

# INTRODUCTION

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The study of media effects is one of the most central to the discipline of communication and encompasses a vast array of theoretical perspectives, methodological tools, and applications to important social contexts. However, in light of the extraordinarily rapid changes in the media environment over the last 20 years, media effects research is at a point where the innovations in content and technology have outpaced the theories typically applied to them. Thus, the timing seems right to reflect on and critically evaluate not only where the field of media effects has been over the past several decades, but more important, where it would be most fruitful to go in the years ahead. These are the underlying motivations and goals of this volume.

In recent years, a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) malaise seems to have cast a pall over a large contingent of media researchers, due to what we argue are a series of theoretical, methodological, and conceptual crossroads facing the field. Focusing first on theory, recent content analyses (Bryant & Miron, 2004; Potter & Riddle, 2007) paint a somewhat discouraging picture of the media effects research landscape—one that is at best as likely to mention any theory as not, one that uses theory as a framework only a quarter of the time, and one with little attention to theoretical development. Even for the most commonly studied theories, there is often little systematic attention and critical examination. The concern that scholars are chasing effects rather than reflecting on the processes that underlie the outcomes of

media exposure has exacerbated this dissatisfaction with the theoretical state of the field.

Added to this discontent are concerns about the methods used to evaluate media processes and effects, including issues regarding the determination of content categories, the measurement of media exposure and use, the samples used and threats to generalizability, and the lack of realistic social environments in which media use is studied. Moreover, a range of conceptual issues faces the field, the most critical of which is arguably this: What do we mean by “media effects”? If one had thought the field was on a smooth course, one only had to attend the 2008 International Communication Association panel “The Future of Media Effects Theory: Charting a Course for the 21st Century” to find passionate discussion and debate regarding where we are at present and where we need to go. Although no consensus was reached, participants (and there were many) seemed united in the sense that the field is in need of reorientation (Nabi, Cappella, Wartella, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2008).

As we reflect on why the study of media effects has reached this crossroads, we suggest that it may be that one of the strongest motivations for studying the media—its great practical appeal—may also serve as its greatest stumbling block in that the concern over (usually) harmful effects generates excitement to pursue problem-based research. Once effects are demonstrated, the lure of issues of application often becomes stronger than those related to illumination of process. Exacerbating this problem, we believe, are structural issues within academe in which the pressures to publish as junior scholars and to pursue grant opportunities result in the development of habits (and perhaps realities) in which replication-based and applied work is more adaptive to pursue, and often at the expense of the more sophisticated, theoretically rich work that we value as a discipline.

However, the new media environment, with its associated innovations in technology and content, offers the ideal catalyst to encourage scholars to reassess the state of media effects research and how we might proceed so that we can meet our dual goals of producing scholarship that is both theoretically insightful and socially relevant. As we reflected on the state of the field, several observations shaped our vision for this volume. First, numerous theoretical paradigms that seemed to have served the field well (e.g., cultivation, uses and gratifications), though still frequently referenced, have been increasingly maligned in print and conversation. Have such paradigms exceeded their “sell by” date, or might efforts to reflect on such theories in light of the new media age engender a renewal of their relevance to modern media study? Second, there appear to be a number of topics that—though seemingly central to issues of media consumption and effects—have been, if not ignored, then sorely overlooked (e.g., emotion, social context of consumption). Consideration of a range of media phenomena in light of these and other concepts has the potential to breathe new life into more fatigued areas of media research. Further, the new media environment itself, especially to the extent it introduces issues related to time and place (e.g., DVR technology, portable media) and allows for greater user involvement (e.g., interactivity, user-generated content), raises a host of questions and highlights the increasingly complex process of conceptualizing media consumption and effects.

In light of these thoughts, our goal with the *Handbook* has been to address key theoretical, methodological, and conceptual issues within a range of areas central to media research such that each chapter may offer both a comprehensive orientation to that area and an agenda for future thinking and research. With this in mind, each chapter is designed to address the area’s historical context, relevant theory,

and conceptual developments; to provide an assessment of what conclusions can be drawn from the extant research; to highlight notable methodological issues; to discuss criticisms and controversies that have been raised; to consider the impact of the new media environment for research in the area; and to outline critical directions for future research.

Given the scope and diversity of the field of media effects, finding an organization scheme for the range of chapters was one of the more challenging aspects of this project. Our thinking on this front was guided by an attempt to group material based on critical issues related to the study of media: conceptualization of key process elements, the societal and individual factors involved in the process of media consumption, the processes and outcomes related to intentional influence, and finally the content and medium issues of prominence and import. Surely there are other ways to organize the vast landscape of media effects scholarship, but our hope is that this presentation will conceptually cohere both within and across sections.

The *Handbook*, then, is divided into six sections. In Part I, we begin with an overview of the field, conceptualizations of media effects and audiences, and the key methodological issues most relevant to the study of media effects. As the extent and validity of the knowledge we gain is contingent on our methods of knowledge acquisition, we consider this to be an essential component to the value of this volume.

In Part II, we focus on dominant theoretical approaches in the media effects arena from more societal, political, and cultural perspectives. Here we include some of the central theoretical paradigms in the media effects realm (i.e., cultivation, framing, perceived influence) that relate to the broad-reaching effects of media with macrolevel implications.

In Part III, we focus on the themes of message selection and processing that are

central to the mass media literature. These chapters range in the scope of their theoretical development in that some of the chapters focus on specific theoretical perspectives and models (e.g., uses and gratifications, limited capacity model), whereas other chapters examine selection, processing, and response variables that can be examined from a host of theoretical vantage points (e.g., emotion, identification, individual differences). Regardless, these processes all cut across and thus are relevant to the full complement of media content domains.

In Part IV, the volume turns to a dominant trend in media effects literature—its relation to persuasion and learning—and traces its theoretical perspectives, including major theories of persuasion and especially social cognitive theory, through the various contexts in which media have such effects, including health, advertising, and media literacy.

Part V then takes us to the contexts and audiences that have been traditional foci of media effects research—violence, children, body image, video games, sports, and the like. In each chapter, the authors take broad and integrative perspectives, addressing the theories most applicable to those contexts and the current state of knowledge, while also reflecting on the critical issues that remain unresolved.

Part VI moves the *Handbook* from more specific forms of content to a concern central and unique to the communication discipline—message medium. These chapters examine how the medium of the message influences processing and effects ranging from what messages are attended to (e.g., media dependency), to how we spend our time (e.g., displacement effects), and even to how we interact as a society (e.g., medium theory).

We recognize that there are several volumes that currently review the domain of media effects quite well. Our hope is that this volume will complement those offerings in several ways. First, we believe

the bird's eye view of the field taken by these chapters, including addressing the relevant historical and methodological issues and providing integrative summaries of the state of the research in that area, will help give readers unique perspective and context to these research domains. Second, this volume emphasizes process in ways that we hope highlight the importance of issues related to viewer selection, interpretation, understanding, and engagement. Finally, we have encouraged authors—all top experts in their fields—to offer their insights and reflections on their own domains of research, with particular attention to new media, with the hope that their ideas will generate discussion and collaboration and thus provide media effects research with more direction and traction than the field may have had in recent years.

There is just one final point we wish to make. Throughout this introduction and the volume, you will note that the term *media effects* is frequently used, often as a shorthand not simply to reflect the outcomes of media consumption but to capture the full range of media effects processes, which are often quite complicated, fluid, and interactive. Unfortunately, use of this shorthand within the field can lead to the misperception that media scholars are not interested in process but only in outcome. As it is unlikely that use of the truncated term *media effects* to reflect our interest in the full range of media consumption processes will wane, we chose to title this volume *The SAGE Handbook of Media Processes and Effects* to highlight the increasing emphasis and interest of media effects scholars on the processes of effects resulting from media exposure.

Finally, before we leave you to this volume, we wish to offer our most sincere thanks to those who have made this project possible. The authors of these chapters are exceptional scholars who,

given their dedication to this field, made remarkable efforts to produce chapters that we believe will truly help advance the study of media effects, and for this we extend our eternal thanks. We also wish to thank Todd Armstrong, Aja Baker, and the SAGE team for their unwavering support of this project, as well as the reviewers of the initial prospectus (Brad J. Bushman, University of Michigan; David R. Ewoldsen, The Ohio State University; Ken Lachlan, Boston College; W. James Potter, University of California, Santa Barbara; Alan M. Rubin, Kent State University; Dietram A. Scheufele, University of Wisconsin—Madison; Michael Slater, The Ohio State University; and Glenn G. Sparks, Purdue University) and our colleagues whose advice and guidance have been indispensable, especially in the early stages of this work.

There are, of course, no words to express our gratitude to and for our spouses, Bob Kennedy and John Christman, for their unconditional patience and support throughout this journey. We can only imagine that they are as happy as we are to see this volume in print—and for all the right reasons. And finally, we thank you—our readers—for your interest in this work, and we hope you find that it delivers on its promise to illuminate the processes and effects of the media embedded within our personal and social worlds and that it inspires you to undertake the next generation of research in this most important and worthy pursuit.

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## ◆ *References*

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