In 1999, two heavily armed students wearing trench coats attacked Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. They planted as many as fifty bombs and murdered twelve fellow students and a teacher before killing themselves.

In the wake of this tragedy, many people blamed the mass media, speculating that the killers had immersed themselves in the dark lyrics of shock rocker Marilyn Manson and were desensitized to violence by “first-person shooter” video games such as *Doom*.

Still others looked to the influence of films like *The Basketball Diaries*, in which a drug-using, trench-coated teenager (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) imagines shooting a teacher and his classmates.

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**Early Developments in Media Research**

- During the mid to late nineteenth century, the major models of media analysis were based on moral and political arguments, as suggested in de Alexis de Tocqueville’s writings.
- More scientific approaches to mass media research did not begin to develop until the late 1920s and 1930s.
- It was in 1920 that Walter Lippmann, in his book *Liberty and the News*, called on journalists to operate more like scientific researchers in gathering and analyzing factual material.
- Lippmann’s next book, *Public Opinion*, published in 1922, applied principles of psychology to journalism; it is considered by many academics to be “the founding book in American media studies.”

“The pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationships, are their public opinions.”

—Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1922
Propaganda Analysis
- After World War I, some media researchers became interested in the ways in which propaganda had been used to advance the American war effort. They found that during the war, governments routinely relied on propaganda divisions as part of their "information" apparatus.
- Though propaganda was considered a positive force for mobilizing public opinion during the war, researchers after the war labeled propaganda as "partisan appeal based on half-truths and devious manipulation of communication channels."

Public Opinion Research
- Researchers soon extended the study of war propaganda to include general concerns about how the mass media filtered information and shaped public attitudes.
- On the upside, research on diverse populations has provided insights into citizen behavior and social differences, especially during election periods or following major national events.
- On the downside, the journalism profession has become increasingly dependent on political polls. Some critics ask whether this heavy reliance on measured public opinion has begun to adversely affect active political involvement.
- Furthermore, because people do not design a CBS News or Gallup poll, the public is just passively responding to surveys that mainly measure opinions on topics of interest to business, government, academics, and the mainstream news media.
- Another problem is the pervasive use of unreliable pseudo-polls, typically call-in, online, or person-in-the-street polls that news media use to address a "question of the day." The National Council of Public Opinion Polls notes that "unscientific pseudo-polls are widespread and sometimes entertaining, if always quite meaningless," and discourages the news media from conducting them.

Social Psychology Studies
- While opinion polls measure public attitudes, social psychology studies measure individual behavior and cognition.
- The Payne Fund Studies (1929-1932) emerged from a growing national concern about the effects of motion pictures, which had become a particularly popular pastime for young people in the 1920s. These beginning studies, which were later used by politicians to attack the movie industry, linked frequent movie attendance to juvenile delinquency and other antisocial behaviors, arguing that movies took "emotional possession" of young filmgoers.
- The 1936 movie, Little Caesar, follows the career of gangster Rico Bandello (played here by Edward G. Robinson), who kills his way to the top of the crime establishment and gets the girl as well. The Motion Picture Production Code, which was established a few years after this movie's release, reined in sexual themes and profane language, set restrictions on film violence, and attempted to prevent audiences from sympathizing with bad guys like Rico.
In one of the Payne studies, for example, children were taken to a movie house and wired with electrodes to galvanometers, mechanisms that detect any heightened response via the subject’s skin. The researchers interpreted any galvanic changes in the skin as evidence of emotional arousal.

In retrospect, the findings hardly seem surprising. The youngest children in the group (nine-year-olds) had the strongest reaction to violent or tragic movie scenes, and the teenage subjects reacted most strongly to scenes with romantic and sexual content. The researchers concluded that films could be dangerous for young children and might foster sexual promiscuity among teenagers.

The conclusions of this and other Payne Fund Studies contributed to the establishment of the film industry’s production code, which limited movie content from the 1930s through the 1950s.

Marketing Research

Specialized researchers, using improved audience sampling and statistical techniques, began selling their services to advertisers and media firms in the 1920s. The emergence of commercial radio led to the first ratings systems that measured how many people were listening on a given night. By the 1930s, radio networks, advertisers, large stations, and advertising agencies all subscribed to ratings services.

However, compared with print media, whose circulation departments kept careful track of customers’ names and addresses, radio listeners were more difficult to trace. This problem precipitated the development of increasingly sophisticated direct-mail diaries, television meters, phone surveys, the telemarketing industry, and eventually Internet tracking in trying to determine consumer preferences and measure media use worldwide.
Research on Media Effects

As concern about public opinion, propaganda, and the impact of the media merged with the growth of journalism and mass communication departments in colleges and universities, media researchers looked more and more to behavioral science as a model.

Media research generally comes from the private or public sector—each type with distinguishing features. Private research, sometimes called proprietary research, is generally conducted for a business, a corporation, or even a political campaign. It is usually applied research in the sense that the information it uncovers typically addresses some real-life problem or need, such as determining consumer buying habits or market trends, trying to discover the hot-button issues for a political race, or measuring test audience responses to variations of a movie ending.

Early media researchers were concerned about Adolf Hitler’s use of national radio to control information and indoctrinate the German people throughout the 1930s. Germany’s wartime international broadcasts, however, were considered failures. Trying to undermine morale using broadcasts aimed at Allied soldiers and British citizens, Germany hired British defector William Joyce (“Lord Haw Haw”) and Ohioan Mildred Gillars (“Axis Sally”). Because so many media messages competed with Nazi propaganda in democratic countries, these radio traitors had little impact.

Key Phases in Research Approaches

Hypodermic-Needle Model

One of the earliest and least persuasive media theories attributed powerful effects to the mass media. Having watched Hitler use radio, film, and print media as propaganda tools for Nazism, they worried that the popular media in America also had a strong hold over vulnerable audiences. This concept of powerful media affecting weak audiences has been labeled the hypodermic-needle model, sometimes also called the magic bullet theory or the direct effects model. It suggests that the media shoot their potent effects directly into unsuspecting victims.
Minimal-Effects Model

With the rise of empirical research techniques, social scientists began demonstrating that the media alone do not cause people to change their attitudes and behaviors. At this point, the limited or minimal-effects model emerged, based on tightly controlled experiments and surveys. Researchers argued that people engage in selective exposure and selective retention with regard to the media. That is, we selectively expose ourselves to media messages that are most familiar to us, and we retain messages that confirm values and attitudes we already hold. Minimal-effects researchers argued that in most cases the mass media reinforce existing behaviors and attitudes rather than change them.

Uses and Gratifications Model

Aside from difficulties in proving direct cause-effect relationships, the effects tradition usually assumed that audiences were passive and were acted upon by the media.

A response to the minimal-effects theory, the uses and gratifications model was proposed in the late 1960s to challenge the notion of audience passivity. Under this model, researchers—usually using in-depth interviews to supplement survey questionnaires—studied the ways in which individuals used the media to satisfy various emotional or intellectual needs.

Approaches to Media Effects

Scientific method: A widely used research method that studies phenomena in systematic stages; it includes identifying the research problem, reviewing existing research, developing working hypotheses, determining appropriate research design, collecting information, analyzing results to see if the hypotheses have been verified, and interpreting the implications of the study.

Random assignment: A social science research method for assigning research subjects; it ensures that every subject has an equal chance of being placed in either the experimental group or the control group.

Survey research: In social science research, a method of collecting and measuring data taken from a group of respondents.

Longitudinal studies: A term used for research studies that are conducted over long periods of time and often rely on large government and academic survey databases.

Content analysis: In social science research, a method for studying and coding media texts and programs.

Explaining Media Effects

Social Learning Theory—Supporters of social learning theory draw on the concept of observational learning to explain the link between exposure to aggression in the mass media and real-life acts of violence. Similar to Bandura's original research on the effects of imitation, social learning theory maintains that observing others engage in aggressive behavior can lead to imitative behavior. However, it also acknowledges that the mere observation of aggression without imitation can lead to desensitization, or a decrease in emotional responses to violent acts. This desensitization can make individuals more likely to engage in aggressive behavior themselves.

Agenda-Setting

Another key phenomenon posited by media effects researchers has been agenda-setting: the idea that when the mass media pay attention to particular events or issues, they determine—that is, set the agenda for—the major topics of discussion for individuals and society.

The Cultivation Effect

Another mass media phenomenon—the cultivation effect—suggests that heavy viewing of television leads individuals to perceive reality in ways that are consistent with television portrayals. This area of effects research attempts to push beyond a focus on individual behavior and toward larger ideas about the media's impact on society. The major research in this area grew from the TV violence profiles of George Gerbner and his colleagues, who attempted to make broad generalizations about the impact of televised violence on real life. The basic idea suggests that the more time an audience spends watching television and absorbing its viewpoints, the more likely it is that the audience's own views of social reality will be shaped by the content and portrayals they see on television.
Spiral of Silence

Developed by German communication theorist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in the 1970s and 1980s, the spiral of silence is a theory that links the mass media, social psychology, and the formation of public opinion. It proposes that those who find that their views on controversial issues are in the minority will keep their views to themselves—i.e., become silent—for fear of social isolation.

As those in the minority voice their views less often, alternative and minority perspectives are diminished and even silenced.

Cultural Approaches to Media Research

It is important here to distinguish directions in American media studies from British-European traditions. In Europe, media studies have favored interpretive rather than scientific approaches; in other words, researchers have approached media questions and problems as if they were literary or cultural critics rather than experimental or survey researchers.

Such approaches built on the writings of political philosophers such as Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci; these types of research investigated how the mass media have been used to maintain existing hierarchies in society.

They examined, for example, how popular culture or sports distract people from redressing social injustices. They also studied the subordinate status of some social groups in attempting to address some of the deficiencies of emerging social science research.

cultural studies: In media research, the approaches that try to understand how the media and culture are tied to the actual patterns of communication used in daily life. These studies focus on how people make meanings, apprehend reality, and order experience through the use of stories and symbols.

textual analysis: in media research, a method for closely and critically examining and interpreting the meanings of culture, including architecture, fashion, books, movies, and TV programs.

Audience Studies

Cultural research that focuses on how people use and interpret cultural content is called audience- or reader-response research.

Political Economy

The focus on the production of popular culture and the forces behind it are the topic of political economy studies. The greatest concern political economy studies have about the media is the increasing concentration of ownership. This concentration of ownership means that the production of media content is being controlled by fewer and fewer organizations, investing those companies with more power. Moreover, the domination of public discourse by for-profit corporations may mean that the bottom line for all public communication and popular culture is money, not democratic expression.
Evaluating Cultural Approaches

- "a more cultural approach "does not seek to explain human behavior, but to understand it . . . . It does not attempt to predict human behavior, but to diagnose human meanings." In other words, a cultural approach does not provide explanations for the laws that govern the mass media. Rather, it offers interpretations of the stories, messages, and meanings that circulate throughout our culture.

- One of the main strengths of a cultural approach is the freedom it affords to broadly interpret the impact of the mass media. Because cultural work is not bound by the precise control of variables, researchers can more easily examine the ties between media messages and the broader social, economic, and political scene.

- Both media effects and cultural researchers today have begun to look at the limitations of their work more closely, borrowing ideas from each other to better assess the complexity of the media's impact. For instance, in Democracy without Citizens, political scientist Robert Entman employed both perspectives to examine journalism and politics.

- He used cultural theories about economics and politics to reveal how journalists slant the news and oversimplify complex issues. He supplemented his cultural inquiry with surveys that measured the impact of slanted reports on public opinion. By combining the two approaches, Entman strengthened his argument, which called for substantial journalistic reform.

Media Research, Ivory Towers, and Democracy

- Although media research has built a growing knowledge base and dramatically advanced what we know about individuals and societies, the academic world has paid a price. That is, the larger public has often been excluded from access to the research process. Researchers themselves have even found it difficult to speak to one another across disciplines because of the obscure language used to analyze and report findings.

- Even in cultural research, the language used is often incomprehensible to students and to other audiences who use the mass media. Cultural research tends to identify with marginalized groups, yet this scholarship can be self-defeating if its complexity is too removed from the daily experience of the groups it addresses and the students it is designed to educate.