



CHAPTER 1

Why Study Media Effects?

Source: ©iStockphoto.com/fotosipsak

Media Message Saturation

High Degree of Exposure

Accelerating Production of Information

Impossible to Keep Up

The Challenge of Coping

Media Influence Is Pervasive and Constant

Huge Knowledge Base About Media Effects

Summary

Why Study Media Effects?

You may be thinking that the question of this chapter is such an obvious one that it is silly to attempt an answer. Isn't it obvious that the hundreds of films, thousands of songs, tens of thousands of TV shows, and billions of Internet sites must be having some effect? Also, if advertisers did not think their messages had effects, why do they spend hundreds of billions of dollars each year on making and distributing such messages? In our everyday lives, we see other people being affected by the media all the time. Of course there are media effects!

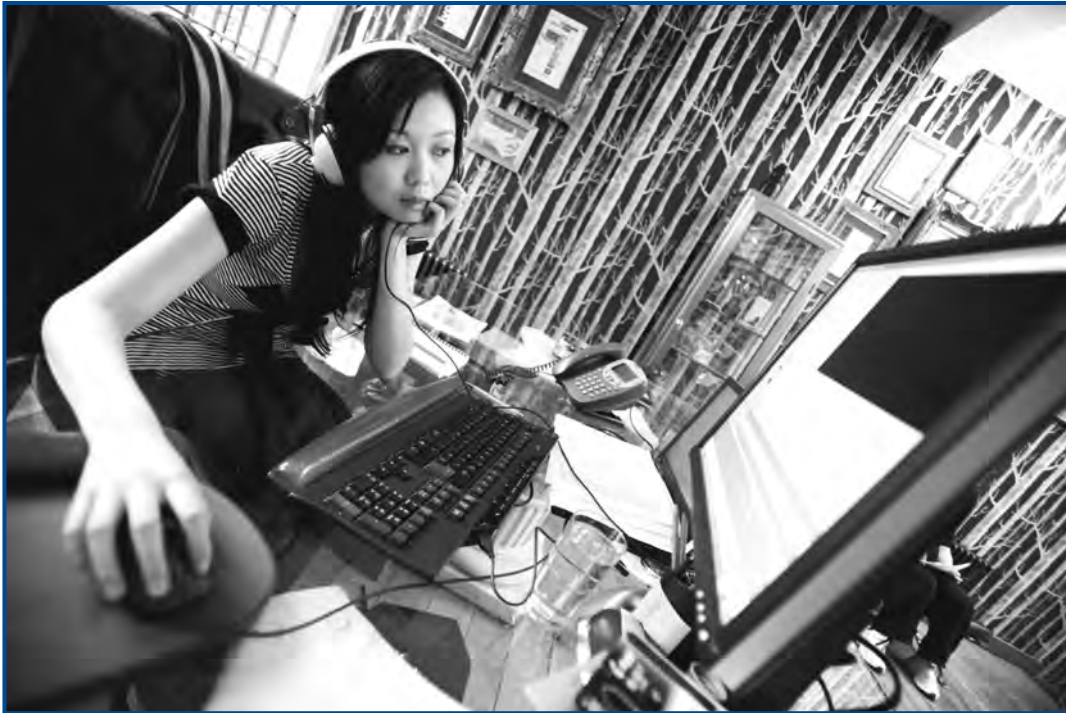
Yes, there are media effects. But the things you regard as examples of media effects when you observe them in your everyday life may not be stimulated by the media at all. Also, there are many, many effects that the media are responsible for—either in part or in full—that we never notice or even think about. And many of those large numbers of effects are not just happening to other people; they are happening to you every day.

It is the purpose of this book to move you beyond the obvious that is likely to be based on faulty beliefs about media effects. The purpose is to get you to see the more complete “big picture” of media effects that has been constructed from a very large literature of scientific studies. When you see the big picture, you will realize that the topic of media effects has far more facets and is far more interesting than you may have thought. Also, when you understand the full spectrum of media effects and how they occur, you will feel much more powerful in your ability to control those effects in your day-to-day life.

This chapter focuses you on the big picture of media effects by emphasizing three trends: media message saturation, the growing challenge of coping, and the growth of knowledge about media effects. Taken together, these three trends make now the most important time for you to start studying media effects.

MEDIA MESSAGE SATURATION

Our culture is saturated with information. And much of that information comes to us through a flood of messages from the media. As Table 1.1 reveals, there will be 175,000 book titles published in this one year in just the United States. Throughout the world, radio stations send out 65.5 million hours of original programming each year, and television adds another 48 million hours.



Source: © iStockphoto/Chris Schmidt

With personal computers, we have access to even more information than ever when we connect to the Internet. By early 2011, the Internet had over 13.6 billion pages that were indexed and therefore available through search engines (WorldWideWebSize.com, 2011). If you started visiting these 13.6 billion Web pages right now and visited a new one every second all day with no breaks and no sleep, it would take you 42 years to get through just the first 10% of these Web pages. Of course, over the course of those 42 years, the number of websites is likely to have increased several thousand times, because the amount of information that is produced not only grows each year, but the *rate of its growth* accelerates each year.

High Degree of Exposure

We love our media, as evidenced by how much time we spend with them. A recent comprehensive study of media use found that by the end of 2010, the average American was spending 11 hours with the media each and every day—and this figure continues to grow (Phillips, 2010). Of this total time, television and video (not including online video) accounted for about 40% while Internet and mobile accounted for an additional 31%. The increase in media use is driven by younger people who are shifting away from traditional

Table 1.1 Number of Media Vehicles

Medium	United States	World
Books (titles per year)	175,000	968,735
Radio stations	13,261	47,776
TV broadcast stations	1,884	33,071
Newspapers	2,386	22,643
Mass market periodicals	20,000	80,000
Scholarly journals	10,500	40,000
Newsletters	10,000	40,000
Archived office pages	3×10^9	7.5×10^9

Source: Adapted from Potter (2011).

media (such as newspapers, magazines, and books that use print on paper) and toward electronic forms of media. A report generated by the Kaiser Family Foundation in 2005 characterized your generation (people 8 to 18 years old) as the “M Generation” for your focus so strongly on media use. This report found that children and adolescents were spending 49 minutes per day with video games and another 62 minutes with the computer. Furthermore, most of your generation frequently multitasks by exposing yourselves to several media at a time (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). Also, computer use is especially high among college students. In the United States there are now 17.4 million college students, and more than half of you arrive on campus as freshmen with laptop computers. The typical college student has been found to spend more than 3.5 hours a day on the computer e-mailing, instant messaging, and Web surfing. And you likely spend an additional 7.5 hours every day engaged with other media, such as books, magazines, recordings, radio, film, and television (Siebert, 2006).

It is clear that the media are an extremely important part of everyone’s lives, especially people in your generation. The media organizations themselves realize this and continue to provide more and more messages in a wider range of channels with each new year.

Accelerating Production of Information

Not only is information easily available to almost anyone today, but information also keeps getting produced at an ever-increasing rate. More information has been generated since you were born than the sum total of all information throughout all recorded history up until the time of your birth. It is estimated that 80% to 90% of all scientists who have ever lived on this planet are alive today and producing scientific information at an exponentially growing rate; there are now more than 100,000 scientific scholarly journals; they publish more than 6 million articles each year (Shermer, 2002), and those numbers continue to

grow. Also in the past 40 years, the number of people in this country who identify themselves as artists increased from about 700,000 to 2.2 million, the number of musicians grew from 100,000 to more than 200,000, and the number of authors and writers increased fivefold to more than 190,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). These fast-growing numbers of artists, musicians, and authors are pumping even more messages through our media channels every day.

How much information is produced each year? In 2002, researchers at the University of California at Berkeley conducted a huge project that resulted in the estimate that in that single year, 2002, there were 5 exabytes of information produced worldwide (Lyman & Varian, 2003). This means that the amount of information produced in 2002 was 500,000 times the amount of all the holdings in the Library of Congress. As if that is not scary enough, Lyman and Varian estimated that the rate of growth of information increases at 30% each year. However, Lyman and Varian were wrong—they greatly *underestimated* the amount of information produced. Infoniac.com (2008, March 13) estimated that in 2007, there were 281 exabytes of information produced in that one year. The biggest drivers of this accelerating increase in information are the growing popularity of social networking and digital television and cameras that are not only used by hobbyists but in surveillance of public places.

Impossible to Keep Up

There is now so much information already in our culture that it is impossible to keep up with all of it. To illustrate this point, let's focus on just one medium: books. Until about two centuries ago, the majority of the population could not read, and even if it could, there were few books available. In the early 1300s, the Sorbonne Library in Paris contained only 1,338 books and yet was thought to be the largest library in Europe. Only elites had access to those books. Today, there are many libraries with more than 8 million books, and they lend out their books to millions of people every year. With literacy rates high, the ease of buying books from websites, and the availability of free public libraries in every town, *access* to books is no problem.

Time, however, is a big problem. If you were to try to read only the new books published this year, you would have to read a book every 3 minutes for 24 hours each day with no breaks over the entire year—that is 20 books per hour and 480 books each and every day. All that effort would be needed just to keep up with the *new titles published in the United States alone!* You would have no time left to read any of the other 66 million book titles in existence worldwide. And this example is limited to only books!



Source: ©iStockphoto.com/kertis

We live in an environment that is far different from any environment humans have ever experienced. And the environment changes at an ever-increasing pace. This is due to the accelerating generation of information and the sharing of that information through the increasing number of media channels and the heavy traffic of media vehicles traversing those channels. Messages are being delivered to everyone, everywhere, continually. We are all saturated with information, and each year the media are more aggressive in seeking our attention. It is a hopeless expectation to keep up with all the available information. The most important challenge now lies in making good selections when the media are continually offering us thousands of messages on any given topic.

THE CHALLENGE OF COPING



Source: Noel Hendrickson/Digital Vision/Thinkstock

How do we meet the challenge of making selections from among the overwhelming number of messages in the constantly increasing flood of information? The answer to this question is, We put our minds on “automatic pilot” where our minds automatically filter out almost all message options. I realize that this might sound strange, but think about it. We cannot possibly think about every available message and consciously decide whether

to pay attention to each one. There are too many messages to consider. So our minds have developed routines that guide this filtering process very quickly and efficiently so we don't have to spend much, if any, mental effort.

To illustrate this automatic processing, consider what we do when we go to the supermarket to buy food. Let's say we walk into the store with a list of a dozen items we need to buy. We rush through the aisles, and 15 minutes later we walk out of the store with our dozen items. In this scenario, how many decisions had we made? Our first guess is to say 12 decisions, because we needed to have made a decision to buy each of our dozen items. But what about all the items we decided *not* to buy? The average supermarket today has about 40,000 items on its shelves. So we actually made 40,000 decisions in the relatively short time we were in the supermarket—12 decisions to buy a product and 39,988 decisions not to buy a product. That is 45 decisions for each and every second we were in the store; that is indeed some fast thinking! Of course, we did not consider each product, weigh its merits relative to other products, and pick the best option. Instead, we relied on automatic programs running in our minds that guided us to certain products and brands while ignoring all others. These automatic programs are what enable our minds to work so quickly and efficiently.

Our culture is a grand supermarket of media messages. Those messages are everywhere whether we realize it or not, except that there are far more messages in our culture than there are products in any supermarket. To navigate our way efficiently day-to-day through our information-saturated culture, we rely on automatic processing. Psychologists refer to this automatic processing of information as *automaticity*. Automaticity is a state wherein our minds operate without any conscious effort from us. Thus the human mind is able to perform many mundane tasks routinely with remarkable efficiency. Once you have learned a sequence—such as tying your shoes, brushing your teeth, driving to school, or playing a song on the guitar—you can perform it over and over again with very little effort compared to the effort it took you to learn it in the first place. As we learn to do something, we are writing the instructions like a computer code in our minds. Once that code is written, it can later be loaded into our minds and run automatically to guide us through any previously learned task with very little thought.

In our everyday lives, the media offer us thousands of choices for exposures. With automatic processing, we experience a great deal of media messages without paying much attention to them. Every once in a while something in the message or in our environment triggers our conscious attention to a media message. To illustrate this, imagine yourself driving in your car with the radio playing while you are talking to your friend. Your attention is on the conversation with your friend instead of on the music coming from the car radio. Then your favorite song starts playing, and your attention shifts from the conversation to the music. Or perhaps your conversation is interrupted when your friend notices that the radio is playing her favorite song, and she starts singing along with the music. In both scenarios, you are being exposed to a stream of media messages from your car radio without paying conscious attention to them, but then something happens to trigger your conscious attention to the music from the radio.

The huge advantage of automatic processing of information is that it helps us get through a great many decisions with almost no effort. However, there are some serious disadvantages. When our minds are on automatic pilot, we may be missing a lot of messages that

might be helpful or enjoyable to us. We might not have programmed all the triggers we need to help us get out of automatic processing when a useful message comes our way. Returning to the supermarket example, let's say you are very health conscious. Had you been less concerned with efficiency (getting through your shopping list as quickly as possible), you would have considered a wider range of products and read their labels for ingredients. Not all low-fat products have the same fat content; not all products with vitamins added include the same vitamins or the same proportions. Or perhaps you are very price conscious. Had you been less concerned with efficiency, you would have considered a wider variety of competing products and looked more carefully at the unit pricing, so you could get more value for your money. When we are too concerned with efficiency, we lose opportunities to expand our experience and to put ourselves in a position to make better decisions that can make us healthier, wealthier, and happier.

MEDIA INFLUENCE IS PERVASIVE AND CONSTANT

Because we spend so much of our time with automatic processing of media messages, the media exert a continual influence on us without our conscious realization. We typically follow our habits day after day because it is easier to do that than to have to rethink everything every day. But this raises an important question: Who has programmed the computer code that governs our automatic routines?

The answer to this question is that we have programmed some of our code but that there are also other forces that have been programming our code. Those other influences include our parents, our friends, society in general with its social norms, the educational system, along with a variety of other institutions (such as religion, politics, criminal justice system, government, and so on), and the media. Each of these is continually exerting an influence on how we think, how we feel, and how we behave. Some of this influence is obvious and easy to notice, but most of it occurs subtly and shapes our mental codes unconsciously. When we are not consciously paying attention to these influences, they quietly shape our mental codes without our being aware of it. This is especially the case with the media, because there are so many messages and because we open ourselves up to so much media exposure. Over time, this exposure becomes a habit that we never think about consciously. For many of us, we turn on the radio every time we get in our cars, turn on the television as soon as we get home, and turn on our computers when we get up in the morning. Once we open these channels—the radio, the television, the computer—storytellers pump messages into our subconscious. Advertisers continually program the way we think about ourselves. Advertisers program an uneasy self-consciousness into our minds so that we are on the lookout for products that will make us look, feel, and smell better. Advertisers have programmed many of us into a shopping habit. Do you realize that Americans spend more time shopping than do people in any other country? Americans go to shopping centers about once a week, more often than they go to houses of worship, and Americans now have more shopping centers than high schools. In a survey of teenage girls, 93 % said that shopping was their favorite activity (Schwartz, 2004). Advertising works by programming our automatic routines so that we shop even when it would be in our best interest to do other things.

The media are continually programming and re-programming our mental codes. They are adding information, altering our existing information structures, stimulating responses, and reinforcing certain patterns of thinking and acting. The media are thus exerting an influence on us whether we are aware of it or not.

Furthermore, media influence is constant. The media influence on us does not stop when we stop exposing ourselves to media messages. As long as the media have an influence on programming our mental codes, their influence shapes how we think and act any time those mental codes are automatically running in our conscious or unconscious minds. So when you go into the supermarket to buy food, you may not be looking at coupons from newspapers or magazines; you may not be looking at TV monitors or listening to radio or an iPod. But your purchasing decisions are being shaped by the “shopping code” running automatically in your mind, and much of your shopping code has been programmed by advertisers who have sent their messages to you through all kinds of media year after year—for your entire life.

HUGE KNOWLEDGE BASE ABOUT MEDIA EFFECTS

Scholars have generated a very large number of research studies that examine media effects. Estimates place the number of published studies in communication journals at about 6,200 (Potter & Riddle, 2006). There are also likely to be media effects studies published in scholarly journals outside of communication, such as in social science (psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics), as well as humanistic (film studies, English, comparative literature) and applied fields (such as education, business, law, and health). Furthermore there are likely to be many books and governmental reports published on this popular topic. When we take all these additional outlets into consideration, there may be more than 10,000 published studies on the topic and an untold number of unpublished studies in the form of convention presentations and working papers.

All of this careful research activity has generated a very long list of media effects. This literature is now so large that many scholars have a difficult time organizing it all, so they often focus only on a small handful of more visible effects, such as the effect of violence on unstable people or the effect of sexual portrayals on impressionable teenagers. While these two effects are important, it is a serious mistake to limit our examination of media effects to a small number. Instead, we need to develop an appreciation for the wide range of effects that show up in the full spectrum of the population. Many of these effects are subtle to observe at any given time, but this does not make them unimportant. To the contrary, many of the most influential effects on each of us are those that occur during our everyday lives and sneak in “under the radar” so that we are unaware of how they are changing our habits and the way we think until someone points it out.

The purpose of this book is to ignore neither the common everyday effects nor the high-profile dramatic effects. This book will give you a map of the full range of media effects and to do it in a way to help you recognize those effects in yourself as well as in other people.

In the next four chapters, I show you some tools—basic terms, definitions, and ways of thinking about media effects—to help you as a reader get ready to process all this evidence

without losing sight of the big picture—that is, the map of media effects. These tools will help you navigate through all the detail in Chapters 6 through 14.

By the end of the book, you should really appreciate the saying, “Knowledge is power,” because you will have the knowledge that few people in our culture have, that is, an accurate vision of the big picture of media influence on you, your friends, and society. If you use that knowledge, you can powerfully control the effects in your life as well in the lives of other people.

SUMMARY

By this point in the chapter, you should have three ideas fixed well in your mind. First, you should realize that there is a great deal of information being produced each year and that production of new information continues to grow at an accelerating rate. We cannot avoid massive exposure to media messages in our information-saturated culture. Second, this continual flood of information influences us whether we pay conscious attention to it or not. And third, there is a large base of knowledge that clearly demonstrates that there is a wide range of media effects that are continually occurring in all kinds of people across the full span of our population.

Review Questions

1. Why is keeping your focus on the big picture of media effects so important?
2. List some indicators of media message saturation.
3. What is the most important challenge in coping with the flood of information?
4. What is automaticity?
5. In what way is media influence pervasive and constant?
6. Why is it difficult to organize the findings in the research literature on media effects?

Further Thinking Questions

1. Think about your own media message exposures.
 - What are your favorite media? Why are those your favorites?
 - What are your favorite types of messages (news, action/adventure movies, situation comedies, games, vampire stories, romances, reality competitions, sports, or others)? Why are these your favorites?
 - How much time do you spend with all the media on an average week?

2. Think about the automatic routines you use unconsciously to filter media messages.
 - How well do these routines work for you?
 - Can you think of any changes you should make to these routines?
3. Before you read any further in this book, think about the media effects that have been happening to you in your everyday life.
 - Take out a sheet of paper and draw a vertical line down the middle. Label the left side “Negative Effects” and the right side “Positive Effects.” See how many effects you can list in each column.
 - When you are finished, put the paper aside. Then refer back to it as you read through Chapters 6 through 12.