

Audience: How to Assess the Effects of Media Messages?

i.e.

what/where is the link between exposure and attitude, b/w messages and behavior?

"despite many decades of research and hundreds of studies, the connections between people's consumption of the mass media and their subsequent behavior have remained persistently elusive."

i.e. research has not yet identified any clear connections between watching Rambo and being violently nationalistic (or nationalistically violent)

key question: what KIND of research?

hence...

Brief History of Effects Research (1914 – 2003)

1. Propaganda Model (1914 – 1950)

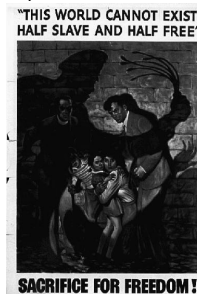
- AKA hypodermic model, "magic bullet" theory

- mass media are so powerful that they can 'inject' their messages into the audience, or that, like a magic bullet, they can be precisely targeted at an audience, who irresistibly fall down when hit by the bullet.



- initially by the rapid growth of advertising from the late nineteenth century on, coupled with the practice of political propaganda and psychological warfare during World War.

- messages exerted a direct force on people



propaganda model of media effects also at work in:

- people's desire to keep kids from watching certain kinds of movies
- many people's "moral" opposition to pornography

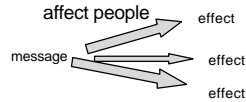
primary research method: very broad theories and systems of human psychology

2. Effects Model (1950's – 1960's)

- message have multiple effects

- cannot assume the effect is obvious or total

- the point of research is to identify and explain how messages affect people



primary research method: survey and generally experimental methods

3. Uses and Gratifications Model (1960's – 1980's)

- audiences are active participants in the construction of meaning

- people use messages as a way to gratify certain needs or desires that they have (surveillance, diversion, identity, relationships)

- group membership, audience interest, and other socio-cultural commitments play an important role in how people understand media messages

"even the most potent of the mass media content cannot ordinarily influence an individual who has 'no use' for it in the social and psychological context in which he lives. The 'uses' approach assumes that people's values, their interests, their associations, their social roles, are pre-potent, and that people selectively 'fashion' what they see and hear to these interests." (Katz 1951)



primary research method: surveys and focus groups

critique of uses and gratifications:

- too individualistic; ignores larger social, economic, and ideological structures that influence how people uses and make sense of messages

- focus on the four needs risks oversimplifying the diversity of meanings that people make

- too abstract; idea of universal "needs" ignores context and specificity of media use

enter demographics...

Demographic - "the study of the characteristics of human populations"

region: west, south, midwest, northeast, northwest
ethnicity: hispanic, african-american, caucasian, asian, african,
eastern-european
age: 0-3, 4-7, 8-11, 12-15, 16-18, 18-24, 25-34, 35-50, 51-58, 59,
65, 65+
rural, urban, suburban
male, female

demographics suggests/presumes/requires that there are certain "kinds of people"

4 step (circular) process

1. companies value certain kinds of people more than others
2. they require demo in order to target ads to preferred audiences
3. broadcasters and publishers design content that will (theoretically) attract the preferred audience
4. broadcasters and publishers sell air/page space to companies who want to reach that demographic

based on the assumption that **abstract** social categories (age, gender, ethnicity, education, geography) are associated with **actual** experiences and attitudes

BUT...

is this really a fair assumption?

ex. music

more sophisticated concept of audience gets at
commonalities of value,

not "kinds of people"

Question is NOT "what kind of people watch Fear Factor?"

but

"what is it about Fear Factor that certain people **value**?"

Audience: group of people who value something about a text (or genre, or idiom, or publication, etc. etc.)

Ex. Fear Factor audience NOT

white, suburban, upper-middle class, age 18-26, etc.

but

people who value: controlled risk, co-ed competition, extroverts willing to do outrageous things for money, etc. etc.

the next method of studying audience attempts to get at these values and at the creation of meaning within particular socio-cultural contexts...

4. Audience Ethnography (1980's - today)

- questions where the generation of meaning takes place; in a person's "mind" or in very specific spaces (the home, a club, in school, etc.)

- people do not consume messages, they produce meaning

- meaning is not "in" the message, rather, it is produced through and within a complex social network.

"We have access to huge amounts of statistical data about audiences, but the audience remembers remain 'statistics with skins'. 'Watching television' is not necessarily the same activity for you as it is for me. In fact, my 'watching television' is probably not the same for me today as it was yesterday. Our use of the media is closely tied up with the rest of our daily lives and will be conditioned by what we want to get out of it, who we're with, who we discuss it with, where we happen to be and so on. The statistics tell us very little about that." (Underwood 2001)

primary research method: ethnography (of the living room, of the sports bar, of the street corner, etc)

audience ethnography sacrifices mass influence in favor of local understanding

but...

for now,

Ethnography + Demographics = ADVERTISERS GOLDMINE

ex. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/view/>