

Media effects on the audience attitudes and behavior

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a bibliographical review of the development of the literature on *media effects* and it presents a nuanced history of the development of the studies on media effects. This text intends to recover the classical demarcation of literature belonging to the era of (1) unlimited effects, in which the media have complete power over its audience, to the period in which the studies (2) evoked potentially intervening variables in media effects (in determining limited effects), and to the (returning) era of (3) significant effects. The perspective taken in this study focuses on researches that approach the media influence on the *attitudes and behaviors of the audience*.

Keywords: Effects, attitude, behavior, audience

INTRODUCTION

From a theoretical point of view, for a long time the influence of the media was understood as omnipotent so that the audience was believed not only to consume media and their contents under any circumstance, but also suffer their consequences in a uniform manner. These notions have remained heavily disseminated until alternative ideas of *unlimited effects media* arose.

The concept of *unlimited effects* came up in the second half of the XIX century, with the setup of the news industry like the *Penny Press* (Baran and Davis, 2006: 10). However it would only be highlighted with the interest in the great popularity of the communication vehicles such as the radio, the movies and, most of all, the television.

These new technologies make the existence of widespread cultural goods more evident. The first readings of the phenomenon emphasized the *unlimited effects* of the media on its audience.

According to this approach, the audience, taken over by the media, was seen as atoms of individuals clustered in a *uniform* mass and, when exposed to cultural goods,

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reacted the same way, as in a causal relation between exposition and action (Santos, 1992: 18). Thus, the behavioral reactions of the mass audience were also a reflection of its exposition to the media.

For these theories, the media had clear intentions of mobilizing attitudes and behaviors and, the audience, passive and unprotected responded as an organism responds to the inoculation of a potion that is directly injected into the vein, an “emblematic formulation of the hypodermic theory (see Santos, 1992).

Similar to these concepts, the notion of unlimited effects was spread with great prestige by the Frankfurt critical approach, which became an important, if not the most important current of thought at the beginning of the last century. In the heart of this current was also the understanding of the *powerful impositions of the media* that suppressed the *audience responses*. The development of the Frankfurt intellectual work was centered in the performance of the cultural industry that *challenged the audience*, forcing them to accept a culture of action and thought.

The main thesis is a conspiracy. There are evidences of powerful production techniques of cultural goods that conditioned anyone who was exposed to the media. The assumptions on the audience responses are: 1 – There are no options to the receiver, but to consume the goods the culture industry wants (Wolf, 1995: 76-77) and 2 – once exposed to the cultural good, the receiver adheres to it acritically. “Being intensely exposed to the cultural industry, he, at last, accepts it, changing his own individuality” (Santos, 1992: 47)

On the audience side, no alternative reaction is allowed, the receiver is alienated and can be manipulated by the organizations that use the media to seduce him “to several different psychological levels and that is not going to be stopped, penetrating the viewers’ brains” (Adorno, 1954, apud Wolf, 1995: 80). This thesis is different from the former one because it is based on Marx aspirations.

The failure of the prediction that the proletariat would face the dominant class made the critical theory researches recognize the origin of this failure in the media. The media serving the dominant class were able to mold and condition the labor class to the *status quo*; “changing the history” (Santos, 1992: 45).

That happened due to the mass culture transmitted by the media that supposedly imposed the current social-economic system to the alienated receivers. However, such

thesis faced new concepts that overcame, even if not definitely, the idea both of the *unlimited effects of the media* as well as of *passive audience*.

Nowadays it is highly spread that the media is not *all-powerful*, as well as *mass audience* had a pejorative connotation, “that feared depersonalization, irrationality, manipulation and decline in cultural and moral levels” (McQuail, 2003: 366). In fact, the weightings on the understanding of the media reversed the approaches of the media power on the receivers to the power of the use of the media by the audience. Among the ideas that determined *mass audience*, at least one could not be supported as possible; the *homogenous* responses of the media audience (responses such as exposition, interpretation, learning the media suggestions as well as a behavioral change).

The idea of an audience that acts uniformly facing the powerful media was little by little being conceived by other designations that better expressed the reactive capacity of the audience.

The relationship between the audience and the media should be faced as a multi-semantic process, “whose syntax is extremely unpredictable and imprecise” (Castells, 2006: 422). That means that once the complex possibility of audience intervention over the media on its predisposition to selection, interpretation, acceptance or not of the content suggestions with subsequent change (or not) in attitudes and behaviors is noticed, the relationship between the audience and the media (not so powerful now) seemed to be more diverse than it was determined.

The investigations that differ from these original ideas make way to several formulations on the audience behavior influenced by the media. From different conjectures, knowledge concepts (sociology, psychology, anthropology, etc.), different ideologies (positivism, constructivism and others related) the research was developed in a field of varied perspectives that sometimes reinforce some ideas, sometimes generate conflicts that fight to validate the principles of the capacity of media influence.

The following review starts specifically from the theoretical references developed by the research groups focused on the media consumer and that privilege the cleavage of changes in the audience attitude and effective behavior.

Naturally it can be seen that attitudinal studies (1) have been contributing to the knowledge of the influence capacity of the media on the audience. It is focused on the media capacity to influence the audience attitudes. The attitude, that involves the filed

of opinions¹, becomes an important factor of attention, since it determines “a tendency to the effective behavior” (see Ruótolo, 1998: 158), that means, there is a willingness to action. The main idea of such investigations is based on the hypotheses that if the media could precisely mobilize people’s attitudes, it could also mold their behavior.

The receiver conduct after being exposed to the media is analyzed by behavioral perspectives (2). Unlike the former perspective, this one is centered in the expressed behavior of the receiver from the media influence capacity. At first, media effects are established in a causal relation on the audience behavior and how they are going to be noticed, such perceptions on direct reactions to the suggestions of the media are overcome by new propositions.

ATTITUDINAL PERSPECTIVES

The studies developed by the attitudinal perspective were based on the assumption that in order to understand an expressed behavior, first it was necessary to see clearly the conditions involved in the formation of the receiver attitude. The attitude is a significant former stage that conducts the behavior expressed by the receiver, it indicates that internally the viewer is ready to practice, operate, that is, a disposition or still a preparation to act in a certain way than any other possible.

The tradition of persuasion and the political behavior

The attitudinal studies started investigating persuasion and political behavior. The first formulations had the 1930 decade belief that the media had the power to directly change the receivers’ attitudes, characteristics of the unlimited effects of the media. By the end of the 1950 decade, with the studies of Lazarsfeld, Hovland and Laswell (see Ruótolo, 1998: 167), the investigation focus the persuasive effects and changes of opinion as a consequence to the media consumption with other identified factors as relevant to such *effect* relation. These last ones marked the beginning of a new stage of scientific researches, the second phase that put in evidence a *limited power* of media influence on attitudes.

¹ While an attitude is a non-expressed predisposition of behavior, the opinion is only the expression of this predisposition.

The works developed by Hovland (1996), for instance, dealt with the aspects of the success of the media messages that privileged, on one side, the “great characteristics of the persuasive message” as the media characteristic; the credibility of the communicator, the order and integration of argumentation, the exploitation of the message conclusion, as well as it considered personal aspects of the audience as it exposed itself to the messages (opinions, knowledge, etc.). This two ends of the same process established the *two sides of the same coin*, since “persuading the receivers is only a possible objective, if the way and the organization of the message are adequate to the personal aspects the receiver activates when he consumes the message” (Wolf, 1995: 31).

From political studies, the notion that the receiver personality was an intervenient factor, relevant to the consequences on opinions was being consolidated:

one of the first attempts to determine the influence of the press on political behavior was conducted by Lundberg (1926) who interviewed a random group of 940 inhabitants from Seattle about their opinion on four public issues largely spread by the press in the last eight months. In a different context, each interviewed was questioned about the paper he read most. There was only a very tenuous relation between the position assumed by the paper on each issue and the opinions of that paper reader. This tenuous relationship could be explained by selective factors that worked in a reverse direction, that is, some readers chose the newspaper much more because of they agreed with the editorial position than for the influence it could have on their opinion. From the data he got, Lundberg concludes: “a modern commercial newspaper has very little direct influence on the readers’ opinions concerning public issues; probably it will try to figure it out and reflect on it first instead of shaping it”. (Hovland 1966: 564).

Moreover, the relationship and social structure of the receiver were not ignored. Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, in their study on *The people’s choice*, 1948, showed that the effects of the media on election attitude formation were very subtle.

The receivers were much more influenced on political decisions by personal contacts – family, friends and neighbors, coworkers – than by the media. With the adjustments and widening of the study on the limitations found in the initial thesis, Lazarsfeld (see Santos, 1992: 30) clearly established that media receivers found themselves in a complex net of reciprocal influence in which the media was just part of.

Closing the cycle of the studies on the *thesis of the limited effects* (second phase), the *agenda setting* would raise, with others, the banner of a new research

generation that focused the *significant effects*² (third phase) of the media on attitudes, idea developed by refined studies that used measuring tools in methodological drawings much more developed (see Neuman and Gugeheim 2009).

Kappler, for instance, “showed several not so small effects and described that if the media does not tell you what to think, they say, with tremendous success, what to think about” (apud Neuman and Guggenheim, 2009: 07). At this moment, the influence of the media would be related to the themes of their agenda, stimulating the debate on certain opinions and points of view instead of others. According to Ruótolo, although the theory looks simple, its implication is spread to many fields over the audience study: “if media effect is effectively setting the agenda, it could be asked who sets it – which would take us to study the structure of the media functioning and control” (1998: 167).

The enunciation of these works would finally set the most widespread understanding of the development of attitudinal perspective, the classic literary division of the era of (1) unlimited effects, in which the media has absolute power on attitudes, the period in which the studies (2) evoked several potentially intervenient variables on media effects (in determining limited effects, such as the personal predisposition of the audience to accept or not the media suggestions), and the time (of return), (3) of the significant effects, phases that would also include, according to the literature of effects, the development of behavior studies, as it will be shown now.

The main idea of this approach is that predispositions are, most of the time, converted in behavior, which motivated theorists to try to understand how the media influence the audience opinions and attitudes. Due to the intrinsic connection and sometimes agreement between attitude and behavior, such studies are considered part of the *effect of the media* literature.

So, I will now review the development of the studies concerning the media influence on the *behavior of its audience*. For this purpose, I have to look for other sources, such as the results of Neuman and Guggenheim (2009) in the article *The evolution of media effects theory: Fifty years of cumulative research*, which describes the basic models of media effects in literature from 1956 to 2005, based on 20.736

2. In the literature about these effects, such phase could be identified, for instance, through the expression given by Noelle-Neumann of “the return of the concept of the mass media power” (1973, apud McQuail, 2003:426).

articles from the five main magazines dedicated on the subject, the *Journals of Communication*.

According to the results of the research conducted by Neuman and Guggenheim (2009), the classic division of media effects literature could be better nuanced by such models, whose clusters are due to the uniformity of the explanatory variables of media effects (in this article I just focus on attitudes and behavior). This way, this literature could be observed by other perspective besides the chronological one, even because it is not presented linearly to the understanding of the studies development of *media effects*. This happens basically because such works, in fact, do not show any homogenous form to the converging formulations in its development.

After describing the most important behavior studies, I will present the descriptive models of the research.

BEHAVIORAL PERSPECTIVE

Behavioral perspectives are interested in the behavior expressed by the audience from its exposition to the media. The studies, although seen as congruent to the flow exposed above (unlimited effects, limited effects and significant effects), are not presented linearly as originally proposed. In fact, the development of the investigations did not happen chronologically, and, in certain way, it does not enable precise indications of the development of the knowledge of the area.

These are studies that were first developed on the idea that “their reactions (the audience) are interpreted as evidence of media effects” (Ruótolo, 1998: 168), that is, such studies were based on the idea that the receiver behavior is directly related to the media and that the media contents are directly related to behavior changes (as already mentioned at the beginning of this work).

From all the behavior researches that diverge from these conceptions, we can mention the “modeling” behavior thesis (see Ruótolo, 1998). The traditional approach of the research dedicated to these understandings is the idea of the effect of violent content on the *aggressive behavior* of the receivers.

Conditioning and modeling: the studies of the violence of media

The studies of the violence of media, mainly on television, are distinguished representatives of the conditioning behavior perspective and one of the most investigated area. Comstock, Chaffe and Katzman (1978) pointed out that the empiric studies of harmful effects on the audience were in the proportion of four to one, dedicated to other aspects of the media.

Approaches of *social learning*, *social cognitive theory*, *aggressive scripts*, *initiation effects* are theoretical models that describe the basic process of learning and imitation of television violence. With the model of “catharsis”³, the researches defined the main ideas of what would be the second and the third phase of the development of researches (see Baran and Davis, 2006: 190).

The concepts of *Social Learning*, carried out in parallel with the first behavioral investigations (Wimmer and Dominick, 1996: 365), point out, for example, that *imitation* and *identification* explain how people would learn new behavior from the media. The basic assumption is that a behavior could be learned as a “particular way of imitation, from which a model is copied” (Baran and Davis, 2006: 196). Thus, identification is one of these behavior learning forms from copies of transmitted models by media such as the television. This first concept is based on the stimulus-response formulation of learning from the media, but it improves with new ideas as suggested by Bandura.

The “cognitive theory of social communication” of Albert Bandura (1971 and 2001) is one of the most important theoretical models of the first version of the unlimited media effects on the audience. In his theory, Bandura points out that the learning of the behavior from television happens through observation⁴.

3 Such model assumes that violent images could work as catharses to the receiver. That way, convergent investigations on such assumption suggested that the abundant supply of violence can lead to the trivialization of the violent act, a kind of insensitiveness to violence (Wimmer and Dominick, 1996: 365). But this idea is largely refused by the theorists of the area, supported by the results of empiric studies conducted recently, showing, therefore, final positions on this possibility.

4 Other learning and imitation paths are developed similarly to Bandura’s even if not so well elaborated. The “preparatory or initiation effects” (Berkowitz, 1984 apud McQuail, 2003: 441), for example, show that behavior would happen because the media had offered a previous context used by the receiver as a referential structure to interpret real conditions of violence, as recognizing or identifying an evil or aggressive person in the real environment of the receiver.

When a behavior model is observed, the audience acquires a symbolic representation of the action. The images send out information of following behavior according to the perception of these representations. The behavioral manifestation learnt, besides being preceded by many personal factors of the audience to the behavioral manifestation (predisposition), would also depend on the opportunity for its expression.

According to Baran and Davis (2006: 198) and Bandura (2001), the use of media representations occurs in three ways: (1) Observational learning: new behavior patterns can be acquired by observing the representation of new behaviors from the media. Although a receiver could have never used a fire gun, the observation of such behavior turns it in a learned behavior; (2) Inhibitory effects: learning of a punished behavior decreases the probability of the receiver modeling it in its own behavior. The idea is that the punished behavior learning decreases the chances of reproduction, (3) Disinhibitory effects: through the same process, representations that show reward to threats or forbidden behavior increase the chances of learning the behavior and, when possible, express it.

Although many studies on the effects on behavior are out of site in time, Ruótolo (1998: 168-169) sum up them in two distinct concept groups, the conditioning and modeling studies. In the first, theories try to specify the necessary conditions to the expression of these effects in behavior. The starting point is that media like the movies and the television are the causes of aggressive behavior because somehow the content could (1) be the disinhibitor factor of violence that is already in the person or (2) it would lead to the trivialization of the violent act, or even more (3) it would activate physiological behavior responses motivated by the violent content.

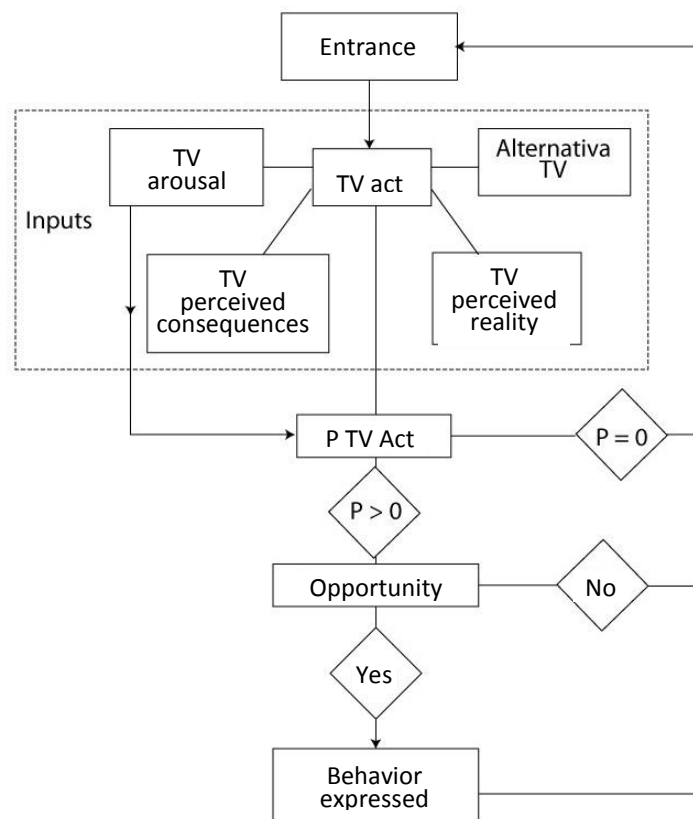
The modeling group, on the other side, would consider the existence of an “intermediate stage between exposition to the media and the expression in behavior” Ruótolo (1998: 161). Here, the receiver learns behaviors observed in the media through the models presented in situations and characters. These become part of the receiver repertoire and, when a real situation demands a behavioral response, he expresses what was learned from the media.

The knowledge from the modeling studies could be illustrated by the Comstock *et al.* (1978, apud McQuail, 2003: 442-443) model that shows the basic aspects of the

stimuli and the possible behavioral responses by the audience to the exposed/received situation on television. The model also takes into consideration that other elements, that some receivers would be more subjected to responding to the stimuli than others (according to their predisposition), expressing behaviors more affected by the violent content.

The simplified model describes it from the first exposition to the way the behavior is expressed. The effect process is a continuous sequence of exposition, that is repeated to behavioral representations (TV acts), whose effects depend on the way the behavior is noticed, the entrance of the situation and the opportunity of performing the behavior.

Simplified model of behavioral effects



Source: Comstock *et al.* (1998), from McQuail (2003: 443)

The exposition is the main entrance to learning or copying behavior. Other entrances are also described as arousal (interest, attention) that comes from the message

and the possibility of TV alternatives, so, the stronger the audience interest and involvement to the reception of the TV contents, the less alternative behavior, it is more likely to lead to learning that action.

Two entrances are related to the description of results of the exposition to violence, TV perceived consequences and TV perceived reality, in which the most the positive consequences seem to overcome the negative, and the most *real* the television behavior is, more likely is the learning (TV acts).

According to the description of McQuail, when the conditions to the effect do not occur ($P=0$), the receiver goes back to the beginning of the process and, if there is any chance of effect ($P>0$), the opportunity of the act in the viewer environment is questioned. In the model, all the entrances affect the probability of behavioral learning; however, the resultant behavior is conditioned mainly by the real chance of practicing the *behavior* by the receiver.

This model, as presented, shows the progress done by researches that diverge from the initial model of simple and direct conditioning of the media.

In fact, according to the researches presented, there is not a chronological line of the development of the media effects literature. More precisely, concerning the studies in the media effects on behavior, we can see distinct approaches on the possibilities of behavioral conditioning or modeling. An alternative possibility can be seen in the proposal of Neuman and Guggenheim (2009), which investigated fifty years of research from the media effects.

According to this proposal, literature can be observed from the emphasis of involved variables (in reinforcement or weakening) of media *effects*, and that together would show *how* the research has been designed as well as would point out the knowledge on the capacity of influence of social media on the attitudes and behavior of the audience. Let's see the main ones:

1. **Persuasion theories model** – the research group focus the direct and non-mediated effects, not mediated, whose media models the observed behavior. Such theories are mainly found between 1944 and 1963. Here are included the studies on political campaigns, advertising, attitude change and social modeling through the observation of the representation of media behavior.

2. **Active audience model** – summing up nine explicit theories, the group is identified in the period from 1944 to 1985. The difference from the others is the variety of propositions on the motivation and psychological orientations of the audience that are *active* in media consume. In some cases, such elements minimize media effects (as the minimum effect, due, for instance, to the evidence of selective exposition), in others, these elements reassure the power of the potential effects, due to the predisposition of media receivers.

3. **Social context model** – such researches focused emphatically the effects from social contexts and a wider social sphere. The publications on these ideas are from 1955 to 1983. In this group, we can mention the two-flow communication and the multi-flow communication studies of Paul Lazarsfeld, which designed the influence of a complex context to determine media effect. Also the theories of *new technologies diffusion* e the *knowledge-gap* theory, since they also take track of the levels of penetration of new ideas and knowledge, opinions and behavior over the time and between distinct social layers. The *spiral of silence* and the *third-person effects* theories, on the other hand, are highlighted because the social contexts are either oppressing opinion expression of the non-conforming minority with most expressed opinions, or due to the perception of the possible persuasion of the media on other receivers of the social environment.

4. **Media and society model** – this group is formed by studies focused in society (hegemony and social sphere) and the accumulated effects in the person behavior in long periods of time, such as the theories of *cultivation*, which suggests that the exposition to social communication for a certain period of time molds the perceptions on social reality. Hegemony, public sphere and also the tradition of cultivation are associated to a progressive critical and political point of view. To the authors, besides being transversal to a period of time, it is loosely tied, since, although intellectually identifiable, they would not be characterized by a high level of intern quotation.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although the studies of attitude and behavior represent the research of *media effects*, the *focus* objects of understanding of these studies are relatively distinct, while the first studies focused the capacity of influence of media on audience attitudes, the second works directly with the possibility on the behaviors expressed by the audience.

Summarizing, such studies ended up showing both the possibility of the conditioning attitudes, opinions and behaviors as well as its possible modeling, from an *active* concession of the social communication media receiver. In fact, it can be observed in this literary review that media influence on attitudes and behavior is as diverse as the incidental variables of the process.

This process whose syntax is unpredictable and imprecise can be observed by the perspective of literary amount in the area, that Neuman and Geggenheim (2009) classified as study models of *persuasion theories*, *active audience* model, *social context* model and *media and society* model, even if with exceptions that reinforce the nuclear characterization of the groups.

There are doubts about the *persuasion theories* model concerning its particular registration. As it is known, persuasion studies developed mainly in the area of advertising were the ones that boosted the recognition of personal characteristics mediating media effects, although its consolidation was set up later. In this case, maybe a change in the name of the group would, probably, minimize any possible mistake between the concepts of its designation/registration. Such group is particularly associated to the chronological beliefs of direct effects of media.

It is also important to observe the *active audience* research group as directly connected to the *social context* group. Besides its chronological similarity, it is important to emphasize that the relation between media effect on the attitudes and behavior takes place mediated by the *characteristics, not only personal, but contextual of the audience*. The characterization of such works under the presented logic aims to associate it to indirect media effects (see Baran and Davis, 2006: 202 and Kappler, 1978), in which the audience can suffer no effects due to the receiver disposition/context, as well as convenient media effects, even though these ones take place according to the audience predispositions. Thus, it is possible that *effects* on the

audience occur in the direction suggested by social communication, but the process would not happen *directly*.

The researches related to a critical and political point of view, such as the *media and society* tend to (re)establish the belief of significant media effects, even if less specifically.

Checking the development of the literature of media effects, in another perspective, besides the chronological, becomes more productive, mainly when it takes into consideration the extension and dispersion of the applied studies both to multiple and complex contexts, that involve not only media effects on attitudes and behaviors in the personal level of the audience, but in groups, organizations or even in the consequences to society as a whole. Under this point of view, we could see a less clear design of the three phases of development of research, enlightening the replacement of the conditioning vision of media to another one, in which media suggestions operate in a complex environment, causing imprecise and unpredictable effects on their audiences.

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