

The audience response to the media

This area is the source of the biggest debate surrounding media audiences because so little has really been discovered about the way that audiences receive and make sense of media texts. The outline areas for debate are as follows:

- The effect the media have on the audience
- The way audiences use the media
- The ways audiences read media texts

These debates are discussed in greater detail below.

Hypodermic syringe model – a short term effect theory

It has been a popular belief since the 19th century that 'violent images' in media texts could influence the actions of vulnerable sections of society. Effects of media texts on audiences have been the subject of study for nearly as long and the initial research centred on the hypodermic model; in this theory it is suggested that the audience receive an 'intravenous injection' of a media text – which could be negative (eg violent murder) or positive (eg heroic act) and are stimulated into a response. David Glover suggests that the roots of this theory are 'deeply ingrained in modern societies' and suggests two reasons why. First of all he says the theory drew on the assumption 'that the social upheavals associated with industrialisation had made people extremely vulnerable so that they were easily swayed by any attempt to grab their attention or provide them with novel experiences. Thus they were prey to political demagogues and readily duped by the new mass media.' Secondly, he says that the hypodermic theory also came from behaviourist school of thought in psychology which saw '... all human action as modelled on the conditioned reflex so that one's personality consisted of nothing more than responses to stimuli in the individual's environment which formed stable and recognisable patterns of behaviour.'¹

A number of examples have been used to add weight to the hypodermic theory. One often quoted example is the 1938, radio dramatisation of the H. G. Wells play *War of the Worlds* which caused a panic reaction across America because people genuinely believed aliens had landed. Another is the Hungerford massacre in August 1987, when it was suggested that Michael Ryan had been influenced by scenes in the film *Rambo* before committing the shootings. In 1995, it was also suggested that scenes from the film *Child's Play 3* had influenced Robert Thompson and John Venables, the two boys accused of killing James Bulger. The public outcry spurred by comments from the judge at the trial, Mr Justice Morland, who said he suspected '... exposure to violent video films may be in part an explanation for this terrible crime' resulted in more regulations surrounding the sale of videos the following year. However, all of these examples are subject to argument. Research conducted by Hadley Cantril, published in 1940, revealed that among other things the reaction to the Wells' play had a great deal to do with people tuning in late to the broadcast and failing to realise it was fiction; he also found that, at that particular historical moment, there was a prewar world-wide political and economic nervousness which made people 'expect' bad news. In the case of *Rambo* and *Child's Play 3*, there is no proof that viewing these videos prompted the violent acts. In fact, in the latter case, there is no proof at all that the two boys had ever viewed that particular video.

The weakness of this model is that audiences are seen as passive and malleable with no thought of their own. Watson and Hill point out that it assumes that the mass media have a 'direct, immediate, and influential effect upon audiences' and also '... it overlooks the possible effects of **intervening variables** in the communication process and presents the masses as being unquestioning receptacles of media messages.'²

Inoculation model – a long term effect theory

Inoculation theory suggests that long term exposure to repeated media messages makes audiences 'immune' to them. Thus, for example, prolonged exposure to media violence would desensitise the audience so that they would

no longer be shocked by it; it follows that someone thus desensitised might be more likely to commit a violent act as it is not seen as an extraordinary action. One argument put forward during the Bulger murder trial, and possibly also implied in the judge's words quoted above, was that the two accused boys had been subject to long term exposure to so-called video nasties and therefore they felt that violent acts were normal behaviour. At the time, Mary Whitehouse, President of the National Viewers and Listeners Association, said: 'The crudity of violence, showing people skinned alive for example, for that type of film to be received as entertainment says an awful lot about the way society is being corrupted.'⁵



NARCOTISING DYSFUNCTION

This concept of audience reception suggests that the mass media render the audience incapable of action. The term describes the way that prolonged media exposure can act like a narcotic

drug on the brain causing apathy. Another way of describing those afflicted with this disease might be the term 'couch potato'.

Two-step flow model – a long term effect theory

Hypodermic theory suggests that there is a direct one-step effect of the media on the audience but a study conducted in 1940 by Paul Lazarsfeld on the US presidential election came up with some important findings that led to the formulation of the two-step model of communication flow. Lazarsfeld discovered that 50% of the voters in the presidential election had decided their voting preference six months prior to the election and despite media debates and coverage, coupled with persuasive presidential campaigns, they had not changed their minds. The study also discovered that individual views were most affected by opinion leaders who played a key role in the communication process. Opinion leaders both filtered and disseminated media messages; thus Lazarsfeld discovered a two-step communication flow from the medium through the opinion leader to the individual.



PASSIVE, SEMI-ACTIVE AND ACTIVE AUDIENCES

Hypodermic and inoculation models of communication view the audience as passive receivers of media output. The audience is perceived as a sponge absorbing everything contained within media texts without selection or rejection. Two-step flow is a semi-active model of audience reception because it implies some action on the part of the audience. Watson and Hill speak of the 'process of the interpretation' of media

messages in this model that makes it different from earlier ones by presenting the audience as 'interacting and responsive individuals' as opposed to 'socially isolated, passive atoms.'⁴ The following uses and gratifications model views the audience as active users of media texts who are capable of selecting and rejecting media messages and making use of media texts to gratify a complex set of needs.

Uses and gratifications model

This relatively new model radically changed research surrounding audience reception. Commenting on this fresh approach in 1970, James Halloran said that it let study move away from 'thinking in terms of what media do to people' and substituted the idea of 'what people do with the media'.⁵ The thinking went even further than this because the model suggested that what people do with the media was governed by what they need from the media. These needs have been most usefully categorised by McQuail, Blumler and Brown⁶ who identified four major types. These are as follows:

- The need to reinforce a view of personal identity by comparing our own roles and values with similar roles and values represented in the media – for example teenagers might use certain soap operas to reference how other teenagers behave in relationships; buying *Loaded* magazine might reinforce the buyer's self-perception that he is 'one of the lads'
- The need to have companionship and interaction with others. In this case the media might be used in a number of ways; it could become a companion – for instance, an elderly person living by her/himself might have the radio on all day for companionship – or it could be that specific characters within the media become so well-known by the audience they take on the role of a 'real' friend or acquaintance. The media also offer common ground that can be referenced in conversation with others; thus, the media is used to aid social contact
- The need to be informed. The media can offer information on many levels. For instance, this process might be as broad as the press and broadcast news offering us information on day to day happenings or it might be as narrow as an individual going to an Open University programme for specific information for a specific OU course
- The need for entertainment and diversion. This identifies both the need for fantasy as an escape from the constraints of reality and the need to recharge or purge emotions. In practice, this could mean imagining yourself into the role of the superhero/heroine or it could mean going to a comedy film to have a good laugh

The assumption within this model is that individuals are active participants in the mass communication process. People are seen to be able to select and reject aspects of media output according to individual needs. The problem with this assumption is that the audience is always seen to be seeking gratification of specific needs when in fact this is not necessarily always the case. Watching TV, as we all know, can often be a result of being too lazy to get up and switch it off and, frequently, advertising media intrude into our lives because it is simply not possible to ignore them. Another problem is that this model doesn't attribute the media with any direct short or long term effect on the audience at all. Media watchers who witnessed the birth of New Labour in 1996 and have followed Gazza being turned variously from hero to villain to hero *ad nauseam* in the tabloids will realise that the mass media is influential in forming opinions and changing beliefs.



PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND TERTIARY MEDIA INVOLVEMENT

The intensity of audience involvement with a specific medium at a specific time will also vary and this will contribute to the way that the particular media text is being received. Often this is most easily highlighted by logging our media involvement throughout the day and describing the reasons why and consequently how we consume the media during that time. The three categories of involvement are as follows:

- Primary involvement – which implies that someone is completely consumed by watching a specific TV

programme or reading a specific publication

- Secondary involvement – which implies that someone may be occupied in another task but half listening at the same time. For instance, someone may be ironing while also watching *EastEnders*
- Tertiary involvement – which implies that at the most the medium is just a background to what we are doing. This could apply to people who keep the radio on all day but are moving from room to room – in essence a tangential involvement.

Cultural effects – a long term effect theory

The thinking behind this theory centres on the long-term effects of particular ideological representations on our beliefs and values. Media representations of beautiful women, for instance, have been influential in giving both males and females a view of an 'ideal' woman. This ideal woman is, essentially, quite unnatural and while mothers have tried to be serene as the OXO mum, young girls have been conditioned to believe they should be as thin as the catwalk supermodels. It is interesting that the media now stand accused of subjecting men to similar ideological representations of 'male perfection' which require men to be a 'new man' who is 'behaving badly' while striving for the rugged good looks and rippling torso of a participant in *Gladiators*.

The encoding/decoding model – the giving and taking of a media message

The encoding/decoding model put forward by Stuart Hall⁷ and David Morley⁸ centred on the idea that audiences vary in their response to media messages. This is because they are influenced by their social position, gender, age, ethnicity, occupation, experience and beliefs as well as where they are and what they are doing when they receive a message (see primary, secondary tertiary reception above). In this model, media texts are seen to be encoded in such a way as to present a **preferred reading** to the audience but the audience does not necessarily accept that preferred reading. Hall categorised three kinds of audience response.

- Dominant – the audience agree with the dominant values expressed within the preferred reading of the text
- Negotiated – the audience generally agree with the dominant values expressed within the preferred reading but they may disagree with certain aspects according to their social background
- Oppositional – the audience disagree with dominant values expressed within the preferred reading of the text

David Morley's study of audience responses to the news magazine programme *Nationwide* largely fitted with Hall's categorisations listed above. But

Encoding/decoding

Any communication, and a mass media text is no exception, consists of a series of signs organised by certain rules or codes into a meaningful message. Codes can be visual or aural. In a newspaper, for instance, the type of language used and the way that the language is presented in a certain typeface within a certain lay out on the page are all codes that form the message that is being conveyed.

Preferred reading/meaning

This term describes the way that a media message is specifically encoded so that the audience will make sense of it in a certain way.

Cultural competence

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–) initially described this concept suggesting that social class and gender carry with them different cultural competences, and that these competences affect the ease of understanding and hence the enjoyment of different media and art forms. It was seen that women have an engagement with soap opera because they traditionally view the domestic sphere or relationships where women have more competences than men. It follows that some media/art forms would exclude sections of society who do not possess those competences.

Aberrant decoding

When the media text reader either mistakenly or willfully decodes text in opposition to the preferred meaning.

Morley also discovered that certain groups, for example one group of young black further education students, found the programme simply had to relevance to their world whereas a group of shop stewards approved of the populist style⁹. This highlighted the importance of the knowledge, tastes and values or **cultural competence** that individuals/groups brings to texts which subsequently affects the way those texts are enjoyed.

The individual and the text

The idea that media texts contain a preferred reading carries with it the implication that a number of readings are possible. Some texts are more open to different readings than others and are consequently referred to as polysemic. Another possible rejection of the preferred reading might occur if individuals or groups counter it on the basis of their own ideas or experience and produce what is referred to as an **aberrant decoding**.



VIOLENCE AND THE MEDIA

'On November 25, 1995, unidentified thugs perpetrated an especially pointless and sadistic act of violence against an innocent employee of the New York City subway system.

Squirting a huge quantity of flammable liquid into a Brooklyn token booth, they then lit a match and blew it to pieces, burning toll-taker Harry Kaufman, aged 50, over most of his body. After remaining for two weeks in critical condition, Kaufman died of his injuries, leaving behind the two children he had been working overtime to support through college.

This horrible incident might have been ignored as just another example of random urban cruelty except for the eerie resemblance between the attack and scenes in a movie that had been released just four days earlier. In *Money Train*, a mindlessly violent 'action film' in which Wesley Snipes and Woody Harrelson play New York City transit cops, a vicious pyromaniac executes two fiery assaults on toll booths that are identical in virtually every detail to the episode that killed Harry Kaufman.'

Michael Medved in *Screen Violence*¹⁰

'The hunt for witches to explain society's ills is ancient in our blood, but unholy for that none the less. The difference is that now we do not blame the village hag and her black cat but the writer, photographer and film-maker. Increasingly indicted by art and fearful of technology, our society scours them for scapegoats, in the process ignoring Shakespeare, who reminds us that artists do not invent nature but merely hold it up to a mirror. That the mirror now is electronic, widescreen or cyberspace is all the more intimidating to the unschooled and the more tempting to the lawyers.'

Oliver Stone in *Screen Violence*¹¹

'On May 5 1964, at Birmingham Town Hall, I warned: "If you constantly portray violence as normal you will help to create a violent society." People learn from watching others. I think we're being extraordinarily childish if we don't accept that. For intelligent people to say violent films do not have an effect is nonsense. They are running away from the implications. We are *all* responsible for this state of affairs. It's because we have accepted violent material on our screens, and actually enjoy it and laugh at it. We wonder, then, why violence occurs.'

Mary Whitehouse in the *Guardian*¹²

'The violence in *Reservoir Dogs* was acceptable because it was shown to hurt. It was not something to laugh at.'

Barry Norman in *The Sunday Times*¹³

'We see the terrible murders in Liverpool and Cardiff . . . I don't think film or TV has anything to do with those things at all.'

Michael Winner in *The Sunday Times*¹⁴

'Movie violence is like eating salt. The more you eat, the more you need to eat to taste it at all.'

Alan Pakula¹⁵

In the 1990s a number of violent films such as *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1991), *Child Play 3* (Jack Bender, 1991), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), have become the focus for the one vital question of the media violence debate: does exposure to screen violence have an 'effect' on audiences?

The debate is divided into two camps. On the one hand there are those who believe that exposure to screen violence has a negative 'effect' on audiences and can result in:

- Individuals imitating violent events on screen, for example, copy-cat killings (see Medved quotation)
- Audiences becoming desensitised to violence – accepting higher levels of violence in society

On the other hand there are those who believe that exposure to media violence has a limited effect. They claim that there is no firm evidence to link screen violence to real life violence, and that other factors such as social background are more significant.

The proponents of the 'effects' debate draw upon the large body of American research that claims to prove scientifically that the media has an 'effect' on audiences. The study most frequently cited is Albert Bandura's 1963 'Bobo' doll experiment.¹⁶ A 'Bobo' doll is a large inflatable doll with sand in its base which when knocked down stands back up again. In laboratory conditions Bandura proved that children who had previously seen adults hitting the doll (whether live or on film) were more likely to hit the doll than a control group who had not. Critics of the experiment claim that laboratory conditions do not mirror real life and in any case hitting a doll is not the same as 'real' violence.

Other studies have adopted a different approach. Drabman and Thomas (1974),¹⁷ for example, attempted to prove that children exposed to violent material became desensitised. Hans Eysenck and D. K. B. Nias describe the experiment in their article 'Desensitisation, Violence and the Media'.¹⁸

'Children who had watched a violent scene from *Hopalong Cassidy* were compared with a control group, who had not seen a film, for tolerance of violent acts. This was done by asking each subject to keep an eye on a couple of children who were playing in another room, and to summon the experimenter if there was any trouble. They were able to watch the children by way of a videotape monitor; by this technique it was possible to arrange for both groups of subjects to see exactly the same sequence of events. After playing peacefully the two children started to abuse each other verbally and then to fight during the course of which the TV camera was knocked over and contact was eventually lost. The measure of attitude to aggression was the time taken before the subject sought help from the experimenter . . . Just over half the control subjects notified the experimenter of the argument before physical fighting began, whereas only 17 per cent of the film group did.'

Both these studies are based on short-term effects within controlled conditions. There are a number of studies, however, that have attempted to find out the long-term effects of exposure to screen violence. For example, Eron *et al.* (1972)¹⁹ concluded that it was possible to prove that 8 to 9-year-old boy's exposure to violent television resulted in an increased level of aggression aged 18 to 19. A later study observed that the best predictor of whether someone will commit a violent crime aged 30 was the amount of violent television that they watched aged eight.

William Belson in his book *Television Violence and the Adolescent Boy* (1978)²⁰ also attempted to prove that boys' exposure to violent television led to aggression. His research involved 1,565 boys in London aged between 12 and 17: it was designed to be as rigorous as possible and to eliminate some of the problems associated with earlier studies. Guy Cumberbatch in 'Violence and the Mass Media: Research Evidence'²¹ describes the research.

'It attempted to measure children's exposure to television violence in their earlier years and to link this to self-reported violent behaviour through a sophisticated system of matching heavy and light viewers of television violence. This matching was done according to over 200 different measures and thus attempts – reasonably well in fact – to overcome the serious problem that any correlation between delinquency and exposure to television violence could be due to a third variable like social class causing both... Belson concludes that boys with high levels of exposure to television violence commit 49% more acts of serious violence than those who see little.'

Despite Belson's attempts to monitor the integrity of the data, some commentators pointed out some surprising contradictions. Dennis Howitt, for example, has pointed out the fact that 'heavy and light viewers of television violence are less aggressive than middle range viewers'.²² In other words if the levels of violent television were increased violence in society as a whole would decrease. Howitt's interpretation of Belson's research serves to demonstrate how all violence 'effects' studies should be treated with caution as data can often give conflicting results and flaws in methodology can invalidate conclusions.

Child's Play 3 and Natural Born Killers

'The music is heavy and pounding. The camera scans over a mass of decapitated dolls' heads and severed limbs, all shrouded in cobwebs. A pulverised body, spattered in blue paint is hoisted overhead. Blood, thick and gooey, drips into a bubbling cauldron of molten plastic below. Phoenix-like, the moulded outline of a doll's face emerges, its cheeks blood-stained, its eye sockets empty. It screams.'

Description of scene from *Child's Play 3* by Sally Weale²³

'Oliver Stone's film, *Natural Born Killers*, is linked to ten deaths, six of them in the US, where it opened two months ago. Most recently, a 14-year-old from Dallas, Texas, accused of decapitating a girl of 13, tells friends he wanted to kill someone and become "famous, like the natural born killers."'

Mike Ellison²⁴

A number of films in the 1990s have been accused of directly influencing the behaviour of audiences. Both *Child's Play 3* and *Natural Born Killers*, for example, are said to have stimulated individuals to commit murder.

What is interesting about the controversy surrounding *Child's Play 3* and the murder of Jamie Bulger is that it seems unlikely, as noted previously, that John Venables and Robert Thompson ever saw the film. In any case *Child's Play 3* could not be described as ultra-violent – it is a typical 'horror' film and certainly includes no scenes in which a toddler is murdered by children. For want of any other plausible explanation, however, Mr Justice Morland, the trial judge, suggested that the children may have been influenced by the violent videos rented by their father 'including possibly *Child's Play 3*, which has some striking similarities to the manner of the attack on James Bulger.'²⁵ The remarks stirred up a moral panic about screen violence in the tabloid press, which resulted in tightening up of the legislation governing the rental and sale of videos in 1994.

Natural Born Killers was, according to its director Oliver Stone, intended to be a direct criticism of the media, but entered the debate on the effects of the portrayal of violence because of several well-documented cases of individuals who had seen the film and subsequently committed murder. The most often cited American case is that of Nathan Martinez who became obsessed with *Natural Born Killers*, seeing the film ten times, before shooting dead his step-mother and step-sister. A Panorama

Special: *The Killing Screens*²⁶ reconstructed the days before and after the murders, concentrating on Martinez's identification with the central character in the film. The programme seemed in no doubt that this 'copy-cat' killing provided direct evidence that the film had caused the murders.

Martin Barker in his article 'Violence'²⁷ argued strongly against the case put forward by *The Killing Screens*. He claims that it is too easy to take the 'common sense' view that if an individual watches a violent film and then commits a violent crime there must be a connection. Instead he claims that it is not the film itself that has an 'effect' on audiences but the discourses built around it. He states: 'I am therefore quite prepared to believe that Martinez was influenced by his seeing of the film – because he had been endlessly told that this was a film which might authorise violence. In just the same sad way, it is not hard to find, in the reports of witch trials, young and old women *claiming* to be witches, because that is the lens through which *their* culture invited them to see themselves.'

What is screen 'violence'?

Much of the research into screen violence takes little account of the context of the violence, preferring to classify films and programmes by simply counting the acts of 'violence' on screen. A film could therefore be classed as 'very violent' because of its high body count, ignoring whether or not the film provided a moral framework to the killings.

A major problem, however, is defining what is meant by 'violence'. It could mean, for example, any of the following situations:

- Tom hitting Jerry over the head with a hammer
- Phil and Grant having a fist fight in Italy with the locals in *EastEnders*
- Will Munny (Clint Eastwood) killing Little Bill at the end of *Unforgiven*
- A news report from the war zone in Bosnia during the fighting
- Mr Blonde (Michael Madsen) cutting off a policeman's ear in *Reservoir Dogs*

In each case the 'violence' is very different. There is clearly a distinction to be drawn between fictional violence and violence from the real world. However, whether the violence is fictional or non-fictional it is received in a cultural context, which affects how the violence is understood. The cartoon format of *Tom & Jerry*, for example,

allows violent actions to take place (Tom's teeth being knocked out for instance), but the violence is meant to be humorous (the characters do not appear to experience any suffering) and the audience know that its effects will be short-lived. The fistfight in *EastEnders* is coded in a similar manner although it does have the consequence of Phil and Grant temporarily ending up in prison. The scene also, however, fulfils the audience's expectation of the Mitchell brothers as characters – it would be out of character for them not to get involved in a fight with the locals.

Unforgiven contains some disturbingly violent scenes including the killing of Little Bill. The film belongs, however, to the western genre, which typically involves violent conflict between different groups. As in many other westerns it is clear in *Unforgiven* that violence is necessary to achieve justice. The 'violence' of the film also has a very real effect, for example characters that are shot don't just silently fall down, and they suffer a great deal. It is clear, therefore, that the violence of *Unforgiven* must be examined with reference to both the western genre as well as the film as a whole.

News reports often contain disturbing images of violence or the effects of violence. Research studies have shown that this 'real' violence is more disturbing to children than fictional violence. Guy Cumberbatch, for example, interviewed a group of 305 children aged between 13 and 18 and claimed that 82% of the children found violence in the news more upsetting than in videos or computer games. The research makes it clear that children can distinguish between real and fictional violence and it has been pointed out that 'Children don't find fiction frightening; or if they do, they often enjoy it...'.²⁸ It is, however, also the case that despite 'real' violence being more disturbing it is, like fictional violence, set in the context of the news programme genre in which news reports attempt to set the violent scenes in context.

The unrelenting violence of the ear-slicing sequence in *Reservoir Dogs* is perhaps nearing the boundary of what is 'acceptable' on film. Like most other films, however, the violent actions result in the perpetrator's downfall. It is also significant that the other characters regard Mr Blonde as an out of control psychopath who does not act like a 'professional'.



MORAL PANIC

The mass media, in particular the tabloid press, play a key role in creating moral panics by responding to the concerns of public figures. The concern might be about the behaviour of certain individuals or groups or certain events which are perceived as threatening to social order. It is, however, the 'hysterical, stylised and stereotypical'²⁹ manner in which the situation is reported that blows

its true significance out of all proportion. Moral panics can result in government legislation to deal with the perceived problem. It could be argued, for example, that the 'moral panic' about video nasties was responsible for the Video Recording Act 1984. Moral panics in the 1990s have centred on the ownership of knives and guns and have also resulted in legislation to control their use.