

# MEDIA EFFECTS RESEARCH

• A BASIC OVERVIEW •

GLENN G. SPARKS



# Media Effects Research

A Basic Overview

Glenn G. Sparks  
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## Preface

I never intended to write a textbook. I have always identified myself as a researcher and teacher of mass-communication effects—not a textbook writer. My intentions changed after teaching university undergraduates for over two decades. In my course at Purdue University on mass-communication theory, I watch semester after semester as my students gradually sink into the dry-sand prose of most texts that attempt to present theories of mass media. Once the sinking starts, I am almost never able to rescue them. I finally grew tired of this routine.

Compounding my frustration was the fact that my main desire was to teach about media impact rather than about mass-communication *theory*. Theory is fully realized when it meets the soil of observation. I have found that students can digest incredible doses of theory in the context of discovering what research says about media impact. So, this book is focused on the research instead of the theory that motivates the research. Nevertheless, if you use this text, I am betting that you will find plenty of theory to keep your students occupied—but the theory is presented in the context of research findings.

I became convinced to write a book for undergraduate students when I realized that it *was* possible to write a text that was not dry and boring. My two primary exemplars are Robert Cialdini's classic text on persuasion, *Influence*, and Em Griffin's best-selling introduction to communication theory, *A First Look at Communication Theory*. Since Em asked me to advise him about what to include in the mass-communication section of his book, I began thinking more seriously of trying to write a text of my own. This book represents my first attempt to do so. All of the chapters have been pretested on my own classes, and the results have encouraged me to make the material available to more people. Before you dive in, let me outline just a bit about the guiding philosophy of the book and how I think the text can be used.

Above all else, I have tried to write plainly and in a style that will engage the typical undergraduate student. This means that I often share personal anecdotes and refer to myself in the first person. I am committed to this style. I think students respond better if they can sense that there is a living, breathing human being behind the words. The reactions of my own students have helped to convince me that this is truly the case.

As you evaluate the text, keep in mind that I have attempted only to *introduce* the topic of media effects—not to write everything known by the research community. I believe that textbook writers make a tragic mistake when they

try to cover the whole terrain of their topic. This might satisfy textbook reviewers and serve as a valuable reference for scholars, but I don't think it does much good at generating genuine interest among the students who ultimately have to pay for and read the text. Because of my commitment to limiting this textbook to an introduction to media effects, I am certain that some professors will examine this text and spot crucial omissions that simply *must* be included. I am well aware that the book fails to cover everything. I planned it that way. One of my goals is to keep the material manageable so that students will actually read the chapters. I also want students to finish the book and still be interested in finding out more about media effects. I have decided to sacrifice a little breadth on the altar of student interest. I think it is a sacrifice well worth making.

How can this book be used? I think the text can fit into two different kinds of courses. First, it can obviously be used in a mass-communication theory course or a mass media research course. Second, the book can be used as a secondary text in a basic introduction to mass communication. Most of the texts for the basic course have little or no coverage of media effects research. For professors who want their students to develop a deeper understanding of the effects literature, this book should not be too overwhelming as an accompanying volume in the basic introductory course. I have deliberately held the presentation of material to 12 chapters in order for the book to fit comfortably into different course formats. In the 15-week semester, I have found that students would rather ease in and ease out. For years, I attempted to fight that attitude; now I find myself subscribing to it. Once again, my philosophy here is to meet the needs of the audience. If I don't assign a chapter of reading in either the first or last week, I can still assign a chapter per week for the rest of the semester and have one week for some additional reading that I might select. If there is a topic that a professor believes must be in the course that I don't cover, the flexible week fills the need. The chapters are also short enough and easy enough to read that more than one chapter *could* be assigned in a single week for schools that are on a shorter semester. In the end, my primary goal is to have students understand more about media research and still be interested in the topic when they finish reading. The initial evidence suggests that I have succeeded. I am eager to discover if you agree.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a book of this type is not easy. Very simply, I could never have done it without help from lots of people. My students over the years helped to shape my thinking about a book of this type. To the extent that the book is successful at communicating well about media effects, I am indebted to my students' willingness to share their reactions and insights. Before I ever started my work at Purdue, I was fortunate enough to be mentored in graduate school by Joanne Cantor. Her integrity and dedication to my training as a scholar were unparalleled. I could never have written this text without the kind of education that Joanne provided. The book would never have been completed if I hadn't been blessed with a working environment that was conducive to productive labor. I

have been in the Department of Communication at Purdue University for 15 years. It is a fabulous place to teach, conduct research, write, and generally enjoy life. For these things, I am thankful.

The people at Wadsworth have been fantastic to work with from the beginning. My editor, Karen Austin, has been particularly helpful. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the many reviewers on the first version of the manuscript: Andy O. Alali, California State University, Bakersfield; Lisa R. Barry, Albion College; Robert M. Brady, University of Arkansas; Travis Dixon, University of Michigan; Anita Fleming-Rife, Pennsylvania State University; Linda C. Godbold, East Carolina University; Bradley S. Greenberg, Michigan State University; Gerald Kosicki, Ohio State University; Annie Lang, Indiana University; Miriam J. Metzger, University of California, Santa Barbara; John Sumser, California State University, Stanislaus; and Wayne Wanta, University of Oregon.

If you're like me, you find it difficult to sustain work on a project over many months unless you have close friends who bear your burdens, share your joys and offer words of encouragement. I have a few choice friends who do all of these things. I could write several pages about each of them, but that would undoubtedly embarrass them. So, I will just extend a heartfelt thanks to Em Griffin, Will Miller, Bob Ogles, Stuart Robertson, and John Greene. These are the friends who nourish my soul.

Finally, I owe everything to my wife, Cheri Sparks. A Ph.D. in her own right, she has contributed to this project in ways too numerous to count. Most importantly, she offered her daily encouragement and support. It was Cheri who convinced me that I ought to try my hand at this project. She is also the mother of my three incredible children, David, Erin, and Jordan. To my family, both immediate and extended, I offer my deepest thanks for helping me in all of the little ways (and big ones too) to achieve whatever I manage to achieve.

*Glenn Sparks*  
*March 2001*

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# A Scientific Approach to the Study of Media Effects

On April 13, 1999, two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, stunned their classmates and the nation when they unleashed a horrible assault of gunfire and bombs, leaving many students and one teacher dead. In the national discussion that followed this tragic event, a persistent theme was sounded over and over again: The mass media must share a significant part of the blame for this incident and others like it. President Clinton called upon the producers of mass media messages to reduce gratuitous violence. The clear implication of Clinton's rhetoric was that exposure to violent entertainment images increased the probability of this type of violent behavior. But others disagreed. They charged that media messages were simply a convenient scapegoat distracting us from the real problem of poor parental oversight. In a Gallup poll published 2 weeks after the shootings in Littleton, only 2% of the respondents identified violent entertainment as the culprit in the crime. Only 1% identified the root cause of the problem as the unrestricted proliferation of guns.<sup>1</sup>

If you listened carefully to any of this national discussion, you may have heard viewpoints that seemed consistent with your own values or political positions. It may have seemed tempting to embrace one or more of the ideas that you heard about how to prevent similar events in the future. In the end, *opinions* about the events in Littleton were easy to come by. But if you were thinking carefully about the variety of opinions that were expressed about the causes of school shootings, you probably realized that opinions were limited in bringing you to an understanding of the truth. Despite the fact that President Clinton was in a position of national leadership, his opinion about the role of the mass media in the Littleton

shootings was still only an opinion. You can read more about the actual effects of media violence in chapter 5 to see whether President Clinton's opinion has any scientific merit. In this chapter, you will learn something about how science is different from casual opinion.

## WAYS OF KNOWING

### Experience

There are many ways that we try to know things about the world around us. One way is through direct **experience**. This is sometimes called **empiricism**. Experience is often a very reliable way to knowledge. One morning, after leaving home from the Chicago area without a map, I found myself in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The only problem was that I was trying to get to Muskegon, Michigan. If you consult a map, you will discover that I had gone up the wrong side of a rather large lake (Lake Michigan). I have now learned from my experience to consult a map before I travel long distances. This knowledge has often saved me from additional navigating disasters. But learning by experience can also be filled with many trials and errors. Progress can be painfully slow and lead down blind alleys. For nearly 300 years, the people of Europe were afraid to eat tomatoes, which had been introduced from Central America in the 1500s. Personal experience told them that any fruit from the nightshade family was unsafe.<sup>2</sup> Legend has it that someone may have eaten a tomato and died shortly thereafter. In this case, experience proved to be very misleading.

When it comes to our knowledge of media effects, many of us tend to rely upon our own personal experience to reach a conclusion. In class discussions about the media violence controversy, it is not uncommon for me to hear students expressing the following viewpoint:

Well, I don't really think that media violence makes us more violent. After all, look at me. On Saturday mornings, I watched every violent cartoon that the networks put on. Today, I love movies like *The Terminator*. The more blood and guts, the better. My parents love violent movies, too. I grew up on them. But am I a violent person? Of course not! I have never even gotten into a fight. I don't own a gun. I've never been arrested for anything. I'm a peaceful and law-abiding citizen. In fact, my whole life is a personal testimony to the fact that media violence has no negative effect at all. Kids can tell the difference between real violence and fantasy violence. So, I'm sorry, I just don't buy it. Media violence is just fun entertainment. I don't see the harmful effects.

It shouldn't be difficult to recognize that this viewpoint is a great example of knowledge by personal experience. It should also be relatively easy to see that a person's individual experience may be a poor guide to the best general knowledge on a given topic. Just as people thought that tomatoes were poisonous for everyone, people might also think that media violence is benign for

everyone. In both cases, personal experience might seem to point to a solid conclusion. But a more careful look might show such a conclusion to be solidly wrong. One possibility is that the conclusion from personal experience is valid for oneself but not for others. The fact that violent media might not trigger aggressive behavior for one individual does not necessarily imply that it functions the same way for everyone. Another possibility is that one's impression about being invulnerable to media impact is simply incorrect. Perhaps the effects of media violence are difficult for people to detect in themselves—even though the effects are definitely present.

### Authority

Another way of knowing is to rely on **authority**. Obviously, we can't know everything there is to know. When we get sick, we usually consult a doctor and follow whatever advice he or she gives. We recognize that long years of study and practice tend to have qualified the doctor as an authority on medical diagnosis. Often the trust we place in medical authorities is rewarded with a cure. But as some have learned, medical authorities are only human. They make mistakes. Some doctors are better than others. Medical horror stories of incompetent physicians who ruin the lives of their patients are not difficult to find. Blind allegiance to authority can often have debilitating results on our search for reliable knowledge. Our knowledge that doctors generally know more than we do about medical cures can lead to a shortcut in our thinking that results in the conclusion that *any* doctor can be trusted as an authority. That kind of mental shortcut can be dangerous. Another dangerous mental shortcut that often occurs with authority figures is to transfer authority to an area that is unrelated to the area of expertise. My doctor might be an authority in prescribing medication, but there may be little reason to trust the doctor's advice when it comes to finding a good auto mechanic or trying to figure out the best way to motivate my children to do well in school.

Hundreds of years ago, religious authority figures were adamant that the earth was the center of the universe and that every celestial body revolved around it. However, new astronomical discoveries by **Copernicus** indicated that the earth actually revolved around the sun. Copernicus feared the actions of the church leaders so much that he kept his discoveries secret for over a decade before publishing them. Nearly 100 years later, Galileo was still confronting resistance from the church with regard to the Copernican model of the solar system.<sup>3</sup> Many people continued to reject the truth about the movement of the celestial bodies because they relied on the religious authorities for all knowledge. In this case, reliance upon authority resulted in wrong beliefs.

Over the years, executives from the TV networks have made various statements about the effects of media violence that tend to minimize the possibility of negative impact. Shouldn't these network executives be regarded as authorities on the topic? After all, they are in the day-to-day programming business. They sell advertising time on the basis of their understanding of the effects of commercials. If the network executives say that media violence isn't a problem,

shouldn't we listen? As we shall see later, one of the problems with arriving at knowledge by appeal to authority is that the supposed authority figures often have various interests to protect. Just as the religious authorities rejected new views of the solar system to protect what they believed to be their religious interests, the TV networks can probably be blamed for issuing statements about media violence out of their concern for maintaining economic profits.<sup>4</sup>

## Science

In the chapters that follow, I have attempted to summarize the scientific evidence on the question of media effects. **Science** is a particular way of knowing. One of the hallmarks of the scientific method is **systematic observation** as opposed to casual observation. Science combines empiricism with logical thought and is always pressing onward toward greater precision of observation.<sup>5</sup> One of the best arguments in favor of the power of the scientific way of knowing is the observation that *science works*. A commitment to science has brought us powerful antibiotics to cure our diseases. It has also put human beings on the moon. While science is a human activity that suffers from the multitude of human shortcomings, it is still the most powerful way of knowing that humans have at their disposal. One of the best ways to understand the scientific method of arriving at new knowledge is to understand the **goals of science**.<sup>6</sup> Whether one is doing natural science or social science, the goals are the same. Natural scientists attempt to achieve the goals of science in their study of biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, and the like. Social scientists attempt to achieve the goals of science in their study of social and psychological phenomena that involve human beings.

## GOALS OF SCIENCE

### Prediction

Accurate predictions are one of the coveted goals of science. If you turn on the weather forecast tonight on your local TV news, you will discover that the meteorologist has employed a wide array of instruments, maps, and satellite photos in an attempt to provide an accurate prediction of tomorrow's weather. **Prediction** can be defined simply as foretelling the future. Over the years, the science of meteorology has produced increasingly accurate forecasts. Forecasts for a day in advance are usually ones that people can trust in planning their picnics. When the citizens of Oklahoma City experienced an onslaught of killer tornadoes on May 3, 1999, they had a full 30 minutes of advance warning. In this case, accurate prediction undoubtedly saved lives. But the state of the art is not advanced enough to accurately predict the weather over the long term. Science is in continual pursuit of better prediction.

In the area of media effects, accurate predictions are also one of the chief goals. For example, if researchers can predict ahead of time which children are



most likely to imitate violent behavior seen in films, parents might be able to intervene to prevent film exposure. Likewise, if scholars can predict that certain types of characters will facilitate learning on programs like *Sesame Street*, then young children might have a better start upon entering elementary school.

### Explanation

Science certainly has no monopoly on prediction. Insurance companies are also in the prediction business. When my son recently celebrated his 21st birthday, I received notice that my auto insurance rates would be getting cheaper. Data collected by the insurance industry led to the prediction that drivers who have reached their 21st birthday are much less likely to have accidents than those who are younger. The statistic is so dramatic that the insurance companies can pass on premium savings to the customer. The insurance companies don't really care much about *why* accidents drop off after drivers turn 21. You can probably identify several possible reasons without thinking too long (more years of driving experience, increased social maturity, and so on). The insurance companies care mainly about the fact that they can predict that the decrease will happen. It is on this point that the scientist and the insurance company may begin to part ways. They are both interested in prediction. But the scientist is also interested in **explanation**—knowing why something occurs the way it does.

What does it mean to say that something has been explained? Think about something simple like flicking a light switch. If someone asked you to explain why the lights go on and off each time you move the switch, what would you say? You would probably say something about the electric circuitry behind the switch, including wires, lightbulb filaments, and the flow of electricity. All of these ingredients provide a broader framework or pattern that you invoke to help uncover the “why” behind the phenomenon of the light switch. And this is usually what it means to explain something. **Explanations place the phenomenon to be explained into a broader framework or pattern that doesn't really require much additional elaboration.**

Scientists are always searching for the best explanation for why something happens the way it does. You can probably appreciate the fact that arguments will often erupt about the adequacy of specific explanations. A parent might answer a 3-year-old child's question about why the leaves turn colors in autumn by saying something like “That's the way God made trees.” In this case, “God” becomes the broader framework or pattern that requires no additional elaboration. Such an answer might satisfy the 3-year-old but seem increasingly inadequate as the child gets older. The child who discovers that asking “why” is appropriate regardless of what explanation parents may provide has actually discovered something very important about explanations. Explanations can continually be scrutinized and pressed until more detail emerges that seems more satisfying. One of the characteristics of science is that it always encourages additional scrutiny.

In media effects research, as in other sciences, scholars argue about how adequate certain explanations are for given research findings. For example, some