rather than the media,

come to rather different conclusions (and there is certainly a need for more such research). The point that effects studies take the media as their starting point, however, should not be taken to suggest that they involve sensitive examinations of the mass media. As will be noted below, the studies have typically taken a stereotyped, almost parodic view of media content.

In more general terms, the 'backwards' approach involves the mistake of looking at individuals, rather than society, in relation to the mass media. The narrowly individualistic approach of some psychologists leads them to argue that, because of their belief that particular individuals at certain times in specific circumstances may be negatively affected by one bit of media, the removal of such media from society would be a positive step. This approach is rather like arguing that the solution to the number of road traffic accidents in Britain would be to lock away one famously poor driver from Cornwall; that is, a blinkered approach which tackles a real problem from the wrong end, involves cosmetic rather than relevant changes, and fails to look in any way at the 'bigger picture'.

2. The effects model treats children as inadequate

The individualism of the psychological discipline has also had a significant impact on the way in which children are regarded in effects research. Whilst sociology in recent decades has typically regarded childhood as a social construction, demarcated by attitudes, traditions and rituals which vary between different societies and different time periods (Ariés, 1962; Jenks, 1982, 1996), the psychology of childhood - developmental psychology - has remained more tied to the idea of a universal individual who must develop through particular stages before reaching adult

maturity, as established by Piaget (e.g. 1926, 1929). The developmental stages are arranged as a hierarchy, from incompetent childhood through to rational, logical adulthood, and progression through these stages is characterised by an 'achievement ethic' (Jenks, 1996, p. 24).

In psychology, then, children are often considered not so much in terms of what they *can* do, as what they (apparently) cannot. Negatively defined as non-adults, the research subjects are regarded as the 'other', a strange breed whose failure to match generally middle-class adult norms must be charted and discussed. Most laboratory studies of children and the media presume, for example, that their findings apply only to children, but fail to run parallel studies with adult groups to confirm this. We might speculate that this is because if adults were found to respond to laboratory pressures in the same way as children, the 'common sense' validity of the experiments would be undermined.

In her valuable examination of the way in which academic studies have constructed and maintained a particular perspective on childhood, Christine Griffin (1993) has recorded the ways in which studies produced by psychologists, in particular, have tended to 'blame the victim', to represent social problems as the consequence of the deficiencies or inadequacies of young people, and to 'psychologize inequalities, obscuring structural relations of domination behind a focus on individual "deficient" working-class young people and/or young people of colour, their families or cultural backgrounds' (p. 199). Problems such as unemployment and the failure of education systems are thereby traced to individual psychology traits. The same kinds of approach are readily observed in media effects studies, the production of which has undoubtedly

been dominated by psychologically-oriented researchers, who - whilst, one imagines, having nothing other than benevolent intentions - have carefully exposed the full range of ways in which young media users can be seen as the inept victims of products which, whilst obviously puerile and transparent to adults, can trick children into all kinds of ill-advised behaviour.

This situation is clearly exposed by research which seeks to establish what children can and do understand about and from the mass media. Such projects have shown that children can talk intelligently and indeed cynically about the mass media (Buckingham, 1993, 1996), and that children as young as seven can make thoughtful, critical and 'media literate' video productions themselves (Gauntlett, 1997).

3. Assumptions within the effects model are characterised by barely-concealed conservative ideology

The systematic derision of children's resistant capacities can be seen as part of a broader conservative project to position the more contemporary and challenging aspects of the mass media, rather than other social factors, as the major threat to social stability today. American effects studies, in particular, tend to assume a level of television violence which - as Barrie Gunter shows in this volume - is simply not applicable in other countries such as Britain. George Gerbner's view, for example, that 'We are awash in a tide of violent representations unlike any the world has ever seen... drenching every home with graphic scenes of expertly choreographed brutality' (1994, p. 133), both reflects his hyperbolic view of the media in America and the extent to which findings cannot be simplistically transferred across the Atlantic. Whilst it is

certainly possible that gratuitous depictions of violence might reach a level in American screen media which could be seen as unpleasant and unnecessary, it cannot always be assumed that violence is shown for 'bad' reasons or in an uncritical light. Even the most obviously 'gratuitous' acts of violence, such as those committed by Beavis and Butt-Head in their eponymous MTV series, can be interpreted as rationally resistant reactions to an oppressive world which has little to offer them (see Gauntlett, 1997).

The condemnation of generalised screen 'violence' by conservative critics, supported by the 'findings' of the effects studies - if we disregard their precarious foundations - can often be traced to concerns such as 'disrespect for authority' and 'anti-patriotic sentiments' (most conspicuously in Michael Medved's well-received *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (1992)). Programmes which do not necessarily contain any greater *quantity* of violent, sexual or other controversial depictions than others, can be seen to be objected to because they take a more challenging socio-political stance (Barker, 1984, 1989, 1993). This was illustrated by a study of over 2,200 complaints about British TV and radio which were sent to the Broadcasting Standards Council over an 18 month period from July 1993 to December 1994 (Gauntlett, 1995c). This showed that a relatively narrow range of most complained-of programmes were taken by complainants to characterise a much broader decline in the morals of both broadcasting in particular and the nation in general.

This view of a section of the public is clearly reflected in a large number of the effects studies which presume that 'antisocial' behaviour is an objective category which can be observed in

numerous programmes and which will negatively affect those children who see it portrayed. This dark view is constructed with the support of content analysis studies which appear almost designed to incriminate the media. Even today, expensive and avowedly 'scientific' content analyses such as the well-publicised US National Television Violence Study (Mediascope, 1996; run by the Universities of California, North Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin), for example, include odd tests such as whether violent acts are punished *within* the same scene - a strange requirement for dramas - making it easier to support views such as that 'there are substantial risks of harmful effects from viewing violence throughout the television environment' (p. ix). [Footnote: Examination of programmes in full, sensibly also included in this study, found that 'punishments occur by the end of the program (62%) more often than not for bad characters', however (Mediascope, 1996, p. 15). Despite this finding, and the likelihood that a number of the remaining 38% would be punished in subsequent programmes, much is made of the finding that 'violence goes unpunished (73%) in almost three out of four scenes' (point repeated on p. x, p. 15, p. 25; my emphasis)]. This study also reflects the continuing willingness of researchers to impute *effects* from a count-up of content.

4. The effects model inadequately defines its own objects of study

The flaws numbered four to six in this list are more straightforwardly methodological, although they are connected to the previous and subsequent points. The first of these is that effects studies have generally taken for granted the definitions of media material, such as 'antisocial' and 'prosocial' programming, as well as

characterisations of behaviour in the real world, such as 'antisocial' and 'prosocial' action. The point has already been made that these can be ideological value judgements; throwing down a book in disgust, smashing a nuclear missile, or - to use a *Beavis and Butt-Head* example - sabotaging activities at one's burger bar workplace, will always be interpreted in effects studies as 'antisocial', not 'prosocial'.

Furthermore, actions such as verbal aggression or hitting an inanimate object are recorded as acts of violence, just as TV murders are, leading to terrifically (and irretrievably) murky data. It is usually impossible to discern whether very minor or extremely serious acts of 'violence' depicted in the media are being said to have led to quite severe or merely trivial acts in the real world. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that this is rarely seen as a problem: in the media effects field, dodgy 'findings' are accepted with an uncommon hospitality.

5. The effects model is often based on artificial studies

Since careful sociological studies of media effects require amounts of time and money which limit their abundance, they are heavily outnumbered by simpler studies which are usually characterised by elements of artificiality. Such studies typically take place in a laboratory, or in a 'natural' setting such as a classroom but where a researcher has conspicuously shown up and instigated activities, neither of which are typical environments. Instead of a full and naturally-viewed television diet, research subjects are likely to be shown selected or specially-recorded clips which lack the narrative meaning inherent in everyday TV productions. They may then be observed in simulations of real life presented to them as a game, in

relation to inanimate objects such as Bandura's famous 'bobo' doll, or as they respond to questionnaires, all of which are unlike interpersonal interaction, cannot be equated with it, and are likely to be associated with the previous viewing experience in the mind of the subject, rendering the study invalid.

Such studies also rely on the idea that subjects will not alter their behaviour or stated attitudes as a response to being observed or questioned. This naive belief has been shown to be false by researchers such as Borden (1975) who have demonstrated that the presence, appearance and gender of an observer can radically affect children's behaviour.

6. The effects model is often based on studies with misapplied methodology

Many of the studies which do not rely on an experimental method, and so may evade the flaws mentioned in the previous section, fall down instead by applying a methodological procedure wrongly, or by drawing inappropriate conclusions from particular methods. The widely-cited longitudinal panel study by Huesmann, Eron and colleagues (Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder & Huesmann, 1972, 1977), for example, has been less famously slated for failing to keep to the procedures, such as assessing aggressivity or TV viewing with the same measures at different points in time, which are necessary for their statistical findings to have any validity (Chaffee, 1972; Kenny, 1972). [Footnote: A longitudinal panel study is one in which the same group of people (the panel) are surveyed and/or observed at a number of points over a period of time]. The same researchers have also failed to adequately account for why the findings of this study and those of another of their own studies (Huesmann,

Lagerspetz & Eron, 1984) absolutely contradict each other, with the former concluding that the media has a marginal effect on boys but no effect on girls, and the latter arguing the exact opposite (no effect on boys, but a small effect for girls). They also seem to ignore that fact that their own follow-up of their original set of subjects 22 years later suggested that a number of biological, developmental and environmental factors contributed to levels of aggression, whilst the mass media was not even given a mention (Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz & Walder, 1984). These astounding inconsistencies, unapologetically presented by perhaps the best-known researchers in this area, must be cause for considerable unease about the effects model. More *careful* use of the same methods, such as in the three-year panel study involving over 3,000 young people conducted by Milavsky, Kessler, Stipp & Rubens (1982a, 1982b), has only indicated that significant media effects are not to be found.

Another misuse of method occurs when studies which are simply unable to show that one thing causes another are treated as if they have done so. Correlation studies are typically used for this purpose. Their finding that a particular personality type is also the kind of person who enjoys a certain kind of media, is quite unable to show that the latter *causes* the former, although psychologists such as Van Evra (1990) have casually assumed that this is probably the case. There is a logical coherence to the idea that children whose behaviour is antisocial and disruptional will also have a greater interest in the more violent and noisy television programmes, whereas the idea that the behaviour is a *product* of these programmes lacks both this rational consistency, and the support of the studies.

7. The effects model is selective in its criticisms of media depictions of violence

In addition to the point that 'antisocial' acts are ideologically defined in effects studies (as noted in section three above), we can also note that the media depictions of 'violence' which the effects model typically condemns are limited to fictional productions. The acts of violence which appear on a daily basis on news and serious factual programmes are seen as somehow exempt. The point here is not that depictions of violence in the news should necessarily be condemned in just the same, blinkered way, but rather to draw attention to another philosophical inconsistency which the model cannot account for. If the antisocial acts shown in drama series and films are expected to have an effect on the behaviour of viewers, even though such acts are almost always ultimately punished or have other negative consequences for the perpetrator, there is no obvious reason why the antisocial activities which are always in the news, and which frequently do *not* have such apparent consequences for their agents, should not have similar effects.

8. The effects model assumes superiority to the masses

Surveys typically show that whilst a certain proportion of the public feel that the media may cause other people to engage in antisocial behaviour, almost no-one ever says that they have been affected in that way themselves. This view is taken to extremes by researchers and campaigners whose work brings them into regular contact with the supposedly corrupting material, but who are unconcerned for their own well-being as they implicitly 'know' that the effects will only be on 'other people'. Insofar as these others are defined as children or 'unstable' individuals, their approach may seem not

unreasonable; it is fair enough that such questions should be explored. Nonetheless, the idea that it is unruly 'others' who will be affected - the uneducated? the working class? - remains at the heart of the effects paradigm, and is reflected in its texts (as well, presumably, as in the researchers' overenthusiastic interpretation of weak or flawed data, as discussed above).

George Gerbner and his colleagues, for example, write about 'heavy' television viewers as if this media consumption has necessarily had the opposite effect on the weightiness of their brains. Such people are assumed to have no selectivity or critical skills, and their habits are explicitly contrasted with preferred activities: 'Most viewers watch by the clock and either do not know what they will watch when they turn on the set, or follow established routines rather than choose each program as they would choose a book, a movie or an article' (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1986, p.19). This view, which knowingly makes inappropriate comparisons by ignoring the serial nature of many TV programmes, and which is unable to account for the widespread use of TV guides and VCRs with which audiences plan and arrange their viewing, reveals the kind of elitism and snobbishness which often seems to underpin such research. The point here is not that the content of the mass media must not be criticised, but rather that the mass audience themselves are not well served by studies which are willing to treat them as potential savages or actual fools.

9. The effects model makes no attempt to understand meanings of the media

A further fundamental flaw, hinted at in points three and four above, is that the effects model *necessarily* rests on a base of reductive

assumptions and unjustified stereotypes regarding media content. To assert that, say, 'media violence' will bring negative consequences is not only to presume that depictions of violence in the media will always be promoting antisocial behaviour, and that such a category exists and makes sense, as noted above, but also assumes that the medium holds a singular message which will be carried unproblematically to the audience. The effects model therefore performs the double deception of presuming (a) that the media presents a singular and clear-cut 'message', and (b) that the proponents of the effects model are in a position to identify what that message is.

The meanings of media content are ignored in the simple sense that assumptions are made based on the appearance of elements removed from their context (for example, woman hitting man equals violence equals bad), and in the more sophisticated sense that even *in* context the meanings may be different for different viewers (woman hitting man equals an unpleasant act of aggression, *or* appropriate self-defence, *or* a triumphant act of revenge, *or* a refreshing change, *or* is simply uninteresting, *or* any of many further alternative readings). In-depth qualitative studies have unsurprisingly given support to the view that media audiences routinely arrive at their own, often heterogeneous, interpretations of everyday media texts (e.g. Buckingham, 1993, 1996; Hill, 1997; Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash & Weaver, 1992; Gray, 1992; Palmer, 1986). Since the effects model rides roughshod over both the meanings that actions have for characters in dramas *and* the meanings which those depicted acts may have for the audience members, it can retain little credibility with those who consider popular entertainment to be more than just a set of very basic

propaganda messages flashed at the audience in the simplest possible terms.

10. The effects model is not grounded in theory

Finally, and underlying many of the points made above, is the fundamental problem that the entire argument of the 'effects model' is substantiated with no theoretical reasoning beyond the bald assertions that particular kinds of effects *will* be produced by the media. The basic question of *why* the media should induce people to imitate its content has never been adequately tackled, beyond the simple idea that particular actions are 'glamorised'. (Obviously, *antisocial* actions are shown really *positively* so infrequently that this is an inadequate explanation). Similarly, the question of how merely seeing an activity in the media would be translated into an actual *motive* which would prompt an individual to behave in a particular way is just as unresolved. The lack of firm theory has led to the effects model being based in the variety of assumptions outlined above - that the media (rather than people) is the unproblematic starting-point for research; that children will be unable to 'cope' with the media; that the categories of 'violence' or 'antisocial behaviour' are clear and self-evident; that the model's predictions can be verified by scientific research; that screen fictions are of concern, whilst news pictures are not; that researchers have the unique capacity to observe and classify social behaviour and its meanings, but that those researchers need not attend to the various possible meanings which media content may have for the audience. Each of these very substantial problems has its roots in the failure of media effects commentators to found their model in any coherent theory.

So what future for research on media influences?

The effects model, we have seen, has remarkably little going for it as an explanation of human behaviour, or of the media in society. Whilst any challenging or apparently illogical theory or model reserves the right to demonstrate its validity through empirical data, the effects model has failed also in that respect. Its continued survival is indefensible and unfortunate. However, the failure of this particular *model* does not mean that the impact of the mass media can no longer be considered or investigated.

The studies by Greg Philo and Glasgow University Media Group colleagues, for example, have used often imaginative methods to explore the influence of media presentations upon perceptions and interpretations of factual matters (e.g. Philo, 1990; Philo, ed., 1996). I have realised rather late that my own study (Gauntlett, 1997) in which children made videos about the environment, which were used as a way of understanding the discourses and perspectives on environmentalism which the children had acquired from the media, can be seen as falling broadly within this tradition. The strength of this work is that it operates on a terrain different from that occupied by the effects model; even at the most obvious level, it is about *influences* and *perceptions*, rather than *effects* and *behaviour*. However, whilst such studies may provide valuable reflections on the relationship between mass media and audiences, they cannot - for the same reason - directly challenge claims made from within the 'effects model' paradigm (as Miller & Philo (1996) have misguidedly supposed). This is not a weakness of these studies, of course; the effects paradigm should be left to bury itself whilst prudent media researchers move on to explore these other areas.

Any paradigm which is able to avoid the flaws and assumptions which have inevitably and quite rightly ruined the effects model is likely to have some advantages. With the rise of qualitative studies which actually listen to media audiences, we are seeing the advancement of a more forward-thinking, sensible and compassionate view of those who enjoy the mass media. After decades of stunted and rather irresponsible talk about media 'effects', the emphasis is hopefully changing towards a more sensitive but rational approach to media scholarship.

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