

Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs, Media Effects on

L. J. Shrum

University of Texas at San Antonio

Because of the extensive penetration of media into society, and the different purposes and types of information conveyed, there are a number of possible media effects. For the sake of simplicity, these possible media purposes are categorized as those intended to persuade (e.g., → advertising, → propaganda), inform (e.g., → news), or entertain (e.g., narrative television, film). In addition, these effects operate on different aspects of the person, affecting their beliefs (mental association between objects and attributes), → attitudes (evaluations of objects), and values (abstract ideals).

Persuasive media effects have often been thought to be powerful (→ Media Effects, History of). This public belief in massive media effects reached its apex around the time of World Wars I and II, when extensive research was conducted to understand and harness the supposed power of propaganda. Indeed, the power of Adolf Hitler was often used as an example of a strong effect of mass-mediated propaganda. However, the validity of the belief in massive media effects began to be challenged by empirical research. As previous research was analyzed across studies, and new studies were conducted, scientists were finding that persuasive media did not always induce expected attitude change. For example, studies showed that military training films increased knowledge about issues but did not change attitudes (Hovland et al. 1949) and that the impact of media during presidential elections was to reinforce existing attitudes rather than change them (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948).

As scientists further scrutinized the available research, they observed that not only were the expected persuasion effects often not obtained, but the effects were moderated by a number of contextual or situational factors. That is, under certain conditions, mass-mediated persuasive messages might exert relatively strong effects, but under other conditions, those exact same messages might have little or no effect at all. From this observation, more contemporary models of → persuasion were developed. These models generally posited a dual route to persuasion. That is, certain conditions, such as message involvement or importance, influenced the processing of the information, which in turn influenced which aspects of the message were attended to (and to what degree), which in turn affected the persuasiveness of the message. Two of the most widely cited models include the → Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo 1986) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (Chaiken et al. 1989). The dual-process models helped illuminate some of the inconsistent findings in the persuasion literature, including mass media effects.

Information media such as news have also been shown to have effects on audience values, attitudes, and beliefs. At the societal level, one of the prominent theories of news media effects is called *agenda setting* (→ Agenda Setting Effects). This theory posits that news does not necessarily tell us what to think, but its power lies in its ability to set the agenda, or tell us what to think about. In other words, news makes certain issues more

2 Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs, Media Effects on

salient than others through frequency and intensity of coverage, and this process influences audience beliefs about what issues are important.

Although the general point of agenda-setting theory is that the news influences beliefs about the importance of issues, there are other possible indirect effects of extensive news coverage. One is the belief in the prevalence of a problem, and thus corresponding effects on beliefs about the probability of being a victim of a problem. For example, the news media often cover sensational events (e.g., child kidnappings, tainted Halloween candy) extensively. The corresponding impression in news audiences is that these effects occur often, when in fact they are relatively rare (→ Exemplification and Exemplars, Effects of). Other studies have provided supporting evidence that exposure to such things as news about crime influences fear and concern about crime (→ Violence as Media Content, Effects of).

An abundance of research has provided evidence that *entertainment media* can have important effects on the attitudes, values, and beliefs of audience members. In many respects, these effects operate in much the same way as the effects noted for persuasive media and news media. However, the observed effects of entertainment media consumption may be best understood as unintended effects, in the sense that these media do not necessarily intend to persuade or inform (→ Entertainment, Effects of).

Probably the most widely cited theory of such media influence is → *cultivation theory*. The theory, which focuses exclusively on television viewing, posits that television presents a distorted view of the world (e.g., more violence, more affluence, more dishonesty and distrust), and that frequent viewing causes viewers to incorporate these distortions into their real-world attitudes and beliefs (→ Cultivation Effects; Gerbner, George; Media and Perceptions of Reality; Reality and Media Reality). Quite a bit of research has accumulated to support this proposition (for a review, see Shanahan & Morgan 1999). Frequency of viewing has been shown to be positively related to estimates of the prevalence of crime and violence (Gerbner et al. 1977), drug use, prostitution, and alcoholism (Shrum & O'Guinn 1993), and the prevalence of affluence and ownership of luxury products (O'Guinn & Shrum 1997). In addition, frequency of television viewing has been shown to increase the importance of material values (Shrum et al. 2005). Finally, research that has investigated the processes underlying these effects have shown that they operate in much the same way as persuasive media effects and information media effects (for a review, see Shrum 2007).

The findings across the three domains just reviewed show that the media do have effects on audience values, attitudes, and beliefs. These effects occur when they are intended (e.g., persuasive media), but also when they are unintended (e.g., entertainment media). Moreover, although short-term beliefs and attitudes are often easily affected by media, longer-term, enduring attitudes and values (and their corresponding behaviors) are less easily changed.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Advertising ▶ Agenda-Setting Effects ▶ Attitudes ▶ Cultivation Effects ▶ Cultivation Theory ▶ Elaboration Likelihood Model ▶ Entertainment, Effects of ▶ Exemplification and Exemplars, Effects of ▶ Gerbner, George ▶ Media Effects, History of ▶ Media and Perceptions of Reality ▶ News ▶ Persuasion ▶ Propaganda ▶ Reality and Media Reality ▶ Violence as Media Content, Effects of

References and Suggested Readings

- Chaiken, S., Liberman, A., & Eagly, A. H. (1989). Heuristic and systematic processing within and beyond the persuasion context. In J. Uleman & J. Bargh (eds.), *Unintended thought*. New York: Guilford, pp. 212–252.
- Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Elley, M., Jackson-Beeck, M., Jeffries-Fox, S., & Signorielli, N. (1977). TV violence profile no. 8. *Journal of Communication*, 27, 171–180.
- Hovland, C. I., Lumsdaine, A., & Sheffield, F. (1949). *Experiments on mass communication*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1948). *The people's choice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- O'Guinn, T. C., & Shrum, L. J. (1997). The role of television in the construction of consumer reality. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 23, 278–294.
- Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). *Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change*. New York: Springer.
- Shanahan, J., & Morgan, M. (1999). *Television and its viewers: Cultivation theory and research*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Shrum, L. J. (2007). Cultivation and social cognition. In D. Roskos-Ewoldsen & J. Monahan (eds.), *Communication: Social cognition theories and methods*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Shrum, L. J., & O'Guinn, T. C. (1993). Processes and effects in the construction of social reality: Construct accessibility as an explanatory variable. *Communication Research*, 20, 436–471.
- Shrum, L. J., Burroughs, J. E., & Rindfleisch, A. (2005). Television's cultivation of material values. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32, 473–479.