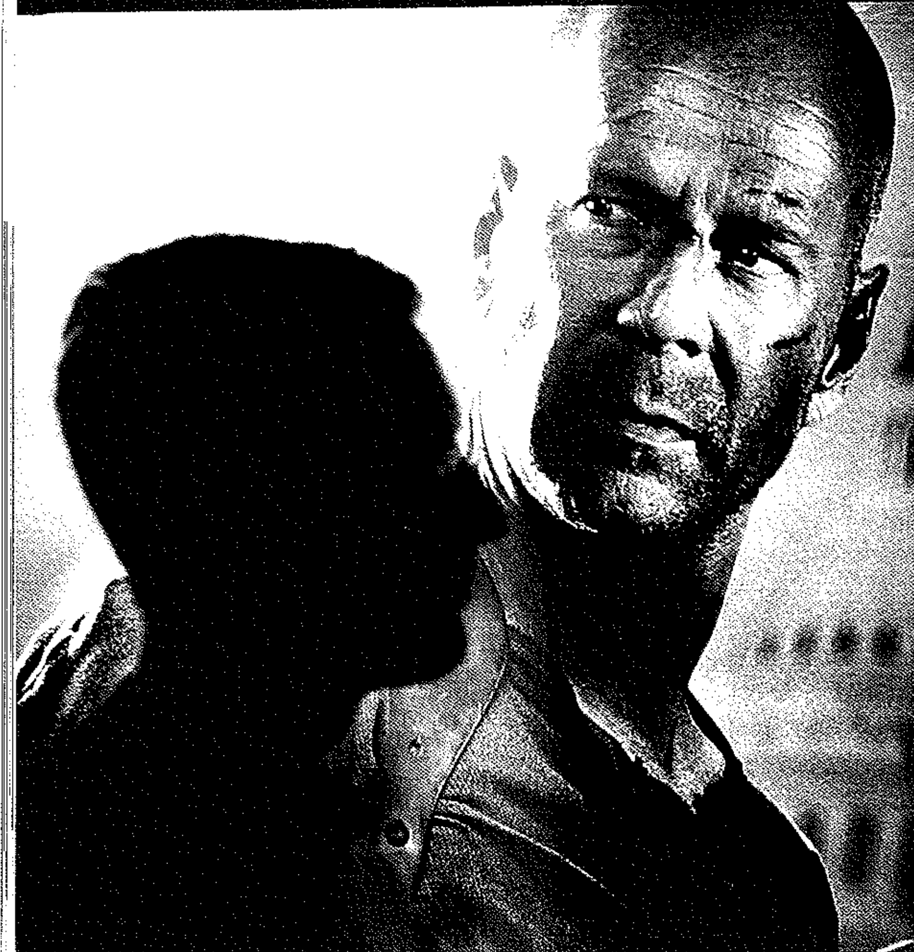


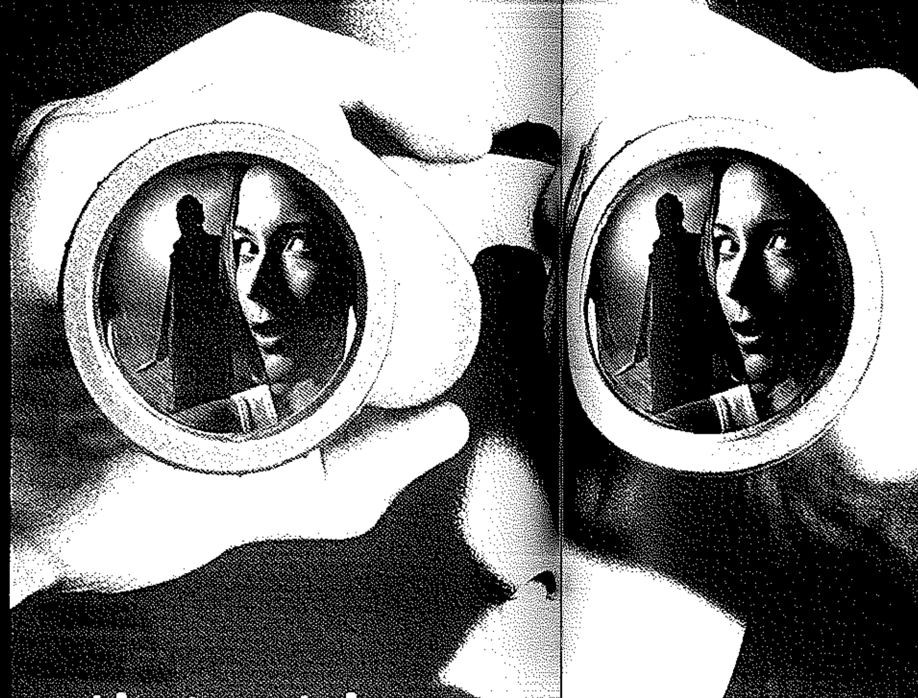




15

# Media Effects and Cultural Approaches to Research

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In 1966, NBC showed the Rod Serling made-for-television thriller *The Doomsday Flight*, the first movie to depict an airplane hijacking. In the story, a man plants a bomb and tries to extract ransom money from an airline. In the days following the telecast, the nation's major airlines reported a dramatic rise in anonymous bomb threats, some of them classified as teenage pranks. The network agreed not to run the film again.

In 1985, the popular heavy-metal band Judas Priest made headlines when two Nevada teenagers shot themselves after listening to the group's allegedly subliminal suicidal message on their 1978 *Stained Class* album. One teen died instantly; the other lived for three more years, in constant pain from severe facial injuries. The teenagers' parents lost a civil product liability suit against the British metal band and CBS Records.

In 1995, an eighteen-year-old woman and her boyfriend went on a killing spree in Louisiana after reportedly watching Oliver Stone's 1994 film *Natural Born Killers* more than twenty times. The family of one of the victims filed a lawsuit against Stone and Time Warner, charging that the film—starring Juliette Lewis and Woody Harrelson as a demented, celebrity-craving young couple on a murderous rampage—irresponsibly incited real-life violence. Part of the family's case was based on a 1996 interview in which Stone said: "The most pacifist people in the world said they came out of this movie and wanted to kill somebody." Stone and Time Warner argued that the lawsuit should be dismissed on the grounds of free speech, and the case was finally thrown out in 2001. There was no evidence, according to the judge, that Stone had intended to incite violence.

In 1999, two heavily armed students wearing trench coats attacked Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. They planted as many as fifty bombs and murdered twelve fellow students and a teacher before killing themselves. In the wake of this tragedy, many people blamed the mass media, speculating that the killers had immersed themselves in the dark lyrics of shock rocker Marilyn Manson and were desensitized to violence by "first-person shooter" video games such as *Doom*. Still others looked to the influence of films like *The Basketball Diaries*, in which a drug-using, trench-coated teenager (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) imagines shooting a teacher and his classmates.

In April 2007, a student massacred thirty-two people on the Virginia Tech campus before killing himself. Gunman Seung-Hui Cho was mentally disturbed and praised "martyrs like Eric and Dylan," the infamous Columbine killers. Cho's rampage included a twist: during the attack, he sent a package of letters, videos, and photos of himself to NBC News. The images and ramblings of his "multimedia manifesto" became a major part of the news story (as did ethical questions about the news media broadcasting clips of his videos) while the country tried to make sense of the tragedy.

Each of these events has renewed long-standing cultural debates over the suggestive power of music, visual imagery, and screen violence. Since the emergence of popular music, movies, television, and video games as influential mass media, the relationship between make-believe stories and real-life imitation has drawn a great deal of attention. Concerns have been raised not only by parents, teachers, and politicians but also by several generations of mass communication researchers.

**". . . the relationship between make-believe stories and real-life imitation has drawn a great deal of attention."**

***AS THESE TRAGIC TALES OF VIOLENCE ILLUSTRATE,*** many believe that media have a powerful effect on individuals and society. This belief has led media researchers to focus most of their efforts on two types of research: media effects research and cultural studies research.

**Media effects research** attempts to understand, explain, and predict the effects of mass media on individuals and society. The main goal of this type of research is to uncover whether or not there is a connection between aggressive behavior and violence in the media, particularly in children and teens. In the late 1960s, government leaders–reacting to the social upheavals of that decade–first set aside $1 million to examine this potential connection. Since that time, thousands of studies have told us what most teachers and parents believe instinctively: Violent scenes on television and in movies stimulate aggressive behavior in children and teens–especially young boys.

The other major area of mass media research is **cultural studies**. This research approach focuses on how people make meaning, apprehend reality, articulate values, and order experience through their use of cultural symbols. Cultural studies scholars also examine the way status quo groups in society, particularly corporate and political elites, use media to circulate their messages and sustain their interests. This research has attempted to make daily cultural experience the focus of media studies, keying on the subtle intersections among mass communication, history, politics, and economics.

In this chapter, we examine the evolution of media research over time. After looking at early research efforts, we focus on the two major strains of media research, investigating the strengths and limitations of each. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of how media research interacts with democratic ideals.

## Early Media Research Methods

In the early days of the United States, philosophical and historical writings tried to explain the nature of news and print media. For instance, the French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, author of *Democracy in America*, noted differences between French and American newspapers in the early 1830s:

*In France the space allotted to commercial advertisements is very limited, and . . . the essential part of the journal is the discussion of the politics of the day. In America three quarters of the enormous sheet are filled with advertisements and the remainder is frequently occupied by political intelligence or trivial anecdotes; it is only from time to time that one finds a corner devoted to the passionate discussions like those which the journalists of France every day give to their readers.*[1]

During most of the nineteenth century, media analysis was based on moral and political arguments, as noted in the de Tocqueville quote above.[2]

More scientific approaches to mass media research did not begin to develop until the late 1920s and 1930s. In 1920, Walter Lippmann's *Liberty and the News* called on journalists to operate more like scientific researchers in gathering and analyzing factual material. Lippmann's next book, *Public Opinion* (1922), was the first to apply the principles of psychology to journalism. Considered by many academics to be "the founding book in American media studies,"[3] it led to an expanded understanding of the effects of the media, emphasizing data collection and numerical measurement. According to media historian Daniel Czitrom, by the 1930s

**"The pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationships, are their public opinions."**

WALTER LIPPMANN, *PUBLIC OPINION*, 1922

EFFECTS OF PROPAGANDA
One of the earliest forms of U.S. mass communication research—propaganda analysis—was prominent during the twentieth century's two world wars. Researchers studied the impact of war posters and other government information campaigns to determine how audiences could be persuaded through stirring media messages about patriotism and duty.

"an aggressively empirical spirit, stressing new and increasingly sophisticated research techniques, characterized the study of modern communication in America."[4] Czitrom traces four trends between 1930 and 1960 that contributed to the rise of modern media research: propaganda analysis, public opinion research, social psychology studies, and marketing research.

## Propaganda Analysis

After World War I, some media researchers began studying how governments used propaganda to advance the war effort. They found that, during the war, governments routinely relied on propaganda divisions to spread "information" to the public. Though propaganda was considered a positive force for mobilizing public opinion during the war, researchers after the war labeled propaganda negatively, calling it "partisan appeal based on half-truths and devious manipulation of communication channels."[5] Harold Lasswell's important 1927 study *Propaganda Technique in the World War* focused on propaganda in the media, defining propaganda as "the control of opinion by significant symbols, . . . by stories, rumors, reports, pictures and other forms of social communication."[6] **Propaganda analysis** thus became a major early focus of mass media research.

## Public Opinion Research

Researchers soon went beyond the study of war propaganda and began to focus on more general concerns about how the mass media filtered information and shaped public attitudes. In the face of growing media influence, Walter Lippmann distrusted the public's ability to function as knowledgeable citizens as well as journalism's ability to help the public separate truth from lies. In promoting the place of the expert in modern life, Lippmann celebrated the social scientist as part of a new expert class that could best make "unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make decisions."[7]

Today, social scientists conduct *public opinion research* or citizen surveys; these have become especially influential during political elections. On the upside, public opinion research on diverse populations has provided insights into citizen behavior and social differences, especially during election periods or following major national events. For example, in 2008, the level of enthusiasm for voting in national elections was higher among Democrats than among Republicans. Polls showed that more than 50 percent of Democrats were enthusiastic about voting versus about 30 percent for Republicans, a reverse of the Republican voter excitement leading up to the 1994 election in which Republicans gained control of Congress.

On the downside, journalism has become increasingly dependent on polls, particularly for political insight. Some critics argue that this heavy reliance on measured public opinion has begun to adversely affect the active political involvement of American citizens. Many people do not vote because they have seen or read poll projections and have decided that

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF MEDIA
Concerns about film violence are not new. This 1930 movie, *Little Caesar*, follows the career of gangster Rico Bandello (played by Edward G. Robinson, shown), who kills his way to the top of the crime establishment and gets the girl as well. The Motion Picture Production Code, which was established a few years after this movie's release, reined in sexual themes and profane language, set restrictions on film violence, and attempted to prevent audiences from sympathizing with bad guys like Rico.

their votes would not make a difference. Furthermore, some critics of incessant polling argue that the public is just passively responding to surveys that mainly measure opinions on topics of interest to business, government, academics, and the mainstream news media. A final problem is the pervasive use of unreliable **pseudo-polls**, typically call-in, online, or person-in-the-street polls that the news media use to address a "question of the day." The National Council of Public Opinion Polls notes that "unscientific pseudo-polls are widespread and sometimes entertaining, if always quite meaningless," and discourages news media from conducting them.[8]

## Social Psychology Studies

While opinion polls measure public attitudes, *social psychology studies* measure the behavior and cognition of individuals. The most influential early social psychology study, the Payne Fund Studies, encompassed a series of thirteen research projects conducted by social psychologists between 1929 and 1932. Named after the private philanthropic organization that funded the research, the Payne Fund Studies were a response to a growing national concern about the effects of motion pictures, which had become a particularly popular pastime for young people in the 1920s. These studies, which were later used by some politicians to attack the movie industry, linked frequent movie attendance to juvenile delinquency, promiscuity, and other antisocial behaviors, arguing that movies took "emotional possession" of young filmgoers.[9]

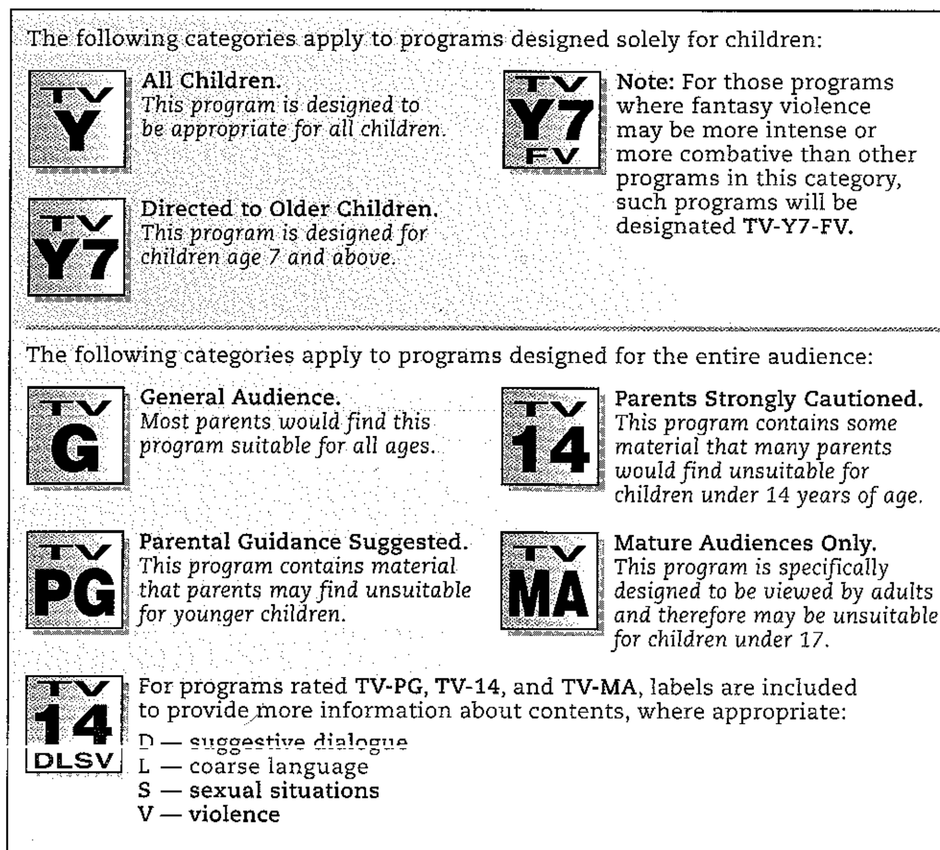
**"Motion pictures are not understood by the present generation of adults. They are new; they make an enormous appeal to children; and they present ideas and situations which parents may not like."**

*MOTION PICTURES AND THE SOCIAL ATTITUDES OF CHILDREN: A PAYNE FUND STUDY*, 1933

In one of the Payne studies, for example, children and teenagers were wired with "electrodes" and "galvanometers," mechanisms that detected any heightened response via the subject's skin. The researchers interpreted changes in the skin as evidence of emotional arousal. In retrospect, the findings hardly seem surprising: The youngest subjects in the group had the

FIGURE 15.1
**TV PARENTAL GUIDELINES**
The TV industry continues to study its self-imposed rating categories, promising to fine-tune them to ensure that the government keeps its distance. These standards are one example of a policy that was shaped in part by media research. Since the 1960s, research has attempted to demonstrate links between violent TV images and increased levels of aggression among children and adolescents.

*Source: TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board, http://www.tvguidelines.org, 7/10/06.*



The following categories apply to programs designed solely for children:

TV Y — **All Children.** *This program is designed to be appropriate for all children.*

TV Y7 — **Directed to Older Children.** *This program is designed for children age 7 and above.*

TV Y7 FV — **Note:** For those programs where fantasy violence may be more intense or more combative than other programs in this category, such programs will be designated **TV-Y7-FV.**

The following categories apply to programs designed for the entire audience:

TV G — **General Audience.** *Most parents would find this program suitable for all ages.*

TV 14 — **Parents Strongly Cautioned.** *This program contains some material that many parents would find unsuitable for children under 14 years of age.*

TV PG — **Parental Guidance Suggested.** *This program contains material that parents may find unsuitable for younger children.*

TV MA — **Mature Audiences Only.** *This program is specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17.*

TV 14 DLSV — For programs rated **TV-PG, TV-14,** and **TV-MA,** labels are included to provide more information about contents, where appropriate:
D — suggestive dialogue
L — coarse language
S — sexual situations
V — violence

strongest reaction to violent or tragic movie scenes, while the teenage subjects reacted most strongly to scenes with romantic and sexual content. The researchers concluded that films could be dangerous for young children and might foster sexual promiscuity among teenagers. The conclusions of this and other Payne Fund Studies contributed to the establishment of the film industry's production code, which tamed movie content from the 1930s through the 1950s (see Chapter 16). As forerunners of today's TV violence and aggression research, the Payne Fund Studies became the model for media research. (See Figure 15.1 for one example of a contemporary policy that has developed from media research. Also see "Examining Ethics: What to Do about Television Violence?" on the opposite page for more on the problems inherent in tackling violence on television.)

## Marketing Research

A fourth influential area of early media research, *marketing research*, developed when advertisers and product companies began conducting surveys on consumer buying habits in the 1920s. The emergence of commercial radio led to the first ratings systems that measured how many people were listening on a given night. By the 1930s, radio networks, advertisers, large stations, and advertising agencies all subscribed to ratings services. However, compared with print media, whose circulation departments kept careful track of customers' names and addresses, radio listeners were more difficult to trace. This problem precipitated the development of increasingly sophisticated marketing research methods to determine consumer preferences and media use, such as direct-mail diaries, television meters, phone surveys, telemarketing, and eventually Internet tracking. In many instances, product companies looking for participation in their surveys paid consumers nominal amounts of money to take part in these studies.



# EXAMINING ETHICS

## What to Do about Television Violence?

The debate over violent television programming is almost as old as television, with the first congressional hearings on the matter occurring in 1952. More than a half-century later, the debate continues. In 2007, the FCC released a lengthy report, "Violent Television Programming and Its Impact on Children," and recommended action to address violent programming.

The commission agreed with research that suggests "exposure to violence in the media can increase aggressive behavior in children, at least in the short term." Yet as the report tried to make conclusive statements about violent programming, it only raised more questions about what to do. The FCC cited several troubling statistics:

- An average American household has the television set turned on eight hours, eleven minutes, daily.
- Children watch on average between two and four hours of television every day.
- Depending on their age, one- to two-thirds of children have televisions in their bedrooms.
- By the time most children begin the first grade, they will have spent the equivalent of three school years in front of the television set.
- By the time the average child is eighteen years old, he or she will have watched more than ten thousand hours of television.
- By age eighteen, an American child will have seen upwards of fifteen thousand simulated murders and about two hundred thousand acts of violence on television.[1]

The report also identified a number of prime-time broadcast shows with violent content, including, of course, *24*, *CSI*, and *WWE Smackdown* but also, and less obviously, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Law & Order*, and *Desperate Housewives*.

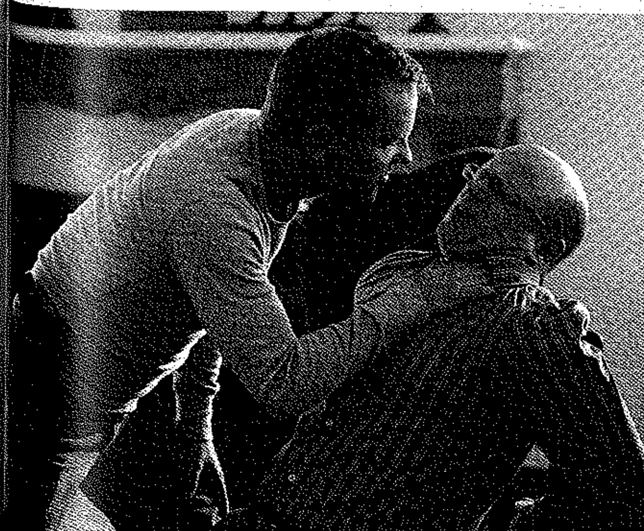
But dealing with television violence has been persistently confounded by several problems. First is the problem of defining violent content, at least in a way that could be used in government policies. Courts have struck down vague definitions that call for regulating excessive violence, noting that many classic stories from the Bible, Greek mythology, and fairy tales are filled with gruesome violence.

A second problem is determining which television programming to regulate. Most proposals include prime-time programming, but what about news, sports, commercials, and promotional announcements? And how should regulations treat cable and satellite television providers, who aren't subject to the same level of FCC oversight as broadcasters? Third is the issue of free speech. Courts have ruled that the First Amendment protects depictions of violence and violent speech. Although broadcasters have less First Amendment protection than other mass media and are subject to daytime restrictions on indecent content to protect children (see "The FCC Regulates Broadcasting" on pages 515–516), it's not clear that similar rules could be applied to violent content. As FCC Commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein stated in the report, "I do not even like my kids watching a cartoon of an anvil falling on the coyote's head, but I do not think any court would let us ban it."

Fourth, although a majority of Americans think there is too much violence on television, nearly all parties have fallen short in using existing tools to deal with it. The FCC charged that broadcast networks are inconsistent in how they voluntarily rate and label programs for violent content, and often "underlabel" programs with less restrictive ratings to increase advertiser incentives. Although the ratings have been around since 1997, many parents don't understand them. One in five parents has never heard of the ratings system, and only 8 percent can correctly identify the categories. Moreover, the V-chip, which has been built into television sets since 2000 to enable parents to block violent programming, is rarely used.

Finally, for all of the research suggesting that TV violence causes violent behavior, there are still significant questions that such effects even exist. Although the FCC sided with effects researchers, the report also noted that controlled laboratory environments and experimental measures of aggression (e.g., hitting dolls, "killing" characters in video games) can't be generalized to the real world and that there is—at least as yet—no demonstrable correlation between media violence and crime statistics.

**EFFECTS OF TV VIOLENCE**
The show *24* is often used as an example of violent programming on television.



## Research on Media Effects

"Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose."

ZORA NEALE HURSTON, WRITER

As concern about public opinion, propaganda, and the impact of the media merged with the growth of journalism and mass communication departments in colleges and universities, media researchers looked more and more to behavioral science as the basis of their research. Between 1930 and 1970, "Who says what to whom with what effect?" became the key question "defining the scope and problems of American communications research."[10] In addressing this question specifically, media effects researchers asked follow-up questions such as this: If children watch a lot of TV cartoons (stimulus or cause), will this repeated act influence their behavior toward their peers (response or effect)? For most of the twentieth century, media researchers and news reporters used different methods to answer similar sets of questions–who, what, when, and where–about our daily experiences.

### Early Explanations of Media Effects

A major goal of scientific research is to develop theories or laws that can consistently explain or predict human behavior. The varied impacts of the mass media and the diverse ways in which people make popular culture, however, tend to defy predictable rules. Historical, economic, and political factors influence media industries, making it difficult to develop systematic theories that explain communication. Researchers developed a number of small theories, or models, that help explain individual behavior rather than the impact of the media on large populations. But before these small theories began to emerge in the 1970s, mass media research followed several other models. Developing between the 1930s and the 1970s, these major approaches included the hypodermic-needle, minimal-effects, and uses and gratifications models.

**EFFECTS OF MASS MEDIA** Early media researchers were concerned about Adolf Hitler's use of national radio to control information and indoctrinate the German people throughout the 1930s. Germany's wartime international broadcasts, however, were considered failures. Trying to undermine morale using broadcasts aimed at Allied soldiers and British citizens, Germany hired British defector William Joyce ("Lord Haw Haw") and Ohioan Mildred Gillars ("Axis Sally"). Because so many media messages competed with Nazi propaganda in democratic countries, these radio traitors had little impact.

#### The Hypodermic-Needle Model

One of the earliest media theories attributed powerful effects to the mass media. A number of intellectuals and academics were fearful of the influence and popularity of film and radio in the 1920s and 1930s. Some social psychologists and sociologists who arrived in the United States after fleeing Germany and Nazism in the 1930s had watched Hitler use radio, film, and print media as propaganda tools. They worried that the popular media in America also had a strong hold over vulnerable audiences. This concept of powerful media affecting weak audiences has been labeled the **hypodermic-needle model**, sometimes also called the *magic bullet theory* or the *direct effects model*. It suggests that the media shoot their potent effects directly into unsuspecting victims.

One of the earliest challenges to this theory involved a study of Orson Welles's legendary October 30, 1938, radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, which presented H. G. Wells' Martian invasion novel in the form of a news report and frightened millions of listeners who didn't realize it was fictional (see Chapter 4). In a 1940 book-length study of the broadcast, *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic*, radio researcher Hadley Cantril argued that contrary to expectations according to the hypodermic-needle model, not all listeners thought the radio program was a real news report. Instead, Cantril, after conducting personal interviews and a nationwide survey of listeners and analyzing newspaper reports and listener mail to CBS Radio and the FCC, noted that although some did believe it to be real (mostly those who missed the disclaimer at the beginning of the broadcast), the majority reacted out of collective panic, not out of a gullible belief in anything transmitted through the media. Although the hypodermic-needle model over the years has been disproved by social scientists, many people still attribute direct effects to the mass media, particularly in the case of children.

"Theories abound, examples multiply, but convincing facts that specific media content is reliably associated with particular effects have proved quite elusive."

GUY CUMBERBATCH, *A MEASURE OF UNCERTAINTY*, 1989

#### The Minimal-Effects Model

Cantril's research helped to lay the groundwork for the **minimal-effects model**, or *limited model*. With the rise of empirical research techniques, social scientists began discovering and demonstrating that media alone cannot cause people to change their attitudes and behaviors. Based on tightly controlled experiments and surveys, researchers argued that people generally engage in **selective exposure** and **selective retention** with regard to the media. That is, people expose themselves to the media messages that are most familiar to them, and they retain the messages that confirm the values and attitudes they already hold. Minimal effects researchers have argued that in most cases mass media reinforce existing behaviors and attitudes rather than change them. The findings from the first comprehensive study of children and television–by Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle, and Edwin Parker in the late 1950s–best capture the minimal-effects theory:

> *For* some *children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For* other *children under the same conditions, or for the same children under* other *conditions, it may be beneficial. For* most *children, under* most *conditions,* most *television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial.*[11]

In addition, Joseph Klapper's important 1960 research study, *The Effects of Mass Communication*, found that the mass media only influenced individuals who did not already hold strong views on an issue and that the media had a greater impact on poor and uneducated audiences. Solidifying the minimal-effects argument, Klapper concluded that strong media effects occur largely at an individual level and do not appear to have large-scale, measurable, and direct effects on society as a whole.[12]

The minimal-effects theory furthered the study of the relationship between the media and human behavior, but it still assumed that audiences were passive and were acted upon by the media. Schramm, Lyle, and Parker suggested that there were problems with the position they had taken on effects:

> *In a sense the term "effect" is misleading because it suggests that television "does something" to children. The connotation is that television is the actor, the children are acted upon. Children are thus made to seem relatively inert; television, relatively active. Children are sitting victims; television bites them. Nothing can be further from the fact. It is the children who are most active in this relationship. It is they who use television, rather than television that uses them.*[13]

"If we're a nation possessed of a murderous imagination, we didn't start the bloodletting. Look at Shakespeare, colossus of the Western canon. His plays are written in blood."

SCOT LEHIGH, *BOSTON GLOBE*, 2000

**USES AND GRATIFICATIONS**
In 1952, audience members at the Paramount Theater in Hollywood donned 3-D glasses for the opening night screening of *Bwana Devil*, the first full-length color 3-D film. The uses and gratifications model of research investigates the appeal of mass media, such as going out to the movies.

Indeed, as the authors observed, numerous studies have concluded that viewers–especially young children–are often *actively* engaged in using media.

### The Uses and Gratifications Model

A response to the minimal-effects theory, the **uses and gratifications model** was proposed to contest the notion of a passive media audience. Under this model, researchers–usually using in-depth interviews to supplement survey questionnaires–studied the ways in which people used the media to satisfy various emotional or intellectual needs. Instead of asking, "What effects do the media have on us?" researchers asked, "Why do we use the media?" Asking the *why* question enabled media researchers to develop inventories cataloguing how people employed the media to fulfill their needs. For example, researchers noted that some individuals used the media to see authority figures elevated or toppled, to seek a sense of community and connectedness, to fulfill a need for drama and stories, and to confirm moral or spiritual values.[14]

Although the uses and gratifications model addressed the *functions* of the mass media for individuals, it did not address important questions related to the impact of the media on society. Once researchers had accumulated substantial inventories of the uses and functions of media, they often did not move in new directions. Consequently, uses and gratifications never became a dominant or enduring theory in media research.

## Conducting Media Effects Research

Media research generally comes from the private or public sector–each type with distinguishing features. *Private research,* sometimes called *proprietary research,* is generally conducted for a business, a corporation, or even a political campaign. It is usually applied research in the sense that the information it uncovers typically addresses some real-life problem or need. *Public research,* on the other hand, usually takes place in academic and government settings. It involves information that is often more *theoretical* than applied; it tries to clarify, explain, or predict the effects of mass media rather than to address a consumer problem.

Most media research today focuses on the effects of the media in such areas as learning, attitudes, aggression, and voting habits. This research employs the **scientific method**, a blueprint long used by scientists and scholars to study phenomena in systematic stages. These steps in the scientific method include:

1. identifying the research problem
2. reviewing existing research and theories related to the problem
3. developing working hypotheses or predictions about what the study might find
4. determining an appropriate method or research design
5. collecting information or relevant data
6. analyzing results to see if the hypotheses have been verified
7. interpreting the implications of the study to determine whether they explain or predict the problem



The scientific method relies on *objectivity* (eliminating bias and judgments on the part of researchers); *reliability* (getting the same answers or outcomes from a study or measure during repeated testing); and *validity* (demonstrating that a study actually measures what it claims to measure).

In scientific studies, researchers pose one or more **hypotheses**: tentative general statements that predict the influence of an *independent variable* on a *dependent variable.* For example, a researcher might hypothesize that frequent TV viewing among adolescents (independent variable) causes poor academic performance (dependent variable). Or, another researcher might hypothesize that playing first-person-shooter video games (independent variable) is associated with aggression in children (dependent variable).

Broadly speaking, the methods for studying media effects on audiences have taken two forms–experiments and survey research. To supplement these approaches, researchers also use content analysis to count and document specific messages that circulate in mass media.

### Experiments

Like all studies that use the scientific method, **experiments** in media research isolate some aspect of content; suggest a hypothesis; and manipulate variables to discover a particular medium's impact on attitude, emotion, or behavior. To test whether a hypothesis is true, researchers expose an *experimental group*–the group under study–to a selected media program or text. To ensure valid results, researchers also use a *control group,* which serves as a basis for comparison; this group is not exposed to the selected media content. Subjects are picked for each group through **random assignment**, which simply means that each subject has an equal chance of being placed in either group. Random assignment ensures that the independent variables researchers want to control are distributed to both groups in the same way.

For instance, to test the effects of violent films on pre-adolescent boys, a research study might take a group of ten-year-olds and randomly assign them to two groups. Researchers expose the experimental group to a violent action movie that the control group does not see. Later, both groups are exposed to a staged fight between two other boys so that the researchers can observe how each group responds to an actual physical confrontation. Researchers then determine whether or not there is a statistically measurable difference between the two groups' responses to the fight. For example, perhaps the control subjects tried to break up the fight but the experimental subjects did not. Because the groups were randomly selected and the only measurable difference between them was the viewing of the movie, researchers may conclude that under these conditions the violent film caused a different behavior. (See the "Bobo doll" experiment photos on page 480.)

When experiments carefully account for independent variables through random assignment, they generally work well to substantiate direct cause-effect hypotheses. Such research takes place both in laboratory settings and in field settings, where people can be observed using the media in their everyday environments. In field experiments, however, it is more difficult for researchers to control variables. In lab settings, researchers have more control, but other problems may occur. For example, when subjects are removed from the environments in which they regularly use the media, they may act differently–often with fewer inhibitions–than they would in their everyday surroundings.

Experiments have other limitations as well. One, they are not generalizable to a larger population; they cannot tell us whether cause-effect results can be duplicated outside of the laboratory. Two, most academic experiments today are performed on college students, who are convenient subjects for research but are not representative of the general public. Finally, while most experiments are fairly good at predicting short-term media effects under controlled conditions, they do not predict how subjects will behave months or years later in the real world.

> **"Writing survey questions and gathering data are easy; writing good questions and collecting useful data are not."**
>
> MICHAEL SINGLETARY, *MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH*, 1994

### Survey Research

In the simplest terms, **survey research** is collecting and measuring data taken from a group of respondents. Using random sampling techniques that give each potential subject an equal chance to be included in the survey, this research method draws on much larger populations than those used in experimental studies. Surveys may be conducted through direct mail, personal interviews, telephone calls, e-mail, and Web sites, enabling survey researchers to accumulate large amounts of information by surveying diverse cross sections of people. These data help to examine demographic factors such as educational background, income level, race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, and political affiliations, along with questions directly related to the survey topic.

Two other benefits of surveys are that they are usually generalizable to the larger society and that they enable researchers to investigate populations in long-term studies. For example, survey research can measure subjects when they are ten, twenty, and thirty years old to track changes in how frequently they watch television and what kinds of programs they prefer at different ages. In addition, large government and academic survey databases are now widely available and contribute to the development of more long-range or **longitudinal studies**, which make it possible for social scientists to compare new studies with those conducted years earlier.

Like experiments, surveys have several drawbacks. First, survey investigators cannot account for all the variables that might affect media use; therefore, they cannot show cause-effect relationships. Survey research can, however, reveal **correlations**–or associations–between two variables. For example, a random questionnaire survey of ten-year-old boys might demonstrate that a correlation exists between aggressive behavior and watching violent TV programs. Such a correlation, however, does not explain what is the cause and what is the effect–that is, do violent TV programs cause aggression or are more aggressive ten-year-old boys simply drawn to violent television? Second, the validity of survey questions is a chronic problem for survey practitioners. Surveys are only as good as the wording of their questions and the answer choices they present. For example, as NPR reported recently, "[I]f you ask people whether they support or oppose the death penalty for murderers, about two-thirds of Americans say they support it. If you ask whether people prefer that murderers get the death penalty or life in prison without parole, then you get a 50-50 split."[15]

### Content Analysis

Over the years, researchers recognized that experiments and surveys focused on general topics (violence) while ignoring the effects of specific media messages (gun violence, fist fights, etc.). As a corrective, researchers developed a method known as **content analysis** to study these messages. Such analysis is a systematic method of coding and measuring media content.

Although content analysis was first used during World War II for radio, more recent studies have focused on television and film. Probably the most influential content analysis studies have been conducted by George Gerbner and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania. Since the late 1960s, they have coded and counted acts of violence on network television. Combined with surveys, these annual "violence profiles" have shown that heavy watchers of television, ranging from children to retired Americans, tend to overestimate the amount of violence that exists in the actual world.[16]

The limits of content analysis, however, have been well documented. First, this technique does not measure the effects of the messages on audiences nor explain how those messages are presented. For example, a content analysis sponsored by the Kaiser Family Foundation that examined more than eleven hundred television shows found that 70 percent featured sexual content.[17] But the study doesn't explain how viewers interpreted the content or the context of the messages. (See "Media Literacy and the Critical Process: Counting Sexual Scenes on TV" on the opposite page.)



## Media Literacy and the Critical Process

### Counting Sexual Scenes on TV

Every few years since 1999, the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonprofit private foundation dedicated to "providing information and analysis on health care issues to policymakers, the media, the health care community, and the general public," releases a major study of sexual content on television. In 2005, the foundation released *Sex on TV 4* and reported that the number of sexual scenes on television had nearly doubled since 1998.[1] But what does "sexual content" actually mean, and what do the study's results suggest to policymakers? To address these questions, we will use the critical process to analyze the study.

**1 DESCRIPTION.** Central to any study using content analysis is developing a working definition of terms. For the Kaiser study, "sex is defined as any depiction of sexual activity, sexually suggestive behavior, or talk about sexuality or sexual activity." What would you include or not include in a definition of sexual content?

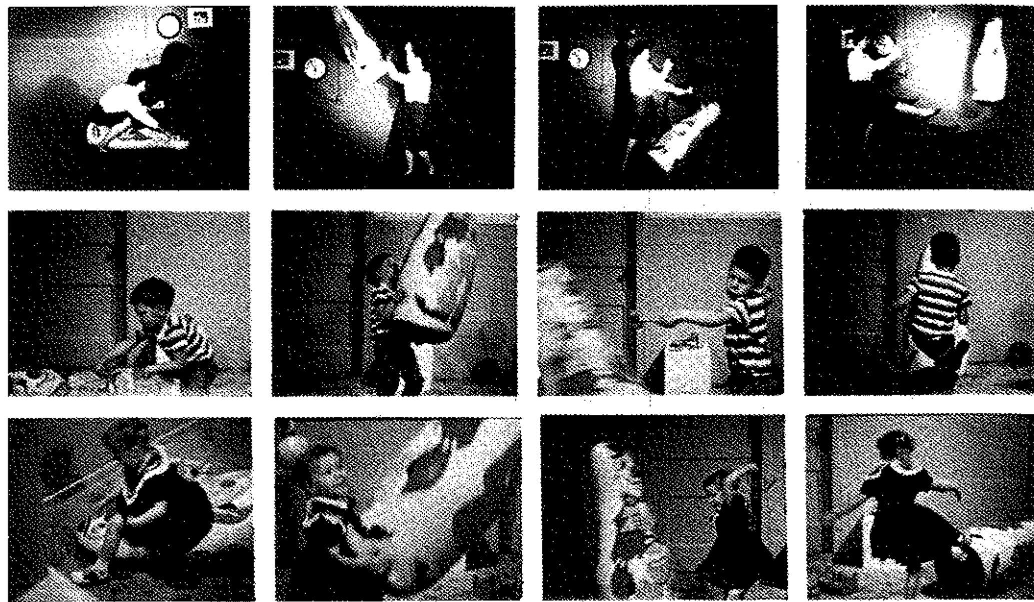
**2 ANALYSIS.** The study analyzed a sample of more than eleven hundred programs, covering a range of television genres but excluding daily newscasts, children's shows, and sporting events. The main sample included shows from ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, an independent WB affiliate, a PBS affiliate, Lifetime, TNT, USA Network, and HBO. The sample also included daytime soap operas, one of the genres with the highest percentage of sexual content. Do these genres represent the viewing environment of twelve- to seventeen-year-olds, the age group of greatest concern to the researchers? In reviewing the study online, what are the significant patterns that emerged?

**3 INTERPRETATION.** Do jokes about a newlywed couple's sexual encounters (*Scrubs*), bedroom banter between a married couple (*According to Jim*), depictions of flirting (*House*), scenes of intimate touching (*CSI: New York*), dramatic discussions about sexually transmitted diseases (*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*), a comment about oral sex (*The View*), and implied (*Boston Legal*) or actual (*General Hospital*) depictions of sexual intercourse all have the same impact and meaning? This study treats them all as sex scenes. Do you think viewers would interpret these scenes the same way? How would audience studies–focusing on how people actually use and interpret this television content–help to clarify the interpretation of the content analysis?

**4 EVALUATION.** The *Sex on TV 4* study notes that over the past decade "fewer teens are having sex, and more of those who are having intercourse are using protection–and the teen pregnancy rate is going down as a result." Does this admission undermine the study's concerns that "the amount of sexual content on television continues to increase" and it "may be contributing to perceptions about peer norms regarding both sexual behavior (e.g., 'everybody is doing it') and safer sex practices"? How is it that sexual content, as measured by this study, is increasing on television, while teen sexual behavior is declining and becoming more safe?

**5 ENGAGEMENT.** This series of studies has had a big impact on the way policymakers understand media effects. There's bipartisan support in Congress to fund more studies that would analyze media effects on the health and development of children. How would you undertake this kind of study? To make an informed recommendation, critically read the studies for yourself at www.kff.org/entmedia/index.cfm.

Second, problems of definition occur in content analysis. For instance, in the case of coding and counting acts of violence, how do researchers distinguish slapstick cartoon aggression from the violent murders or rapes in an evening police drama? Critics point out that such varied depictions may have diverse and subtle effects on viewers that are not differentiated by content analysis. Finally, critics point out that as content analysis grew to be a primary tool in media research, it sometimes pushed to the sidelines other ways of thinking about television and media content. Broad questions concerning the media as a popular art form, as a measure of culture, as a democratic influence, or as a force for social control are difficult to address through strict



**SOCIAL LEARNING THEORIES**
These photos document the "Bobo doll" experiments conducted by Albert Bandura and his colleagues at Stanford University in the early 1960s. Seventy-two children from the Stanford University Nursery School were divided into experimental and control groups. The "aggressive condition" experimental group subjects watched an adult in the room sit on, kick, and hit the Bobo doll with hands and a wooden mallet while saying such things as "Sock him in the nose," "Throw him in the air," and "Pow." (In later versions of the experiment, children watched filmed versions of the adult with the Bobo doll.) Afterward, in a separate room filled with toys, the children in the "aggressive condition" group were more likely than the other children to imitate the adult model's behavior toward the Bobo doll.

measurement techniques. Critics of content analysis, in fact, have objected to the kind of social science that reduces culture to acts of counting. Such criticism has addressed the tendency by some researchers to favor measurement accuracy over intellectual discipline and inquiry.[18]

## Contemporary Media Effects Theories

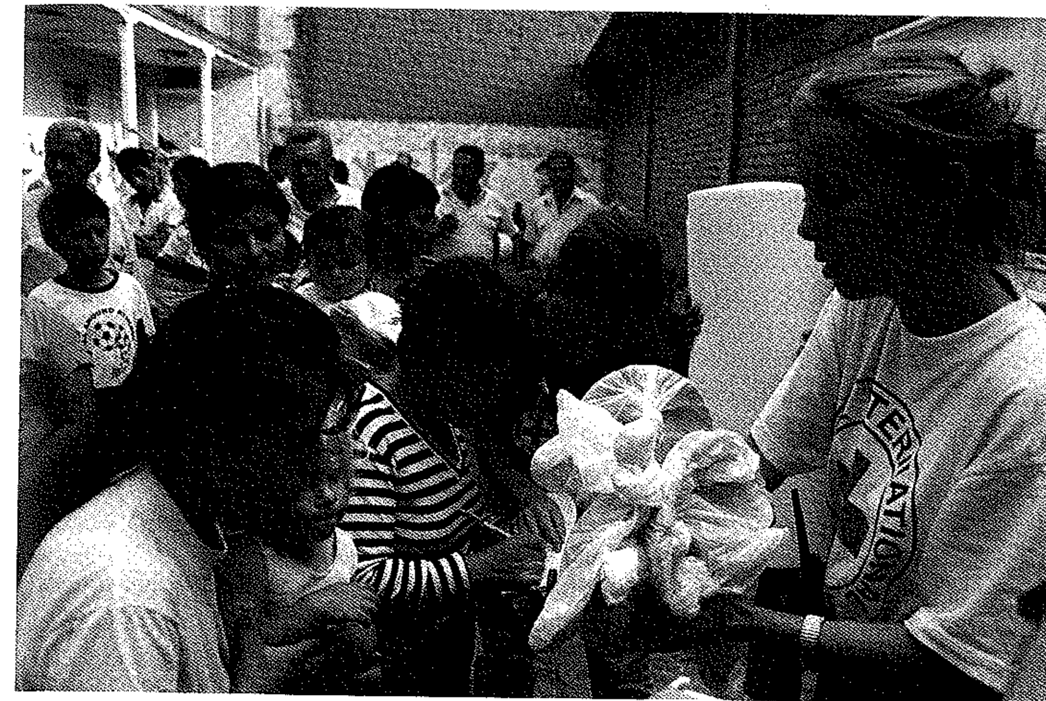
By the 1960s, the first departments of mass communication began graduating Ph.D.-level researchers schooled in experiment and survey research techniques, as well as content analysis. These researchers began documenting consistent patterns in mass communication and developing new theories. Four of the most influential contemporary theories that help explain media effects are social learning theory, agenda-setting, the cultivation effect, and the spiral of silence.

### Social Learning Theory

Some of the most well-known studies that suggest a link between the mass media and behavior are the "Bobo doll" experiments, conducted on children by psychologist Albert Bandura and his colleagues at Stanford University in the 1960s. Bandura concluded that the experiments demonstrated a link between violent media programs, such as those on television, and aggressive behavior. Bandura developed **social learning theory** as a four-step process: *attention* (the subject must attend to the media and witness the aggressive behavior), *retention* (the subject must retain the memory for later retrieval), *motor reproduction* (the subject must be able to physically imitate the behavior), and *motivation* (there must be a social reward or reinforcement to encourage modeling of the behavior).

Supporters of social learning theory often cite real-life imitations of media aggression (see the beginning of the chapter) as evidence of social learning theory at work. Yet critics note that many studies conclude just the opposite—that there is no link between media content and aggression. For example, millions of people have watched episodes of *CSI* and *The Sopranos* without subsequently exhibiting aggressive behavior. As critics point out, social learning theory simply makes television, film, and other media scapegoats for larger social problems relating to violence. Others suggest that experiencing media depictions of aggression can actually help viewers let off steam peacefully through a catharsis effect.





**AGENDA-SETTING**
A consequence of agenda-setting theory is that the stories that don't get attention from the mass media don't make it onto the public and political agendas. Each year Doctors Without Borders compiles a list of the most underreported humanitarian crises. In 2007, the list included the long-standing civil war in Colombia, where over 3.8 million people have been displaced.

### Agenda-Setting

A key phenomenon posited by contemporary media effects researchers is **agenda-setting**: the idea that when the mass media focus their attention on particular events or issues, they determine—that is, set the agenda for—the major topics of discussion for individuals and society. Essentially, agenda-setting researchers have argued that the mass media do not so much tell us what to think as *what to think about*. Traceable to Walter Lippmann's notion in the early 1920s that the media "create pictures in our heads," the first investigations into agenda-setting began in the 1970s.[19]

Over the years, agenda-setting research has demonstrated that the more stories the news media do on a particular subject, the more importance audiences attach to that subject. For instance, when the media seriously began to cover ecology issues after the first Earth Day in 1970, a much higher percentage of the population began listing the environment as a primary social concern in surveys. When *Jaws* became a blockbuster in 1975, the news media started featuring more shark attack stories; even landlocked people in the Midwest began ranking sharks as a major problem, despite the rarity of such incidents worldwide. More recently, the extensive news media coverage of the Hurricane Katrina disaster in fall 2005 sparked a corresponding increase in public concern about preparedness for natural disasters. Today, however, even with the affected areas far from rebuilt, as the national news coverage has dropped, so has much of the public interest in the region's recovery.

### The Cultivation Effect

Another mass media phenomenon—the **cultivation effect**—suggests that heavy viewing of television leads individuals to perceive the world in ways that are consistent with television portrayals. This area of media effects research has pushed researchers past a focus on how the media affects individual behavior and toward a focus on larger ideas about the impact on perception.

The major research in this area grew from the TV violence profiles of George Gerbner and his colleagues, who attempted to make broad generalizations about the impact of televised violence. The cultivation effect suggests that the more time individuals spend viewing television and absorbing its viewpoints, the more likely their views of social reality will be "cultivated" by

the images and portrayals they see on television.[20] For example, Gerbner's studies concluded that, although fewer than 1 percent of Americans are victims of violent crime in any single year, people who watch a lot of television tend to overestimate this percentage. Such exaggerated perceptions, Gerbner and his colleagues argued, are part of a "mean world" syndrome, in which viewers with heavy, long-term exposure to television violence are more likely to believe that the external world is a mean and dangerous place.

According to the cultivation effect, media messages interact in complicated ways with personal, social, political, and cultural factors; they are one of a number of important factors in determining individual behavior and defining social values. Some critics have charged that cultivation research has provided limited evidence to support its findings. In addition, some have argued that the cultivation effects recorded by Gerbner's studies have been so minimal as to be benign and that, when compared side-by-side, the perceptions of heavy television viewers and nonviewers in terms of the "mean world" syndrome are virtually identical.

**"Many studies currently published in mainstream communication journals seem filled with sophisticated treatments of trivial data, which, while showing effects . . . make slight contributions to what we really know about human mass-mediated communication."**

WILLARD ROWLAND AND BRUCE WATKINS, *INTERPRETING TELEVISION*, 1984

### Spiral of Silence

Developed by German communication theorist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in the 1970s and 1980s, the **spiral of silence** theory links the mass media, social psychology, and the formation of public opinion. The theory proposes that those who believe that their views on controversial issues are in the minority will keep their views to themselves–i.e., become silent–for fear of social isolation. As those in the minority voice their views less often, alternative and minority perspectives are diminished and even silenced. The theory is based on social psychology studies, such as the classic conformity research studies of Solomon Asch in 1951. In Asch's study on the effects of group pressure, he demonstrated that a test subject is more likely to give clearly wrong answers to questions about line lengths if all other people in the room (all secret confederates of the experimenter) unanimously state an incorrect answer. Noelle-Neumann argued that this effect is exacerbated by the mass media, particularly television, which can communicate a real or presumed majority public opinion widely and quickly. For example, one researcher noted that from the 1970s through the 1990s, the political Right in the United States was effective in using the media to frame liberals as an elite minority who protected special-interest groups such as atheists and criminals. At the same time, the Right was expounding the existence of a conservative Christian "moral majority" in the country. Instead of offering additional models of morality or protesting a narrow narrative frame that was too restrictive, some liberals–apparently finding themselves portrayed as a minority–chose to remain silent.[21]

According to the theory, the mass media can help create a false, overrated majority; that is, a true majority of people holding a certain position can grow silent when they sense an opposing majority in the media. One criticism of the theory is that some people may not fall into a spiral of silence because they don't monitor the media, or they mistakenly perceive that more people hold their position than really do. Noelle-Neumann acknowledges that in many cases, "hard-core nonconformists" exist and remain vocal even in the face of social isolation and can ultimately prevail in changing public opinion.

## Evaluating Research on Media Effects

The mainstream models of media research have made valuable contributions to our understanding of the mass media, submitting content and audiences to rigorous testing. This wealth of research exists partly because funding for studies on the effects of the media on young people remains popular among politicians and has drawn ready government support since the 1960s. Media critic Richard Rhodes argues that media effects research is inconsistent and often flawed but continues to resonate with politicians and parents because it offers an easy-to-blame social cause for real-world violence.



Funding restricts the scope of some media effects and survey research, particularly if the government, business, or other administrative agendas do not align with researchers' interests. Other limits also exist, including the inability to address how media affect communities and social institutions. Because most media research operates best in examining media and individual behavior, fewer research studies explore media's impact on community and social life. Some research has begun to address these deficits and also to turn more attention to the increasing impact of media technology on international communication.

# Cultural Approaches to Media Research

During the rise of modern media research, approaches with a stronger historical and interpretive edge developed as well, often in direct opposition to the scientific models. In the late 1930s, some social scientists began to warn about the limits of "gathering data" and "charting trends," particularly when these kinds of research projects served only advertisers and media organizations and tended to be narrowly focused on individual behavior, ignoring questions like "Where are institutions taking us?" and "Where do we want them to take us?"[22]

In the United States in the 1960s, an important body of research–loosely labeled *cultural studies*–arose to challenge mainstream media effects theories. Since that time, cultural studies research has focused on how people make meaning, understand reality, and order experience by using cultural symbols that appear in the media. This research has attempted to make everyday culture the centerpiece of media studies, focusing on how subtly mass communication shapes and is shaped by history, politics, and economics. Other cultural studies work examines the relationships between elite individuals and groups in government and politics and how media play a role in sustaining the authority of elites and, occasionally, in challenging their power.

**"When people say to you, 'of course that's so, isn't it?' that 'of course' is the most ideological moment, because that's the moment at which you're least aware that you are using a particular framework."**

STUART HALL, 1983

## Early Developments in Cultural Studies Research

In Europe, media studies have always favored interpretive rather than scientific approaches; in other words, researchers there have approached the media as if they were literary or cultural critics rather than experimental or survey researchers. These approaches were built on the writings of political philosophers such as Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, who investigated how mass media support existing hierarchies in society. They examined how popular culture and sports distract people from redressing social injustices, and they addressed the subordinate status of particular social groups, something emerging media effects researchers were seldom doing.

In the United States, early criticism of media effects research came from the Frankfurt School, a group of European researchers who emigrated from Germany to America to escape Nazi persecution in the 1930s. Under the leadership of Max Horkheimer, T. W. Adorno, and Leo Lowenthal, this group pointed to at least three inadequacies of traditional scientific approaches to media research, arguing that they (1) reduced large "cultural questions" to measurable and "verifiable categories"; (2) depended on "an atmosphere of rigidly enforced neutrality"; and (3) refused to place "the phenomena of modern life" in a "historical and moral context."[23] The researchers of the Frankfurt School did not completely reject the usefulness of measuring and counting data. They contended, however, that historical and

cultural approaches were also necessary to focus critical attention on the long-range effects of the mass media on audiences.

Since the time of the Frankfurt School, criticisms of the media effects tradition and its methods have continued, with calls for more interpretive studies of the rituals of mass communication. Academics who have embraced a cultural approach to media research try to understand how media and culture are tied to the actual patterns of communication in daily life. For example, in the 1970s, Stuart Hall and his colleagues studied the British print media and the police, who were dealing with an apparent rise in crime and mugging incidents. Arguing that the close relationship between the news and the police created a form of urban surveillance, the authors of *In Policing the Crisis* demonstrated that the mugging phenomenon was exacerbated, and in part created, by the key institutions assigned the social tasks of controlling crime and reporting on it.[24]

## Contemporary Cultural Studies Theories

Cultural research focuses on the investigation of daily experience, especially on issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality, and on the unequal arrangements of power and status in contemporary society. Such research emphasizes how some social and cultural groups have been marginalized and ignored throughout history. Consequently, cultural studies have attempted to recover lost or silenced voices, particularly among African American, Native American, Asian and Asian American, Arabic, Latino, Appalachian, gay and lesbian, immigrant, and women's cultures. The major analytical approaches in cultural studies research today are textual analysis, audience studies, and political economy studies.

### Textual Analysis

In cultural studies research, **textual analysis** highlights the close reading and interpretation of cultural messages, including those found in books, movies, and TV programs. It is the equivalent of measurement methods like experiments and surveys and content analysis. While media effects research approaches media messages with the tools of modern science–replicability, objectivity, and data–textual analysis looks at rituals, narratives, and meaning. (See "Case Study: Labor Gets Framed" on the opposite page.)

Although textual analysis has a long and rich history in film and literary studies, it became significant to media in 1974 when Horace Newcomb's book *TV: The Most Popular Art*, became the first serious academic book to analyze television shows. Newcomb studied why certain TV programs and formats became popular, especially comedies, westerns, mysteries, soap operas, news reports, and sports programs. Newcomb took television programs seriously, examining patterns in the most popular programs at the time, such as the *Beverly Hillbillies, Bewitched*, and *Dragnet*, which traditional researchers had usually snubbed or ignored. Trained as a literary scholar, Newcomb argued that content analysis and other social science approaches to popular media often ignored artistic traditions and social context. For Newcomb, "the task for the student of the popular arts is to find a technique through which many different qualities of the work–aesthetic, social, psychological–may be explored" and to discover "why certain formulas . . . are popular in American television."[25]

Before Newcomb's work, textual analysis generally focused only on "important" or highly regarded works of art–debates, films, poems, and books. But by the end of the 1970s a new generation of media studies scholars, who had grown up on television and rock and roll, began to study less elite forms of culture. They extended the concept of what a "text" is to include architecture, fashion, tabloid magazines, pop icons like Madonna, rock music, hip-hop, soap operas and telenovelas, movies, cockfights, shopping malls, reality TV, Martha Stewart, and professional wrestling, trying to make sense of the most taken-for-granted aspects of everyday



# CASE STUDY

## Labor Gets Framed

Labor union membership in the United States dropped from a high of 34.7 percent of the workforce in 1954 to less than 12 percent (less than 8 percent in the private sector) by 2007. In a world where economic and social forces increasingly separate the "haves" from the "have-nots" and popular media such as entertainment television and film rarely address labor issues, the news media remain one of the few places to find stories about the decline in labor unions and the working class.

Could the way in which news stories frame labor unions have an impact on how people in the United States understand them?

Analyzing the frames of news stories—that is, the ways in which journalists present them—is one form of textual analysis. Unfortunately, if one looks at how the news media frame their reports about labor unions, one has to conclude that news coverage of labor is not at all good.

**PROTESTORS** during the December 2005 Transit Workers Union (TWU) strike in New York City (TWU members operate the city's public transportation system, the largest in the country). The reasons behind the strike got less news coverage because the news focused on the millions of stranded commuters instead.

In a major study,[1] hundreds of network television news (ABC, CBS, and NBC) and national newspaper (*New York Times* and *USA Today*) reports involving labor over a ten-year period were analyzed to get a sense of how such stories are framed.

An interesting pattern emerged. Instead of discovering a straightforward bias against labor, the study found that news stories frame labor in a way that selects the consumer perspective (as opposed to a citizen or worker perspective). That is, labor unions aren't portrayed as inherently bad, but any kind of collective action by workers, communities, and even consumers that upsets the American consumer economy and its business leaders and entrepreneurs is framed as a bad thing.

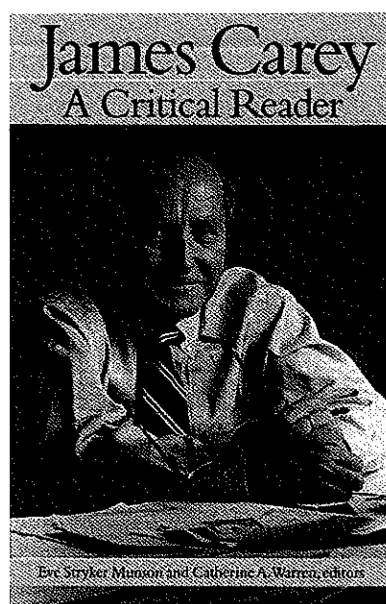
The classic example is the strike story. Even though less than 2 percent of all contract negotiations result in strikes, news stories seem to show union members regularly wielding picket signs. The real stars of strike stories, though, are the inconvenienced consumers—sour-faced people who are livid about missed flights, late package delivery, or canceled ball games. And usually the reports don't explain why a strike is occurring; viewers and readers mainly learn that the hallowed American consumer is upset and if those darned workers would just be a little more agreeable, then none of this inconvenience would have happened.

The frame carries an interesting underlying assumption: If collective action is bad, then economic intervention by citizens should happen only at the individual level (e.g., tell your boss to "take this job and shove it" if you are dissatisfied, or "vote with your pocketbook" if you don't like something). Of course, individual action would preempt collective action on the part of organizations such as labor unions, which, as organized groups, hold the promise of offering more democratic and broader solutions to problems that affect not one but many workers.

Corporate news that appears in many newspaper business sections frames labor stories in ways that are in harmony with the media corporations' own economic priorities. (Corporations like General Electric, Disney, Gannett, and Wal-Mart all have long track records of either trying to weaken their unions or break them completely.) But such stories do so without giving the appearance of bias, which would undermine their credibility. So they frame these stories from the perspective of the consumer (indeed, in an advertising- and corporate sponsor-based media system, this is the familiar environment in which all media stories are framed).

With such framing, the news media's stories undercut a legal institution—labor unions—that might serve as a useful remedy for millions of American workers who want independent representation in their workplace for collective bargaining and dispute resolution, as well as a voice in the economy. In fact, national surveys have shown that the majority of American workers would like a stronger voice in their workplaces but have negative opinions about unions, so they aren't likely to consider joining them.[2]

And that's the disconnect that the framing study illustrates: People want independent workplace representation, but—according to the news—labor unions and similar forms of collective action are hardly a viable option.




**CULTURAL APPROACHES TO MEDIA**
James W. Carey, who spent many years teaching at the University of Illinois and Columbia University, was an influential figure in cultural and critical communication studies. Carey's most well-known contributions envisioned communication as a cultural ritual rather than a mechanistic process of transmission. Carey died in 2006.

media culture. Often the study of these seemingly minor elements of popular culture provides insight into broader meanings within our society. By shifting the focus to daily popular culture artifacts, cultural studies succeeded in focusing scholarly attention—not just on significant presidents, important religious leaders, prominent political speeches, or military battles—but on the more ordinary ways that "normal" people organize experience and understand their daily lives.

### Audience Studies

Cultural studies research that focuses on how people use and interpret cultural content is called **audience studies**, or *reader-response research*. Audience studies differs from textual analysis because the subject being researched is the audience for the text, not the text itself. For example, in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, Janice Radway studied a group of midwestern women who were fans of romance novels. Using her training in literary criticism and employing interviews and questionnaires, Radway investigated the meaning of romance novels to the women. She argued that reading romance novels functions as personal time for some women, whose complex family and work lives leave them very little time for themselves. The study also suggested that these particular romance-novel fans identified with the active, independent qualities of the romantic heroines they most admired. As a cultural study, Radway's work did not claim to be scientific, and her findings are not generalizable to all women. Rather, Radway was interested in investigating and interpreting the relationship between reading popular fiction and ordinary life.[26]

Radway's influential cultural research used a variety of interpretive methods, including literary analysis, interviews, and questionnaires. Most important, these studies helped to define culture in broad terms, as being made up of both the *products* a society fashions and the *processes* that forge those products.

### Political Economy Studies

A focus on the production of popular culture and the forces behind it is the topic of **political economy studies**, which specifically examine interconnections among economic interests, political power, and how that power is used. Among the major concerns of political economy studies is the increasing conglomeration of media ownership. The increasing concentration of ownership means that the production of media content is being controlled by fewer and fewer organizations, investing those companies with more and more power. Moreover, the domination of public discourse by for-profit corporations may mean that the bottom line for all public communication and popular culture is money, not democratic expression.

Political economy studies work best when combined with textual analysis and audience studies, which provide context for understanding the cultural content of a media product, its production process, and how the audience responds. For example, a major media corporation may, for commercial reasons, create a film and market it through a number of venues (political economy), but the film's meaning or popularity makes sense only within the historical and narrative contexts of the culture (textual analysis), and it may be interpreted by various audiences in ways both anticipated and unexpected (audience studies).

**"I take culture... and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."**

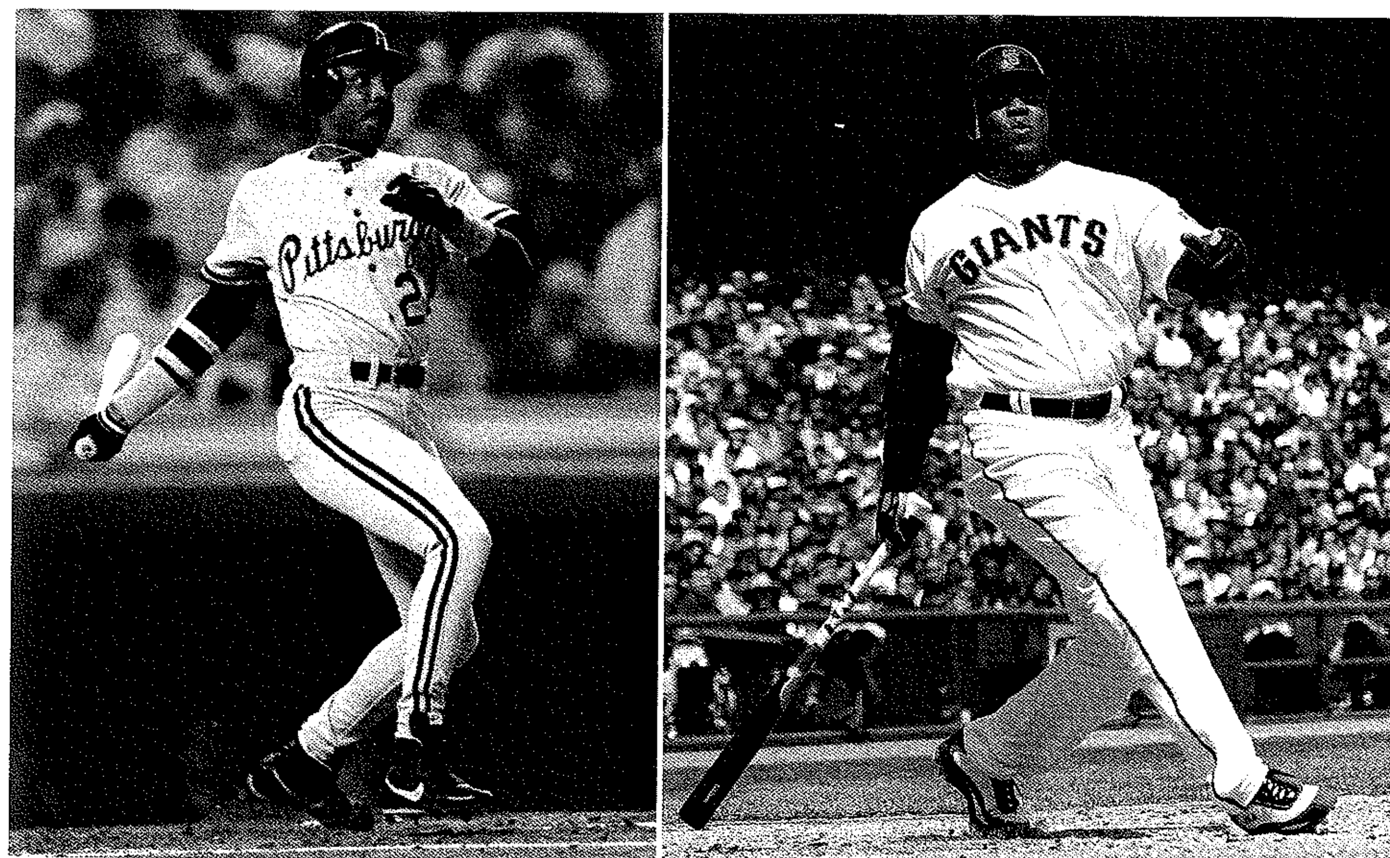
CLIFFORD GEERTZ, CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGIST, 1973

## Evaluating Cultural Studies Research

In opposition to media effects research, cultural studies research involves interpreting written and visual "texts" or artifacts as symbolic representations that contain cultural, historical, and political meaning. For example, the wave of police and crime TV shows that appeared in the mid-1960s can be interpreted as a cultural response to concerns and fears people had about urban unrest and income disparity. Audiences were drawn to the heroes of these dramas, who often exerted control over forces that, among society in general, seemed out of control. Similarly, people today who participate in radio talk shows, Internet forums, and TV reality shows can be viewed, in part, as responding to feeling disconnected from economic success or political power. Taking part in these forums represents a popular culture avenue for engaging with media in ways that are usually reserved for professional actors or for the rich, famous, and powerful. As James Carey put it, the cultural approach, unlike media effects research, which is grounded in the social sciences, "does not seek to explain human behavior, but to understand it. . . . It does not attempt to predict human behavior, but to diagnose human meanings."[27] In other words, a cultural approach does not provide explanations for laws that govern how mass media behave. Rather, it offers interpretations of the stories, messages, and meanings that circulate throughout our culture.

One of the main strengths of cultural studies research is the freedom it affords to broadly interpret the impact of the mass media. Because cultural work is not bound by the precise control of variables, researchers can more easily examine the ties between media messages and the broader social, economic, and political world. For example, media effects research on politics has generally concentrated on election polls and voting patterns, while cultural research has broadened the discussion to examine class, gender, and cultural differences among voters and the various uses of power by individuals and institutions in authority. Following Horace Newcomb's work, cultural investigators have expanded the study of media content beyond "serious" works. They have studied many popular forms, including music, movies, and prime-time television.

**CULTURAL STUDIES** researchers are interested in the production, meaning, and audience response to a wide range of elements within communication culture, including the meaning and reception of sports figures like Barry Bonds, who was caught in a media controversy over performance-enhancing drugs. (*Below left*, Bonds in 1992; *below*, Bonds in 2006.)



Just as media effects research has its limits, so does cultural studies research. Sometimes cultural studies have focused exclusively on the meanings of media programs or "texts," ignoring their effect on audiences. Some cultural studies, however, have tried to address this deficiency by incorporating audience studies. Both media effects and cultural studies researchers today have begun to look at the limitations of their work more closely, borrowing ideas from each other to better assess the complexity of the media's meaning and impact.

## Media Research and Democracy

One charge frequently leveled at academic studies is that they fail to address the everyday problems of life; they often seem to have little practical application. The growth of mass media departments in colleges and universities has led to an increase in specialized jargon, which tends to alienate and exclude nonacademics. Although media research has built a growing knowledge base and dramatically advanced what we know about the effect of mass media on individuals and societies, the academic world has paid a price. That is, the larger public has often been excluded from access to the research process even though cultural research tends to identify with marginalized groups. The scholarship is self-defeating if its complexity removes it from the daily experience of the groups it addresses. Researchers themselves have even found it difficult to speak to one another across disciplines because of discipline-specific language used to analyze and report findings. For example, understanding the elaborate statistical analyses used to document media effects requires special training.

In some cultural research, the language used is often incomprehensible to students and to other audiences who use the mass media. A famous hoax in 1996 pointed out just how inaccessible some academic jargon can be. Alan Sokal, a New York University physics professor, submitted an impenetrable article, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," to a special issue of the academic journal *Social Text* devoted to science and postmodernism. As he had expected, the article–a hoax designed to point out how dense academic jargon can sometimes mask sloppy thinking–was published. According to the journal's editor, about six reviewers had read the article but didn't suspect that it was phony. A public debate ensued after Sokal revealed his hoax. Sokal said he worries that jargon and intellectual fads cause academics to lose contact with the real world and "undermine the prospect for progressive social critique."[28]

**PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS** like Barbara Ehrenreich (center) cross the boundary between academics and the general public.

In addition, increasing specialization in the 1970s began isolating many researchers from life outside of the university. Academics were locked away in their "ivory towers," concerned with seemingly obscure matters to which the general public couldn't relate. Academics across many fields, however, began responding to this isolation and became increasingly active in political and cultural life in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, literary scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. began writing essays for *Time* and the *New Yorker* magazines. Linguist Noam Chomsky has written for decades about excessive government and media power; he was also the subject of an award-winning documentary, *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*. Steven D. Levitt, an economics professor at the University of Chicago, worked with journalist coauthor Stephen Dubner to popularize his unconventional economics studies (asking questions like "If drug dealers make so much money, why do they still live with their mothers?") in the 2005 book *Freakonomics*. Essayist and cultural critic Barbara Ehrenreich has written often about labor and economic issues in magazines such as *Time* and the *Nation*. In her 2008 book *This Land Is Their Land: Reports from a Divided Nation*, she investigates incidents of poverty among recent college graduates, undocumented workers, and Iraq war military families, documenting the wide divide between rich and poor. Finally, Georgetown University sociology professor Michael Eric Dyson, author of the book *April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Death and How It Changed America*, made frequent appearances on network and cable news channels during the 2008 presidential campaign to speak on the issues of race and the meaning of Barack Obama's historic candidacy.

In recent years, public intellectuals have also encouraged discussion about media production in a digital world. Stanford University law professor Lawrence Lessig has been a leading advocate of efforts to rewrite the nation's copyright laws to enable noncommercial "amateur culture" to flourish on the Internet. He publishes his work both in print and online. American University's Pat Aufderheide, longtime media critic for the alternative magazine *In These Times*, worked with independent filmmakers to develop the *Documentary Filmmakers' Statement of Best Practices in Fair Use*, which calls for documentary filmmakers to have reasonable access to copyrighted material for their work.

Like public journalists, public intellectuals based on campuses help carry on the conversations of society and culture, actively circulating the most important new ideas of the day and serving as models for how to participate in public life.

**"In quantum gravity, as we shall see, the space-time manifold ceases to exist as an objective reality; geometry becomes relational and contextual; and the foundational conceptual categories of prior science—among them, existence itself—become problematized and relativized. This conceptual revolution, I will argue, has profound implications for the content of a future postmodern and liberatory science."**

FROM ALAN SOKAL'S PUBLISHED JARGON-RIDDLED HOAX, 1996

**"My idea of a good time is using jargon and citing authorities."**

MATT GROENING, *SCHOOL IS HELL*, 1987