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# DO THE MEDIA HARM CHILDREN?

## Reflections on New Approaches to an Old Problem

**Sonia Livingstone**

### **The Challenge**

Possibly the most contentious issue in relation to children and media centres on children's susceptibility to media influences. It's a question that divides researchers quite profoundly, because at its heart lies the question of children's agency. However the two "sides" are labelled—child-centred versus media-centred, constructivist versus positivist, cultural theorists versus psychologists—there remains not only little agreement but, worryingly, little discussion and debate. Put too simply, just to capture the point, it seems that on the one hand, some researchers anchor their investigation by reference to a social problem in childhood (violence, early sexuality, obesity etc.) and then ask, not always subtly, to what extent the media are to blame. As they see it, research should focus on identifying causes, rigorous testing and addressing real-world problems. By contrast, other researchers begin with a critique of this approach (for its simple causal theories, for engendering moral panics, for positioning the child as "victim") before asking, not always more than descriptively, how children enjoy media, what they gain from them and how skilled or tactical they are in managing the media's role in their lives.

In this short article, I urge a rethinking of the question of media harm so as to develop a stimulating dialogue and identify productive directions for future research. Although my intention is to be even-handed, I am conscious that even in phrasing the question in terms of "media harm", I will seem to some to construct discursively a problem that isn't real, while to others I will seem to ask anew about a subject in which they have long been expert. Such is the polarisation—of theory, methods, language—that I wish to address. Why? Not just because I favour the constructive convergence of different approaches, but because politically, the polarisation of approaches that bifurcates our research community undermines our collective ability to speak powerfully to our source fields—of media studies, of childhood studies. On the one hand, childhood research continues to marginalise or ignore the media, book after book on children's lives being published with little or no mention of television, media or internet even in the index. At the same time, media research relegates the study of children to a small corner of the curriculum, as a "soft" or optional part of the discipline, not one with wider implications for the analysis of media (Livingstone, 1998).

Further, this polarisation threatens our effective contribution to the wider world of public policy regarding childhood and media. Many of us will have experienced the contrast between our knowledge of the research literature and the straightforward answers demanded by policy makers regarding media influence or effects, media literacy and media regulation. To be sure, we can demure from this—qualifying and contextualising, balancing and equivocating, contesting each other in public—and indeed, the demands of robust debate over genuinely uncertain issues surely demand that

we do just this. But when paediatricians, experimental psychologists, cultural analysts and media educators offer very different, often directly contradictory advice, drawing on different studies in the field, the practical outcome is either that the policy makers pick and choose which advice to follow, according to their own interests or, worse, they turn away entirely, frustrated at our lack of consensus, our apparent refusal to develop clear conclusions or to offer useful criteria to inform policy decisions (Livingstone, 2005). So, the political challenge is to make research on children and media count. But to meet it, we must begin with the intellectual challenge, for I contend that the very lack of contestation is allowing both sides to evade or ignore their own problems, and so research risks becoming repetitive or naïve, failing to grapple with key issues or to respond to critics.

### **Contested Terms—Effects, Vulnerability, Harm**

McQuail observes that “the entire study of mass communication is based on the premise that there are effects from the media, yet it seems to be the issue on which there is least certainty and least agreement” (2005, p. 456). By contrast, home, school and peers are all readily acknowledged as major influences on children’s development, though the theories and methods designed to investigate them are equally complex, diverse and often contested. Why is this so hard to acknowledge also for media influences? Partly, it is because the concept of “harm”, though implicitly understood, is rarely formally defined, and nor is that of “vulnerability” (Millwood Hargrave & Livingstone, 2006). But the problem is not really one of semantics but one of methodology, epistemology and the politics of research.

Among those who investigate media’s effects on children, the generally accepted, though far from consensual, “answer” is that children are particularly vulnerable to media influence and, further, that the media do harm some children, in some ways, under certain conditions (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Calvert, 1999; Villani, 2001). As sceptics note, there is little new here, for familiar debates are rehearsed over and again as each new medium arrives (Drotner, 1992; Wartella & Jennings, 2000). Have we, one wonders, got beyond this prescient summary of findings half a century ago:

for some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For some children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children, under most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial. (Schramm, Lyle & Parker, 1961, p. 61)

Although their summary may not greatly please either the public or policy makers, Browne and Hamilton-Giachritsis (2005) do take things further when they summarise the field as showing that:

There is consistent evidence that violent imagery in television, film and video, and computer games has substantial short-term effects on arousal, thoughts, and emotions, increasing the likelihood of aggressive or fearful behaviour in younger children, especially in boys. The evidence becomes inconsistent when considering older children and teenagers, and long-term outcomes for all ages. The multifactorial nature of aggression is emphasised, together with the methodological difficulties of showing causation. Nevertheless, a small but significant association is shown in the research,

with an effect size that has a substantial effect on public health. By contrast, only weak evidence from correlation studies links media violence directly to crime (702).

Yet the grounds for contestation remain considerable, and these grounds have been thoroughly rehearsed in the literature. I am puzzled, however, that although at least some critics of effects research are careful readers of effects research (e.g. Amici Curiae, 2001; Barker, 2004; Barker & Petley, 2001; Cumberbatch, 2004; Freedman, 2002; Rowland, 1983)—and this cannot be said of all, for the mythic claim of the hypodermic needle, though never attributed to any published work, persists among cultural critics—it seems that those criticised rarely publicly answer their critics (although see Alexander & Hanson, 2003; Schroder, Drotner, Kline & Murray, 2003). Article after article published on media effects fails to acknowledge the familiar litany of problems, offering little justification for the supposed validity of a dependent measure, showing only short-term effects yet concluding in favour of long-term societal implications, or making no attempt to bring into the research design the many contextual, cultural factors that form part of the complex phenomena studied, factors that may even help explain the persistence of contradictory or null findings. Why, in short, are the critics of the theoretical, epistemological, methodological and political underpinnings of “effects” research not answered?

On the other hand, if its critics would re-examine “effects research” anew, they might be intrigued by the growing body of subtle, clever, often naturalistic studies now being conducted—for example, to develop interventions to reduce the influence of commercial pressure on children (Robinson, 1999; Robinson, Saphir, Kraemer, Varady & Haydel, 2001), to examine longitudinal effects of childhood viewing (Johnson, Cohen, Smailes, Kasen & Brook, 2002), to encourage positive media messages about sexuality to teenagers (Brown, Halpern & L’Engle, 2005) or to argue against the deregulation of product placement (Auty & Lewis, 2004). These studies do not necessarily repeat the familiar limitations of artificial laboratory conditions, short exposure to unrealistic messages, simplistic measures of “impact” and so forth. Further, the critics might, if they engaged positively, put pressure on effects researchers to address, rather than sideline, some outstanding questions—about the size of the effects they identify (especially, relative to other putative factors that influence their outcome measure—aggression, attitudes etc; Hearold, 1986; Story, Neumark-Sztainer & French, 2002), about exactly which groups their results apply to (for the field is riddled with contradictory findings regarding, most notably, age, gender, class and ethnicity; Millwood Hargrave & Livingstone, 2006); and about the often tangled reasoning regarding media effects that still confuses causation and correlation, process and outcome, proximal and distal causes.

### **Politics and Theory**

Although there seems less appetite these days for the old methodological debates, with many comfortably advocating (though more rarely practising) a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, the political challenge regarding evidence of vulnerability to harm is of growing importance. Governments in many countries are seeking to deregulate the media and communications environment given trends towards channel abundance, technological convergence, globalisation and individualisation (Verhulst, 2006). People, so the argument goes, should regulate their own media context, as part of the choice agenda of the empowered consumer. Hence, parents must become media literate, as must their children, so

as to mitigate against media influences (notwithstanding the absence of clear evidence that media literacy does undermine effects (Kunkel et al., 2004), this calling into question the concept of “vulnerability” itself (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006). The politics of deregulation and the rise of the consumerist discourse are far from uncontroversial. Consequently, effects researchers must ask themselves, reflexively, whether their research is in any way culpable of political critique—motivated by moral panics, encouraging a scapegoating of the media, embodying a middle class critique of working class pleasures, denying the agency of individual audience members, caught up in a censorious policy move that unduly restricts freedom of expression and so on (Millwood Hargrave & Livingstone, 2006)?

In the attempt to avoid just these political traps, cultural critics seem often reluctant to temper their apparent claim of null effects, and instead they celebrate children’s wisdom, the sophistication of their alternative interpretations, their ability to resist influence. This leads to a curious refusal to consider the importance of age, most notably, as a factor that structures and defines childhood, as if children of all ages were equally able to evade or counter media influences (to allow that older children are more sophisticated in their understanding than younger children opens the door to the claim that the younger are more “vulnerable”). Here our field would benefit from better theory. The Piagetian account of invariant stages of cognitive development has indeed been heavily critiqued, notwithstanding the often-missed complexity of the theory, but social developmental theory has moved on, and our field should reflect this. Moreover, there is an intriguing rise in attention to the more social and culturally oriented developmental psychology of Vygotsky, and Bronfenbrenner, and this might be even more fruitful (Bronfenbrenner, 1980; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1934/1986).

Similarly, to avoid being implicated in regulatory moves towards censorship or other constraints on freedom of expression, it seems that cultural critics prefer to develop a defence even of challenging or controversial material (Barker, 2006; Berger, 2002; Gee, 2003; McGuigan, 1996). For example, it is argued that children have much to gain from testing boundaries, experimenting with identity or seeing represented publicly the social problems that adults otherwise seek to hide from them. And undoubtedly, such arguments are plausible, indeed important. But what is the limit to this position? It is noteworthy, for example, that the cultural defence offered is implicitly selective—even for adult viewers, this defence is not generally offered in support of those in the audience who express pleasure in identifying with the aggressor or in viewing violence or suffering for its own sake (though such a defence is, for example, made of people’s right to enjoy pornography for sexual pleasure). When cultural critics attempt to take on the censorship argument in relation to children, their case can be unconvincing and inconclusive: Gee (2003), for instance, offers a defence of the rash of post 11 September 2001 video games featuring US soldiers killing Arabs and Muslims, but he appears less tolerant of a game called “Ethnic Cleansing”, one of several produced by the white supremacist hate group, the National Alliance. Indeed, the range of content available through new media is challenging a number of cultural scholars, leading some towards expressions of concern regarding potential harmful effects.

### **A Risk-Based Approach**

It seems that the focus on simple and direct causal effects of the media is no longer appropriate. Instead, research should seek to identify the range of factors that directly, and

indirectly through interactions with each other, combine to explain particular social phenomena. For as research of all types shows, each social problem (e.g. aggression, prejudice, obesity, bullying etc.) is associated with a distinct and complex array of putative causes. The task for those concerned with media harm is to identify and contextualise the role of the media within that array in order to permit a balanced judgement of the role played by the media, if any, on a case by case basis. In some cases, this may reduce the focus on the media—for example, by bringing into view the many other factors that account for present levels of violence in society. In other cases, it may increase the focus on the media—for example, in understanding the role played by the internet in facilitating paedophiles' access to children.

A risk based approach thus begins by identifying the wide range of factors that may be at work (Kline, 2003). It then seeks to establish the conditions under which any particular factor (such as media exposure) operates, to weigh these factors one against the other for their relative contribution, and to check their importance by conducting interventions that reduce a putative factor to see whether, indeed, the outcome is altered. As cultural critics have long suspected, when such an approach is followed (all too rarely), the hypothesised role of the media is often shown to be minor relative to other factors and, moreover, the outcome (aggression, obesity, prejudice etc.) is not necessarily reduced when media exposure is reduced—although, when the media factor “passes” this test, the evidence for media influence is all the more compelling. Thus researchers are forced to resort to the precautionary principle, which dictates that under uncertain circumstances or insufficient evidence, policy should err on the side of caution; hence the burden of proof is placed not on the side of those asserting the existence of a risk but on the side of those who seek to downplay that risk (Starr, 2003).

On the other hand, to point simply to the importance of social and cultural context, to claim that media influence cannot be researched because so many factors operate, without identifying them clearly or examining their interrelations—as is typical of more cultural approaches, is no more satisfactory either intellectually or in terms of influencing policy (in any direction) for the benefit of children. Of course, many factors are culturally specific, including national traditions of content regulation, approaches to parenting, and moral frames for judging content or determining harm. So too, we know that the media differ—by technology, by genre, by contexts of use, by interpretative context. But surely we can begin to compare findings—across methods, situations, cultures—to learn some lessons and offer some insights to others.

In short, it seems wise to frame the question differently, eschewing the bald question—do the media have harmful effects or not, and instead insisting on a more complex formulation of the question, namely—in what way and to what extent do the media contribute, if at all, as one among several identifiable factors that, in combination, account for the social phenomenon under consideration (violence, racism etc.). For although few effects theorists would wish to imply that the media are solely responsible for a social problem, surprisingly little effort is devoted to identifying the range of relevant factors, of which the media may be one, or to weighing the differential importance of each of these factors in the overall explanation. Contextualising the media within such a multifactorial explanation is demanding, possibly requiring collaboration with experts in other fields (for example, in the currently topical case of childhood obesity, media researchers would have to collaborate with nutritionists, health specialists, sociologists of the family etc.). To compensate, such an approach might avoid the accusation of

theoretical or methodological naïveté that follows the apparent identification of the media as a single cause or object of blame. After all, few critics of media effects research would wish to claim that the media are wholly irrelevant to such social problems.

### **Evidence-Based Policy**

The prospect of preventing harm has guided much research, particularly that designed to inform regulation. But the regulatory context is both complex and fast-changing (Murphy, 2003; Quin, 2005; Verhulst, 2006). While effects researchers have met with some successes (Kunkel & Wilcox, 2001), making evidence of harm count in the legal process is difficult in the extreme (Linz, Penrod & Donnerstein, 1986). For example, in the UK, the criminal offence in the area of harm is governed by the 1959 Obscene Publications Act: it involves an explicit effects based test, defining a publication as obscene “if its effect ... is, if taken as a whole, such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, in all the circumstances, to read, see, or hear the matter contained or embodied in it”. This is a demanding requirement (Barnett & Thomson, 1996), and little media content seen by children under everyday conditions would fall foul of it (though note that in the US the Parents Television Council, a lobby group, have argued that the Federal Communication Commission should “make a priority of reducing TV violence and expand the definition of broadcast indecency to include violence”<sup>1</sup>).

More effective, in terms of influencing policy outcomes, is the effort to produce evidence that informs other forms of regulation and self-regulation of the media market. Ironically perhaps, although rigorous scientific research is often called for by policy makers, in practice they can find contextual and culturally differentiated accounts that chart the everyday conditions under which people access and use media more helpful in framing regulation. This is partly because evidence obtained through laboratory experiments lacks the face validity necessary for the public process of policy formation. As regulatory regimes evolve (and devolve), the growing emphasis on consumer choice, on enabling individual self-regulation and on media literacy opens up new avenues for research on children and media harm, research that must take into account the contextual and contingent factors that mediate harmful exposure.

As research on the conditions under which children access and use media in their daily lives makes clear, many contextual variables are important in framing the ways in which they approach the media. This points to difficulties with the premise of technology-neutral regulation—increasingly favoured in Europe at least, since research shows that people treat different technologies in different ways, depending on the domestic and technological conditions of access, along with multiple other factors that differentially affect, at least at present, how people approach and respond to different media (moreover, there is strikingly little research that compares children’s responses to similar content across different media, impeding the argument either for or against such regulation).

### **Whose Account Counts?**

There are signs in the literature of new, often creative approaches to the question of “harm”, although these tend to be easily “written out” of the standard reviews of the field. Qualitative work with children that canvasses their own views of harm (e.g. Buckingham,

1996; Nightingale, Dickenson & Griff, 2000), interpretative work that seeks to contextualise responses to media—both in terms of textual characteristics and the domestic or social contexts of media use (e.g. Gotz, Lemish, Aidman & Moon, 2005; Jerslev, 2001; Tobin, 1998), approaches focused on the analysis of risk (and children's place in a risk society) rather than on effects as traditionally conceived (e.g. Kline, 2003; Millwood Hargrave & Livingstone, 2006)—all these raise exciting new possibilities for research, and should be more soundly evaluated alongside, even triangulated with, the established experimental and survey approaches. These developments parallel research on adults, for here too a range of qualitative social research methods are being used to gain a more context-sensitive, interpretive account of people's diverse responses to media content (e.g. Barker, 2006; Barker, Arthurs & Harindranath, 2001; Gillespie, 2002; Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash & Weaver, 1992). Although questions may fairly be asked regarding drawing causal inferences, reliability and generalisability of such findings, these approaches represent a concerted attempt to address questions of validity, and should surely be debated in relation to survey and experimental findings, in the spirit of encouraging triangulation of methods (Flick, 1998).

Examples of such research with children, often following child-centred methodologies (Livingstone & Lemish, 2001), include Buckingham's (1996) UK study of how 6- to 16-year-olds "define and make sense of" media images that may be distressing, using repeated in-depth qualitative interviews. This found, interestingly, "in both fact and fiction, (negative) responses appear to derive primarily from a fear of victimisation, rather than any identification with the perpetrators of violence" (see also Gerbner & Gross' cultivation effect hypothesis, 1976). Similarly, Nightingale et al.'s (2000) in-depth discussions with children aged 10–15 about media harm in Australia found that children admitted to being scared of realistic images, especially in those in the news about matters close to the child's own life (see also Millwood Hargrave, 2003), while fictional images were seen as less harmful. Rather than seeing children as "innocent victims", Nightingale et al. argue that children are "active players" trying to take in and deal with the inevitable changes in society and the media. This does not mean, however, that they are sanguine about media content, for they reacted strongly to depictions of real-life risks, with some finding a disturbing resonance with their experience of aggression within the family (Nightingale, Dickenson & Griff, 2000). Indeed, "there is growing evidence that media violence also engenders intense fear in children which often lasts days, months, and even years" (Cantor, 2000). My point here is to break down the notion that qualitative research only celebrates resistance while experiments demonstrate vulnerability, and to invite triangulation across approaches that identifies consistencies and seeks to explain differences (for example, by acknowledging children's desire to push boundaries and play with frightening material, often for legitimate psychological reasons (Jerslev, 2001). Children's voices should surely be heard in this debate, though we may not give them the last word.

Looking ahead, the media and communications environment is diversifying rapidly, with globalising, personalised, mobile and interactive media raising both old and new questions regarding media influence. Rather than rehearse a tired agenda of media effects, I have argued that this is a key moment to rethink and reorient, so that a more productive approach can be taken. After all, most research on media harms has focused on television, conducted in the context of a high degree of content regulation and familiar contexts of parental mediation and media literacy, both of which have limited the conclusions that could be drawn in ways we only now begin to recognise. But, with new forms of media,

and very different conditions of regulation, mediation and literacy, how might this change conclusions regarding harm?

At present, we can surely agree that, to those who fear that the media are responsible for a growing range of social problems, one might urge that the evidence base is carefully and critically scrutinised, for such findings as exist generally point to more modest, qualified and context-dependent conclusions. To those who hope, however, that the media play little or no role in today's social problems, one might point to the complex and diverse ways in which different media are variably but crucially embedded in most or all aspects of our everyday lives, and that it seems implausible to suggest that they have no influence, whether positive or negative. The truth surely, as always, lies somewhere in the middle. Just how we should conceptualise, debate and research this is the challenge ahead.

#### NOTE

1. <http://www.parentstv.org/ptc/publications/reports/stateindustryviolence/main.asp>

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