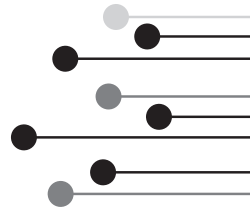# Effects of Media Messages

On June 12, 2016, at roughly 2:00 a.m., a 29-year-old security guard named Omar Mateen entered Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, and began firing into the crowd with a semiautomatic rifle and a pistol, leaving 49 people dead and over 50 people wounded (Mozingo, Pearce, & Wilkinson, 2016). Mateen staged a 3-hour hostage standoff before police stormed the nightclub and killed him. At the time, it was the worst mass shooting in U.S. history. On June 3, 2017, pedestrians on the London Bridge were left scrambling when a van deliberately drove into them before crashing on the south bank of the River Thames, after which the three occupants of the van ran to a nearby market and began stabbing people around nearby pubs and restaurants (Dearden, 2017). Police shot dead the three attackers about 8 minutes into the emergency, but not before eight innocent civilians were killed and 48 people were wounded.

Aside from the infliction of mass casualties and a sense of terror among civilians, these two horrific events had something in common: They were perpetrated by individuals—all native-born citizens in their respective countries—who had reportedly become "radicalized" by consuming Islamist extremist videos on YouTube. In the London Bridge case, Khuram Shazad Butt, one of the attackers and a Pakistani-born British citizen, had been an outspoken proponent of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) after watching online videos of Ahmad Musa Jibril, an American preacher of Palestinian descent who preached a radically conservative ideology of Islam (Moore, 2017). In the Pulse nightclub shooting, FBI Director James Comey as well as President Barack Obama confirmed that Mateen had been "self-radicalized" via his exposure to extremist views over the Internet (Pilkington & Roberts, 2016). These two terrorist incidents in two different countries raise a host of thorny questions about the media: Did these two individuals seek out extremist content online after they had become radicalized? Or did watching YouTube videos really alter the political views of Mateen and Butt, leading them to violently reject their home countries in favor of a dangerously extreme and brutal sect of Islam? YouTube's parent company Google responded to the London Bridge incident by promising to remove videos that clearly violated its community guidelines (such as those promoting terrorism) and would make other changes with regard to videos that denigrated other religions or races. For example, Google changed its policies to prevent extremist videos from to prevent extremist videos from selling advertising and from being promoted, endorsed, or commented on by users (Wakabayashi, 2017). Google noted that its new policy

was intended to balance the need to promote free expression via YouTube with the desire to protect audiences from damaging and potentially radicalizing content.

## Overview of the Chapter

These examples of radicalization via consumption of extremist content on YouTube and other sites online illustrate a style of reasoning that stretches back more than a century: that media messages carry potentially damaging information for the audience and that these messages need to be carefully monitored and potentially restricted. The idea that media messages can lead to changes in individual audience members is the thrust behind the "effects perspective," which emerged in the 20th century as the dominant paradigm in the field of media studies. This chapter orients you to some of the major strands in media effects theories, beginning with the origins of mass society theory in the early 20th century. We then focus on early concerns over film and radio. The chapter then moves on to examine some key studies in media exposure and persuasion in the World War II era. The final section focuses on concerns with mediated violence and its effects on society, particularly children. This is examined via the U.S. television violence studies from the late 1960s and early 1970s (especially the Surgeon General's Report). The chapter concludes with some examples of more recent research into the effects of mediated violence on children, specifically that from video games and mobile media.

# Origins of Media Effects
# Theories in the Early 20th Century

The early 20th century was a time of extraordinary change in the United States and elsewhere in the industrialized world. Manufacturing was rapidly becoming the largest source of job creation, supplanting agricultural labor. The mechanization of farming drove millions to urban centers where they formed a giant pool of cheap labor to fuel the industrial machine. Human migration and immigration were also a part of the story, with waves of new immigrants pouring into the United States from Europe, Ireland, and elsewhere, creating new cultural diasporas in urban centers up and down the East Coast of the United States. New media technologies also emerged during this time period, from motion pictures in the late 1890s to consumer radio in the 1920s. Perhaps not surprisingly, with all of these extraordinary social, economic, and technological changes, there was a good deal of anxiety expressed among elites, scholars, and politicians about the impacts of these changes and the uncertain future direction of society. As discussed in Chapter 1, in the first decade of the 20th century the notion of crowds as dangerous, gullible collectives propelled deep suspicions about the common people among both economic elites and progressive reformers. These fears of the crowd coincided with the emergence of a new media technology that

captivated audiences: motion pictures. The rapid rise of the movies as a dominant leisure-time activity in burgeoning urban areas became a focal point for fascination and alarm among scholars, progressive reformers, and politicians. The importance of film in American life was accompanied by the near simultaneous emergence of new academic disciplines, most notably sociology, which arose to understand and contextualize the enormous changes under way as a result of industrialization, rapid urbanization, and immigration. The seeds of the media effects paradigm were sown during this chaotic and dynamic period.

## Charles Horton Cooley and the Emergence of Sociology

In the early 20th century, the field of sociology was beginning to emerge. For the first time, a number of thinkers were considering some of the ramifications of Gustave Le Bon's theories about crowd psychology. In particular, fascination developed over the dynamics between the individual and social groups, how such groups developed and sustained themselves, and the impact of group membership on the psychology of individuals within the group.

One of the first observers of the impacts of media on society was Charles Horton Cooley, a professor at the University of Michigan (and later at the University of Chicago) and key founding figure in American sociology. In two early books, *Human Nature and the Social Order* first published in 1902 (1964) and *Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind* first published in 1909 (1962), Cooley outlined the significance of "communication" in giving societies a sense of themselves, beginning with observation and imitation processes that children adopt as they mature. Cooley described **communication** as follows:

> The mechanism through which human relations exist and develop—all the symbols of the mind, together with the means of conveying them through space and preserving them in time. It includes the expression of the face, attitude, and gesture, the tones of the voice, words, writing, printing, railways, telegraphs, telephones, and whatever else may be the latest achievement in the conquest of space and time. (1962, p. 61)

Cooley was one of the first intellectuals to link the development of individuals' psyches and worldviews with (a) their immediate surroundings, including social feedback from peers, parents, and other authority figures, and (b) the messages carried by communications media via print, telegraph, and telephones, to name a few.

Of particular interest to Cooley were newer forms of mass media such as newspapers and motion pictures. Each of these new technologies, argued Cooley, would not only encourage the dissemination of more information among the populace, but they would also catalyze a "growth of a sense of common humanity, of moral unity, between nations, races, and classes" (1962, p. 88). Alongside this newfound social uniformity, however, Cooley noted that modern forms of communication

had dramatically lowered barriers to information, allowing individuals to pursue their own individual interests and goals to a greater degree than ever before. In spite of some of these positive impacts of new forms of communication, Cooley also voiced some concern about the potentially negative effects of media. In particular, he surmised that newspapers and other media forms would give the public only a superficial understanding of (and concern with) public issues and other people. The problem, he noted, is that we learn so much about so many things that we develop only the most rudimentary understanding of those things (because our time and attention are necessarily limited). Cooley's early scholarship paved the way for future systematic analysis of the impacts of media, particularly the Payne Fund Studies in the late 1920s.

## Concern Over Film Audiences: Hugo Münsterberg and Mass Suggestibility

The movies were rapidly becoming one of the most popular leisure-time activities for lower-class immigrants and other unskilled labor in major cities in the United States and elsewhere. This development raised numerous red flags for elites and progressive reformers. Gustave Le Bon's theories about the suggestibility of large crowds to unscrupulous demagogues were quickly adapted to the motion pictures. The capability of this new medium to reach tens of thousands of people sparked new controversy about the susceptibility of the "masses" to dangerous thoughts and emotions. Film historian Garth Jowett (1976, p. 13) argues that these concerns were fueled not necessarily because there was any substantive evidence to support them but instead because "there were no established mechanisms of cultural or social control" to rein in the perceived excesses of the motion picture. In fact, the "movies represented a threat to the established hegemony of the Protestant groups that had imposed their morality and values on American life and culture" (Jowett, Jarvie, & Fuller, 1996, p. 22). In cities and towns all over the United States, small, silent motion picture houses called "nickelodeons" began appearing that offered short 10- to 15-minute silent films for a 5-cent ticket price (see Figure 2.1). Particularly in urban areas, working-class Americans (many of them recent immigrants) flocked to nickelodeons as their main leisure-time activity, which caused consternation among politicians, elites, and other cultural critics (Fuller, 1996; Peiss, 1986).

Scholars and social commentators of the time were concerned with how motion pictures integrated into the modern city. They worried about the effect of the movies and popular amusements in general on other sociological changes such as childhood delinquency, a rise in teenage pregnancy rates, and the health and safety of the movie theaters themselves (Edwards, 1915; Phelan, 1919). As McDonald (2004, p. 185) notes, notions of media effects in these early years "were conceived of as learning effects" and other potential effects on children and other populations emerged out of the learning process. However, Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg was the first to consider how motion pictures were beginning to alter

Boys Loiter in Front of a Nickelodeon Theater in
Jersey City, New Jersey, in 1912



Source: Library of Congress.

human beings' sense of reality. His 1916 book *The Photoplay* closely examined the
perceptual processes that were found among audiences when they encountered the
moving image on the screen. In order to understand and engage with a film's plot
and characters, he argued, audiences must first place themselves within the concep-
tual world of the visual images on the screen. They must accept, at least temporarily,
the reality of the images they encounter in order to make some kind of sense of
the events unfolding on the film screen. For Münsterberg, "This confusion of real-
ity and content is a necessary condition for understanding communication and a
crucial part of how mediated communication works" (McDonald, 2004, p. 185).
For instance, even though the images flickering on the screen are two-dimensional,
Münsterberg argued that audiences cannot help but see them as "strongly plastic
forms. . . . We feel immediately the depth of things" (1916, p. 47).

Perhaps the most explosive aspect of Münsterberg's analysis of film viewers,
however, was his suggestion that the unique cognitive and emotional state expe-
rienced by audiences during a motion picture performance left those individuals

vulnerable to forms of psychological suggestion. Films introduced an altered reality for audiences, which was a concern, according to Münsterberg:

> The sight of crime and of vice may force itself on the consciousness with disastrous results. The normal resistance breaks down and the moral balance, which would have kept under the habitual stimuli of the narrow routine of life, may be lost under the pressure of the realistic suggestion. (1916, p. 95)

Over time, Münsterberg worried, the deeply moving cinematic world of images and faraway places would slowly begin to displace real-world social interaction. Additionally, Münsterberg's warning that the movies could be used to implant ideas into unsuspecting audiences marked "the beginnings of an effects approach that would become the dominant paradigm for audience researchers, for government investigation, and for the public for over fifty years. Much of the research would be driven by public concern and *moral panics*" (Butsch, 2008, p. 45). British sociologist Stanley Cohen (2002) used the term **moral panics** to describe very strong negative public reactions to the spread of a new social behavior. This response is generally an overreaction, which makes finding an accommodation to the new behavior difficult. **Media panics** are a specific type of moral panic that surround the introduction of a new type of media or content genre (Drotner, 1992). Audiences are typically imagined as vulnerable to negative influences from this new medium or content since messages are assumed to have a direct influence on each individual.

The rapid expansion of new media technologies in the 20th century was largely characterized by a cycle of media panics and subsequent actions, including scholarly research, elite activism, and even public policy responses. Münsterberg's book was one of the first to facilitate a media panic surrounding the motion picture and in so doing effectively replaced Le Bon's idea of crowd psychology with the notion of a **mass society**. This concept of the isolated, anonymous, and vulnerable mass became the dominant view of media audiences throughout much of the 20th century.

## Mass Society Theory and the Payne Fund Studies

Much of the concern surrounding new forms of media had its roots in the social and economic upheavals of the 19th century. With the rise of industrialization in the United States and elsewhere around the world, farm workers found that their labor was being displaced by faster, more efficient machinery, which drove them into urban environments where there were available factory jobs. In 1887, a young German sociologist named Ferdinand Tönnies (1957) began an analysis of the large-scale shifts going on around him and published them in an influential book titled *Community and Society*. Tönnies observed an ongoing transition

between **Gemeinschaft** (community) and **Gesellschaft** (society). The concept of Gemeinschaft referred not just to small rural communities that were increasingly disintegrating because of urban migration but also to a way of living in these communities. Tönnies noted that social relationships were deeply intertwined in these small communities, and webs of reciprocal trust and cooperation bound these communities to one another. These strong interpersonal networks were fueled by a shared heritage or cultural traditions (such as religious or ethnic ties). In the cities, however, recent transplants from these tight-knit, rural settings were confronted with a completely different social environment. Industrialization and the move toward factory labor resulted in a different kind of social organization, a Gesellschaft. **Gesellschaft** refers to a much larger group of individuals living together in an urban environment. Here, the informal webs of interpersonal trust are replaced by formal contracts, which are required since almost all daily social and economic transactions take place between strangers. Instead of feeling closely connected with one's peers, individuals in a Gesellschaft are largely anonymous and experience a sense of displacement because they are unmoored from their traditional cultural environments. In a Gesellschaft, Tonnies' wrote,

> Everybody is by himself and isolated, and there exists a condition of tension against all others. Their spheres of activity are sharply separated so that everybody refuses to everyone else contact with and admittance to his sphere; i.e., intrusions are regarded as hostile acts. (1957, p. 64)

Tonnies' ideas about the shift from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft had a profound impact on the development of the field of sociology in the 20th century (Kamenka, 1965). They also shaped a new way of thinking about the vulnerability of audiences to forms of mass media in urban, industrialized environments by giving rise to the **mass society theory**. Mass society theory assumes that Tonnies' claims about the isolated nature of individuals living in modern, urban environments are correct and then imagines the role that media such as newspapers, magazines, and motion pictures might play in such a society. The theory posits that these forms of media are a malignant force in society because they have the capacity to directly influence the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. Modern audiences are vulnerable to media influence precisely because they are anonymous city dwellers who have been cut off from their families, communities, cultural traditions and other social institutions. Forms of mass media, then, serve to further isolate individuals, debase culture as a whole, and generally result in social decline (for a recent overview of the notion of the mass, see Lang & Lang, 2009).

## The Payne Fund Studies (1929–1932)

The tenets of mass society theory were well accepted by social theorists, progressives, and educators who focused their concern on the potentially negative influence of motion pictures in the 1920s. Their suspicion that the movies could

implant ideas into the minds of unsuspecting audiences motivated one of the most ambitious early audience research projects in the history of the field. While the movies had been a source of concern during the first two decades of the 20th century, "there was very little scientific evidence to substantiate the often hysterical claims of the reform group" (Kamenka, 1965). The Payne Fund, a philanthropic organization founded to encourage adolescents to take up reading, took up the cause against the movies by hiring William Short, the executive director of the Motion Picture Research Council (another private educational group), to organize a large-scale research project to generate scientific evidence about the deleterious effects of the movies. Short himself was "convinced that commercial interests had captured what was a powerful tool for education and morality and were producing movies that undermined the moral education of youth" (Jansen, 2008, p. 82). In 1927, Short began the process of inviting scholars from a number of fields such as education, sociology, and psychology to conduct systematic research into the effects of motion pictures on America's youth. The Payne Fund Studies, as they came to be known, explored numerous types of effects of the movies, including physical and emotional impacts, effects on racial attitudes and beliefs, self-identity, and factual learning and retention. The project culminated in a sizeable 13-volume report, which was published in 1933. While an extensive overview of the studies is beyond the scope of this chapter, some highlights of the findings are outlined here.

One of the questions addressed by the research was the influence of motion pictures on adults' and children's retention of factual information. George Stoddard, director of the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station at the University of Iowa, and a graduate student, P. W. Holaday, conducted a series of experiments in which they showed feature-length films to children in different age groups (Holaday and Stoddard, 1933). To measure information retention, the researchers gave the children a fact quiz 6 weeks and 3 months after they had seen the films. They found that 60% of children could recall specific details about the films they saw, though the retention of information increased for films with exciting action sequences and for films that featured contexts that were beyond the world experiences of the children.

In another study, psychologists Shuttleworth and May (1933) developed a questionnaire with inventories of children's attitudes toward categories of people and ethical situations, including questions about their own moviegoing habits and performance in school. After conducting surveys with approximately 1,400 children and comparing movie "fans" to those with sparse movie attendance, only small differences were observed: Movie fans had slightly lower grades in school but were more liked by their peers. The lack of conclusive results about the impact of movie attendance on these behavioral and attitude measures was a source of concern for William Short, who urged the researchers to keep looking for a connection (Jowett et al., 1996, p. 68).

A clearer link between film exposure and attitude change was observed by Ruth Peterson and L. L. Thurstone (1933). This study loomed particularly large in the larger Payne Fund research project because Thurstone's pioneering work on quantifying and measuring attitudes was considered crucial to finding specific evidence of motion

picture effects (Jowett et al., 1996, p. 67). In their experiments, Peterson and Thurstone selected 16 different feature films that presented either favorable or unfavorable views about one of a number of topics, such as antiwar sentiment (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1930) or anti-Black sentiment (*Birth of a Nation*, 1915). In experiments that investigated both single and multiple film effects on different children ranging in age from sixth through 12th grades, children's attitudes were measured 2 weeks before exposure to films and then again afterward. While some individual films had little if any effect on attitudes toward themes or ethnic groups portrayed in the films, other films demonstrated a measurable impact. In a study that measured attitudes of more than 400 high school students with little exposure to African Americans, for instance, exposure to the racist film *Birth of a Nation* substantially lessened viewers' favorability toward Blacks. Peterson and Thurstone (1933) discovered a cumulative effect as well: When two or three films were shown that expressed very similar views, the effects on children's attitudes were much more pronounced than with single film exposures.

The Payne Fund Studies also contained research on more immediate and visceral impacts of the movies. Christian Ruckmick and graduate student Wendell Dysinger, both from the University of Iowa psychology department, were fascinated by the physiological and emotional responses of children to motion pictures (Dysinger and Ruckmick, 1933). In their studies, they attached children to heart monitors and galvanometers in order to capture real-time measurements of children's heart rates, blood pressure, and sweaty palms as indicators of excitement, arousal, and fear. Children in their study screened adventure and romance films that were in circulation at the time, such as *Charlie Chan's Chance* (1932) and *The Feast of Ishtar*. Responses to films varied according to the children's age. For instance, scenes of danger and tragedy had a powerful effect on children up to age 9, but then began decreasing steadily among teens and adults. On the other hand, responses to erotic or romantic scenes were muted among 7- to 10-year-olds, but grew in intensity among 10- and 11-year-olds, only to peak in the 16-year-old viewers.

## Consequences of the Payne Fund Studies

Despite the somewhat mixed results regarding the impacts of motion pictures on children's attitudes, emotional health, and behaviors, the lasting impression left by the Payne Fund Studies was that the movies represented a powerful and inherent danger to American youth. This perception was fueled mainly by Short's public interpretation of the findings and by some of the more reformist-minded scholars who contributed research to the project. Chief among these reformers was University of Chicago sociologist Herbert Blumer, who conducted a qualitative study that compared the autobiographical reflections of middle-class high school students with those of juvenile delinquents (Blumer, 1933). A reformer by nature and a critic of the movies, Blumer was interested to see if he could uncover a connection between motion picture exposure and delinquency. In one of his two reports submitted to the Payne Fund Studies, Blumer built upon Le Bon's ideas about emotional contagion by using a concept called "emotional possession" to describe the sway that the moviegoing

experience had on young viewers. The effects of this on the individual were so strong, argued Blumer, that "even his efforts to rid himself of it by reasoning with himself may prove of little avail" (Butsch, 2008, p. 45). While Blumer ultimately discovered only a tenuous connection between juvenile delinquency and moviegoing, the notion of **emotional contagion**—the viral-like spread of emotional states and attitudes from one individual to another, facilitated through mass media—captured the public's concern once again, drawing attention back to earlier concerns that had been so powerfully perpetuated by Le Bon's and Münsterberg's research. Fears about the persuasive impact of motion pictures were largely transferred to the medium of radio, which began to rise in importance in the late 1920s.

## *The War of the Worlds* Broadcast and the Direct Effects Model

By the time the Payne Fund Studies were published in 1933, a new medium was emerging for delivering news and entertainment to millions of Americans: radio. According to estimates provided by the Columbia Broadcasting System, by 1935 roughly 70% of all American households (some 21.5 million homes) possessed a radio set, and some 78 million Americans described themselves as habitual radio listeners (Cantril & Allport, 1935, p. 85). Even during the depths of the Great Depression, Americans clung to their radio sets as a source of information, entertainment, and even comfort. The first systematic attempt to take stock of the effects that radio listening was having on audiences was *The Psychology of Radio* (1935), written by Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport and his former graduate student Hadley Cantril. Cantril and Allport argued that the rhetorical conventions of radio radically oversimplified many complex issues, reducing them to "black or white" dichotomous terms (Pandora, 1998). They worried that this was narrowing the minds of American listeners, particularly since many radio programs were dominated by so-called experts who instructed their listeners on "what to eat, what to read, what to buy, what exercise to take, what to think of the music we hear, and how we treat our colds" (Cantril & Allport, 1935, p. 23). They also noted that the radio could function as a tool of propaganda, which they described as the "systematic attempt to develop through the use of suggestion certain of the listener's attitudes and beliefs in such a way that some special interest is favored" (1935, p. 48). With start-up funds from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1937, Cantril was one of several prominent scholars (such as Paul Lazarsfeld and Theodor Adorno) to found the first large-scale research institute dedicated to understanding the impacts of radio on society. At the Office of Radio Research at Princeton University, Cantril and his colleagues began to map out methodological strategies for tracking who was listening to radio and why.[1]

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[1]One of these studies, coauthored by Herta Herzog, explored the uses of daytime radio serials by American women. It is discussed in full detail in Chapter 5.

### *The War of the Worlds* Broadcast (1938)

The event that crystallized critics' concerns about the power of radio was *The War of the Worlds* broadcast on October 30, 1938. The broadcast was a production of a radio drama program titled *Mercury Theatre on the Air* on the CBS network: a weekly program of audio-only stage dramas (including classic works by Shakespeare) that featured the vocal and artistic talents of director Orson Welles and his troupe of classically trained actors. During this particular week, Welles and his creative collaborator John Houseman had decided to dramatize British author H. G. Wells's science-fiction classic from 1898, *The War of the Worlds.* Wells's first-person narrated novel follows the events of an imagined invasion of London by Martians. Welles and Houseman reimagined the novel for their radio drama by making several small but fateful changes to the narrative. They adopted the first-person narration of the original novel but changed the setting of the drama to take place in the United States and made the small town of Grover's Mill, New Jersey, the landing site for the fictional Martian invasion. After an initial introduction to the program by Welles himself to set the stage for the drama, a fictional radio announcer took the microphone and informed listeners that they would be listening to a selection of musical pieces played by Ramon Raquello and his orchestra in the Meridian Room in the Hotel Park Plaza in downtown New York. The drama quickly shifted, however, when multiple news bulletins interrupted the music to inform listeners that a strange object had landed from space near Princeton, New Jersey. The broadcast skillfully wove in supposed eyewitness accounts of Martians attacking passersby and spreading their extraterrestrial conquest throughout the country.

Radio listeners who had tuned into the Mercury Theatre program from the 8:00 p.m. start time were likely aware that the musical program they were listening to was part of the plot of the drama. There were many more, however, who tuned in late, thanks to a much more popular program on rival network NBC. Many of these "dial-twisting" listeners believed that the broadcast was a real news program and that accounts of alien invaders in New Jersey were happening in real time. Primed to believe in the radio as a trustworthy source of news, hundreds of thousands of listeners panicked when they heard Welles's broadcast. The reaction was strongest in the area immediately surrounding Princeton, New Jersey, where news reports indicated that families were rushing out of their homes with wet handkerchiefs and towels around their heads to ward off a gas attack (Cantril, 1940, p. 49). In all, Cantril estimated that roughly 1 million people out of the several million who tuned into the broadcast were frightened by what they heard, though historical reexamination has challenged this mass panic narrative (Socolow & Pooley, 2013).

## Cantril's Study of Mass Panic Among Radio Audiences

Cantril immediately recognized the unique opportunity that had presented itself to gather data on the "psychology of panic" and its relationship to radio broadcasting. In the preface to the 1939 book that detailed the results of his

research, Cantril wrote, "Such rare occurrences are opportunities for the social scientist to study mass behavior. They must be exploited when they come" (1940, p. ix). Given the inability to carefully plan a research project in advance, Cantril relied upon several sources of available data, including a nationwide telephone survey conducted by the American Institute of Public Opinion (founded by George Gallup; see Chapter 3), another telephone survey conducted by CBS itself, and 135 listeners who were interviewed by Cantril and his research team in the weeks following the broadcast. Cantril was interested in how many people panicked and why. In particular, he wondered why some audiences had panicked while others did not.

The results of the telephone surveys indicated that fewer than 1-in-3 listeners (28%) thought that the broadcast was a news report. However, of those who did believe that they were hearing breaking news, 70% reported that they were frightened or disturbed by the broadcast. In his follow-up interviews with panicked listeners living near Princeton, Cantril discovered a number of psychological characteristics and personality factors that helped to explain why they became frightened. For instance, listeners who were less self-confident, less emotionally secure, or were fatalistic were much more likely to panic when they heard the broadcast. Additionally, listeners who were more religious than others were also more likely to be frightened by the broadcast. As to why some listeners panicked while others did not, Cantril posited that some audiences possessed "critical ability," which he defined as "a capacity to evaluate the stimulus in such a way that they were able to understand its inherent characteristics so they could judge and act appropriately" (1940, pp. 111–112). Cantril reasoned that critical ability was likely related to an individual's level of education but admitted that there was no direct way to measure it.

As with the Payne Fund Studies earlier in the decade, the results of Cantril's study revealed that the effects of media messages were contingent on specific characteristics of the audience. This nuance was largely lost on the popular media, however, which saw the broadcast as yet another example of the dangerous power of the mass media to affect millions of innocent people.

## Mass Propaganda Concerns and World War II Communication Research

The panic that ensued following the *War of the Worlds* broadcast demonstrated the potential power of the mass media to provoke an immediate, emotional response to a message. But aside from these types of short-term emotional responses, could media messages also change the way we think about the world? Could forms of media actually change audiences' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors? A number of key early figures in the use and study of media effects were fascinated by the media's potential for mass persuasion.

## Early Concerns With Mass Persuasion

One of the key early texts to explore the relationship between the media and audiences was *Public Opinion*, published in 1922 by journalist and public intellectual Walter Lippmann. While Lippmann is most remembered for his reflections upon news and politics (he was extensively consulted by numerous U.S. political figures, including presidents), he is also "arguably the most important single figure in the immediate prehistory of academic communication research" (Jansen, 2008, p. 82). The title of Lippmann's 1922 classic is a bit misleading—his book did not consider public opinion in our modern sense of that phrase (statistical measurements of collective sentiment). Instead, Lippmann painted a broad picture of how modern forms of mass communication such as newspapers and motion pictures affected the psychological outlook of individuals and therefore their ability to effectively participate in a democratic society.

Specifically, Lippmann outlined the notion of **stereotypes**, which described the predominant method through which all individuals perceived the world. He wrote that "we are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 90). Individuals' sense of reality is therefore mediated by their expectations of reality, and these expectations are formed through their exposure to the media. Journalists, who conduct what Lippmann called "intelligence work" on behalf of the public by gathering information about national events, policies, and people, provide an incomplete picture of political and world events for the public. The public, therefore, makes decisions and evaluates their political leaders according to the "pictures in their heads," which are composed of the narratives and images that are provided by the news media. This presented an important problem: If there existed "some barrier between the public and the event," then this barrier could create a "pseudo-environment" that could be effectively managed by those with specific interests in mind. In essence, Lippmann foreshadowed the dangers posed by **media propaganda**. The term *propaganda* refers to the means to "disseminate or promote particular ideas," and it stems from the Latin term meaning "to propagate" or "to sow" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2011, p. 2). In its modern usage, however, *propaganda* has taken on a more negative connotation, describing a deliberate attempt by one party to control or manage the information environment of another (or group) through the manipulation of symbols or psychology.

The power of the media to direct the American public's understanding and evaluation of world events was demonstrated strikingly during World War I (1917–1918). Then-President Woodrow Wilson recognized from an early stage that he faced a highly skeptical public and Congress regarding the potential entry of the United States into a costly and dangerous foreign conflict. To rally public support and to put pressure on Congress and American businesses to cooperate with his administration in its war policy, Wilson established the Committee on Public Information (CPI) by executive order in April 1917. The committee was chaired by George Creel, who worked closely with the Secretaries of War, State, and the Navy to carefully coordinate the first wide-scale public relations effort in American history (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2011, pp. 124–125). The CPI carefully crafted messages about the U.S. war efforts and communicated them through an

enormous range of media outlets: news stories, motion pictures, books, magazines, posters, billboard advertisements, speeches, and phonograph records. In a series of billboards and posters, Creel's committee not only informed Americans of their responsibilities to preserve food and to buy war bonds, but it also depicted the German army as evil and barbaric, which generated hard feelings among the public for the enemy (see Figure 2.2). The wartime propaganda effort was regarded by many to be highly successful in mobilizing the U.S. public and the industrial interests in the United States to fight a long, protracted war in Europe.

Figure 2.2   U.S. World War I Poster
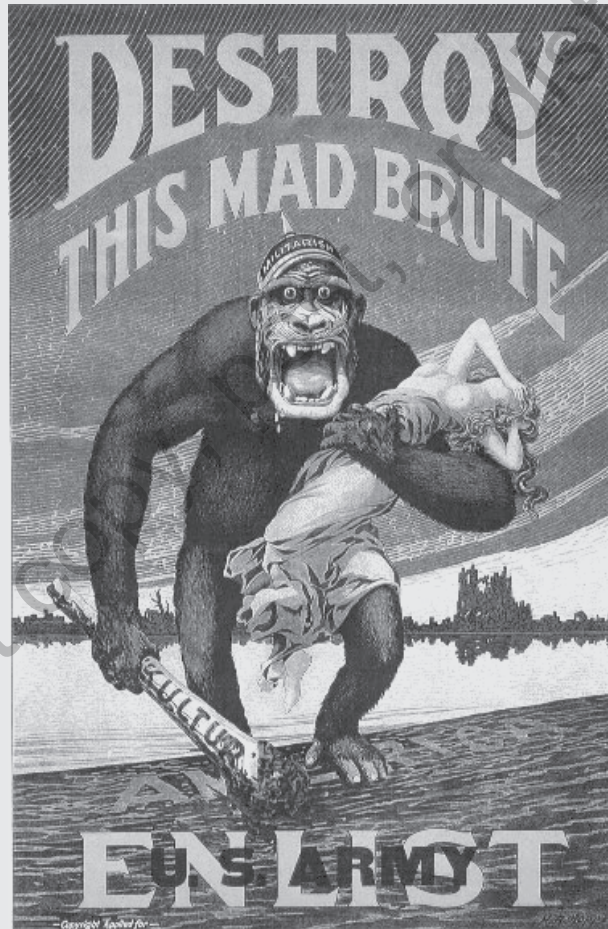


*Source:* "Destroy this Mad Brute," US Government. H.R. Hopps, 1917.

After the armistice was signed in 1918, bringing an end to the war, a number of lawmakers in Congress began to call for an investigation into the CPI since they believed that it had systematically deceived the American public during the war. Creel staunchly defended his work on the CPI in the 1920 book *How We Advertised America*, arguing that he had simply engaged in

> plain publicity proposition, a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world's greatest adventures in advertising. . . . We did not call it propaganda. . . . Our effort was educational and informative throughout, for we had such confidence in our case as to feel that no other argument was needed than the simple, straightforward presentation of the facts. (1920, pp. 4–5)

The experience of World War I also solidified the notion that media forms could persuade millions of people to change their attitudes and behaviors.

## World War II Communication Research

The apparent success of Creel's propaganda efforts coupled with rising concerns over the persuasive power of radio (seen in *The War of the Worlds* broadcast, for instance) crystallized the view that specific media messages could alter audiences' attitudes and behaviors. Although the institutional propaganda apparatus within the U.S. government was dismantled after the end of the war, the "psychological warfare projects of World War I left their strongest legacy in academic circles, particularly in the embryonic field of communication research" (Simpson, 1996, p. 16). Scholars became fascinated by the prospect that individuals might be susceptible to persuasive messages distributed via the mass media. A myriad number of questions remained, however: What types of media and what aspects of the specific media message would prove most persuasive for audiences? Under what conditions might audiences shift their attitudes and behaviors as a result of experiencing a message?

When World War II erupted in Europe, answers to these questions were of interest not only to social scientists but to those in the highest echelons of the U.S. armed forces. Social psychologists and sociologists were hastily recruited by the federal government to study how to perfect propaganda and counterpropaganda. The U.S. War Department was particularly concerned about the seeming effectiveness of the German propaganda machine in persuading Germans to back the policies of Hitler's Nazi government. It was clear that some media messages could achieve powerful effects under certain conditions, but the researchers working under the auspices of the government attempted to determine which "magic bullets" could alter attitudes on a mass scale. This wartime research was spearheaded by University of Chicago sociologist Sam Stouffer and Yale University psychologist Carl Hovland (Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949; Stouffer, Lumsdaine et al., 1949; Stouffer, Suchman, Devinney, Star, & Williams, 1949).

One of the key problems for the U.S. military at the outset of the war was the enormity of the task of training millions of young civilians to become soldiers. One challenge was the widespread ignorance of world affairs among the recruits. To combat this problem and to counter German propaganda, the U.S. Army recruited famous Hollywood director Frank Capra to develop "pro-democratic" propaganda to support the U.S. cause. Rather than shoot new footage, Capra had the novel idea of reediting Axis propaganda footage to tell a much different story about how Germans were being misled by their government and how Hitler's aims were a direct threat to the United States. Capra produced seven 50-minute documentary features in a series called *Why We Fight*, and they were screened in movie theaters all over the United States (see Figure 2.3).

Hovland and his team used controlled field experiments to better understand soldiers' knowledge about the war, opinions about the war and the Allies, and attitudes about their willingness to fight in the conflict. Different methods of transmitting persuasive messages were used: lectures, screenings of the *Why We Fight* films, and written documentation of the information contained in the

Figure 2.3   Compilation of Screen Images From *Divide and Conquer* (*Why We Fight* Film No. 3)



*Source:* "Divide and Conquer" (1943), Frank Capra. Images compiled by Stephanie Plumeri Ertz.

films. After more than 4,000 Army soldiers participated in the experiments, Hovland discovered that the *Why We Fight* films were by far the most effective at expanding soldiers' *knowledge* about the history and geopolitics surrounding the conflict. The soldiers' knowledge was tested via a factual quiz related to the themes and specific historical material provided in the films. However, while Capra's films were heralded as masterfully persuasive about the just nature of the American cause, the films did little to alter soldiers' initial attitudes or over-all motivation to fight in the war. The development of the concept of attitude was a major contribution of Hovland's WWII-era studies. An **attitude** refers to an internal psychological orientation toward an external entity, typically expressed in terms of the degree of favor or disfavor toward that entity (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). In the case of the *Why We Fight* studies, soldiers were asked about their orientation toward the British Allies both before and after viewing the *Battle of Britain* (1943) documentary, which depicted the determination of the British military despite the campaign of Nazi air bombardment. Hovland measured attitudes with a Likert scale, which consisted of a series of statements to which respondents indicated their agreement on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is *very much disagree* and 5 was *very much agree*, for example). Hovland found little attitude change in soldiers' overall attitude toward the British Allies after watching the films.

The lack of strong evidence for persuasion in these studies made it clear that there were no magic keys that could unlock mass persuasion. Hovland's research methods—use of a controlled setting and experimental techniques to measure soldiers' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs—had a profound effect upon the study of mass media for many decades following his World War II research.

## Postwar Communication Research: The Rise of the Limited Effects Paradigm

The takeaway message from the extensive research conducted during World War II was clear: It was actually quite difficult to persuade audiences through the use of mass media, regardless of the skill of the message producer. The once-pervasive concern about the propagandistic qualities of the media seemed less problematic than before. In the wake of Hovland's research findings, schol-ars began to search for new models to explain the effects of media messages on audiences. In postwar research, the perspective on media effects underwent an important shift. Now, scholars were interested in exploring the specific con-ditions under which media messages might be influential, but they no longer expected to find universal effects among all audiences. Two key theories that emerged in this postwar period—selectivity and the two-step flow of communi-cation—are explored next.

## Persuasion Research:
## Selectivity and the Elaboration Likely Model (ELM)

Carl Hovland returned to Yale University after the war, recruited a group of 30 colleagues, and continued his research into attitude change by using the experimental approach he had pioneered during the war (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2011, p. 132). Fresh from the seeming lack of evidence for mediated persuasion from the *Why We Fight* films, Hovland's goal was to develop a systematic theory of persuasion. He wanted to carefully isolate and explore the mechanisms through which humans made decisions about their environment. Hovland and his colleagues studied a number of variables that may have an influence on the persuasion process, including audience personality traits, susceptibility to persuasive appeals, the order of arguments in a message, and fear-based appeals. One of the surprising results from this research was that weak fear appeals seemed to be more influential than moderate and strong fear appeals (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). The researchers also discovered that communications from a source perceived to be low in credibility would be seen as more biased and unfair than from a high credibility source. Thus, **source credibility**, or the degree to which a message receiver perceived the source of the message to be credible, emerged as a major factor in determining whether or not attitude change took place in the receiver. This effect was a short-term effect, however, since people tended to disassociate a message from its source over time (Kelman & Hovland, 1953).

One of the major theoretical advances to come out of Hovland's Yale research group was **consistency theory**. Consistency theorists argued that the human being's drive for cognitive consistency (the mental agreement between someone's beliefs about an object or event) was the prime motivator for all human behavior. The assumption of the theory was that when individuals are exposed to information that is inconsistent with their previously held beliefs, they will experience confusion and tension. For example, if you are a cigarette smoker and you have a desire and expectation that you will live a long life, when you encounter information that provides conclusive evidence that smoking causes cancer, then you will be motivated to resolve this inconsistency by changing your behavior (e.g., giving up cigarettes). The most famous and controversial theory of cognitive consistency is Leon Festinger's (1957) **theory of cognitive dissonance**. Festinger's claim was that the need for cognitive consistency was so strong (and the discomfort felt by individuals by inconsistency was so great) that individuals will rationalize their actions to relieve the inconsistency. To take the previous smoking example, if smokers were confronted with information about the health dangers of cigarettes, then they might decide that they actually smoke so little that the negative effects are going to be quite small (and therefore the decision to smoke is rationalized). This process of reinterpreting the world to match one's previously held beliefs is called **selective perception** (see Box 2.1). Additionally, Festinger argued that individuals would actively avoid a state of cognitive dissonance. So the smoker may consciously avoid communication messages about the health hazards of smoking. This process is called **selective exposure**.

## BOX 2.1

## Selectivity at Work in *The Colbert Report* Audience

One of the more popular programs on cable television in the early 2000s was *The Colbert Report*, a satirical news program on the Comedy Central cable network that masqueraded as a conservative news and interview program. The show's host and creator, Stephen Colbert, who left Comedy Central to take over as the host of *The Late Show* on CBS, relentlessly parodied the self-indulgence of conservative news personalities, and his on-air persona is specifically modeled on then-Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly. Part of the show's continual comic appeal was Colbert's "explicit rejection of the need for facts in engaging in political debate and assessing political arguments" (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008, p. 623).

Given the popularity of *The Colbert Report*, one might assume that its tongue-in-cheek humor was widely appreciated by its audience. However, scholarly research suggested that different viewers may have distinctly different reasons for appreciating the program. Two studies of *Report* viewers attempted to understand how audiences were interpreting the satirical humor on the program. These studies took their cue from an earlier postwar study of selective perception in audiences. Cooper and Jahoda's 1947 study "The Evasion of Propaganda" evaluated a public information campaign designed to lessen prejudice against minorities in American society. The campaign featured a cartoon character named "Mr. Biggott" who illustrated a number of prejudiced opinions in the comics but was then the object of the humor at the end of the message. Cooper and Jahoda measured respondents' initial level of prejudice (their attitude toward minorities) and then asked them about their interpretation of the cartoon. Contrary to their initial suspicions that prejudiced individuals would recognize their own biases in the character of Mr. Biggott, those individuals instead distanced themselves from the character or noted that people are entitled to their prejudices. Some prejudiced readers failed to understand the core message about tolerance and understanding. Instead of changing their views, therefore, some readers had effectively "evaded" this prosocial propaganda and kept their initial attitudes intact.

The story was much the same with viewers of *The Colbert Report*. Baumgartner and Morris (2008) found, for example, that Colbert's satirical critiques of the George W. Bush administration had the effect of actually *increasing* support for President Bush, for Republicans in Congress, and for Bush's national security policies. Another study by LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam (2009) found that both conservative- and liberal-minded college students found *Colbert* equally funny, but for different reasons. The researchers concluded that the conservative students were selectively perceiving the program in a way that matched their existing ideological beliefs. These studies demonstrate some of the inherent difficulties in persuading audiences with strong initial attitudes.

*Sources:* Baumgartner, J. C., & Morris, J. S. (2008). One "nation," under Stephen? The effects of *The Colbert Report* on American youth. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 52*(4), 622–643; Cooper, E., & Jahoda, M. (1947). The evasion of propaganda: How prejudiced people respond to anti-prejudice propaganda. *The Journal of Psychology, 23*(1), 15–25; LaMarre, H. L., Landreville, K. D., & Beam, M. A. (2009). The irony of satire. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 14*(2), 212–231.

The investigation into the process of persuasion is ongoing—not only in communication studies but in the field of psychology as well. A significant advance in the study of the persuasion process occurred with the discovery of the **elaboration likelihood model (ELM)** (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a, 1986b). The model maps out the process by which an individual forms an attitude about an object, event, or experience. Petty and Cacioppo's significant contribution to the study of persuasion was their contention that an individual's susceptibility to a persuasive message was directly related to their *motivation to process the message.* If the message is of perceived relevance to the receiver and the receiver is able to process the message, then she may engage in *central processing.* In this case, the receiver carefully attends to the message, evaluates the information, and makes a reasoned judgment based on a number of factors (including the arguments made and the credibility of the source) and, ultimately, may accept or reject the information. Central processing represented the type of classic learning theory that had been characteristic of earlier work in persuasion, including Hovland's World War II research. The model also suggested a secondary route to persuasion, however, called *peripheral processing.* When the motivation or ability to process a message is low, then the receiver is likely to take a "cognitive shortcut" to process the message by making a quick decision about the message based on a peripheral cue (such as the background music or other emotional cue; Petty, Brinol, & Priester, 2009). Peripheral processing could therefore provide a "back door" for a weak argument to persuade a receiver, though the persuasive effects of this type of processing are typically not as long lasting as centrally processed messages.

### *The People's Choice* (1944) and *Personal Influence* (1955)

While postwar communication research shifted toward the notion that the effects of media messages were limited in scope, a number of studies that were already under way during the war were drawing similar conclusions. One of the most important studies conducted during the wartime years was *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). The project was spearheaded by Paul F. Lazarsfeld, an Austrian émigré who fled to the United States to escape persecution shortly before the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany. A mathematician by education, Lazarsfeld was fascinated by quantitative techniques to explore social phenomena (Rogers, 1994). Unlike Hovland's focus on carefully controlled experiments, Lazarsfeld's research relied largely on survey methods to study attitudes. Lazarsfeld was the director of the Office of Radio Research at Princeton when Hadley Cantril conducted his famous study of *The War of the Worlds* broadcast. After a falling out with Cantril, Lazarsfeld moved the office to Columbia University where he renamed it the Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR). The bureau became a major hub of communication research in the postwar years. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at the bureau, most notably sociologist Robert Merton, played an important role in shaping the direction of communication research in the second half of the 20th century (Katz, 1987).

The study that became *The People's Choice* was designed to answer a basic question: To what extent did the radio and newspapers shape voters' choice in a presidential election? The test case was the 1940 presidential election between the incumbent president, Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Republican Wendell Willkie. Lazarsfeld and his team selected Erie County, Ohio, as the main research site for a number of reasons. First, the small county of 43,000 residents was culturally homogeneous and had changed little in population size or character for 40 years. Secondly, the county had deviated little from national voting trends, making it a convenient microcosm for the country as a whole. Six hundred randomly selected respondents were given a telephone survey at various points throughout the 1940 campaign season, and their responses were compared with four control groups in different months to make sure that the repeated surveys were not biasing the results. Lazarsfeld wanted to know when voters made up their minds about how they would vote in the November election and whether their exposure to the news media affected their decisions. The results revealed that very few voters actually changed their minds over the course of the campaign. In fact, voters' ultimate choices could be largely inferred in advance by looking at their socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, and age (a combined metric that was dubbed the "index of political participation"). With regard to media exposure, Lazarsfeld's team discovered that voters' reported news exposure served mainly to reinforce their latent predisposition to vote either Democratic or Republican.

The key finding of *The People's Choice* study—that the media may simply reinforce rather than persuade citizens about their voting choice—foreshadowed much of the postwar selectivity research. One interesting and unexpected finding from the Erie County study was that many respondents indicated that their conversations with others were more influential in their voting decisions than their media exposure. It was clear from the results that some individuals had acted as **opinion leaders** for others. In other words, these individuals were regarded to be knowledgeable about a particular issue and were consulted by others as a source on that issue. Lazarsfeld vowed to follow up on this insight in subsequent research.

The opportunity to explore the role of interpersonal relationships in media effects presented itself to Lazarsfeld when the head of McFadden Publications, a company that published women's gossip and fashion magazines, contracted with the bureau to perform market research on women readers. McFadden wanted to know what kinds of products his readers were buying so that he could more effectively market his magazines to advertisers. Ever the intellectual entrepreneur, Lazarsfeld agreed to do the study but added additional survey questions so that he could study the process of opinion leadership. The findings from the research were released in a book, *Personal Influence*, which was coauthored by Lazarsfeld and graduate student Elihu Katz.

The research was based on interviews with 800 women in the Decatur, Illinois, area. By using the survey, the research team was able to discover 693 reported opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Who were these opinion leaders, and what distinguished them from the rest? They discovered that women's "position in the life cycle" (their age and role as single or married, for example), their socioeconomic
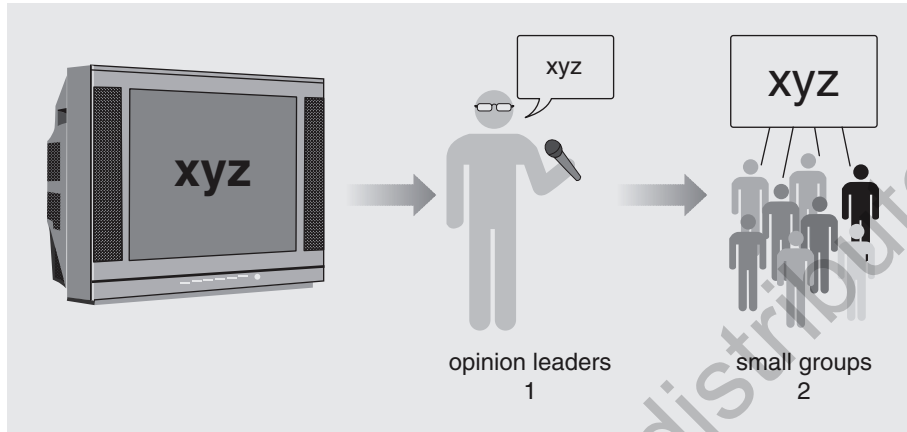
*Source:* Stephanie Plumeri Ertz.

status, and the extent of their social contacts were largely responsible for their position as opinion leaders. Additionally, different women acted as opinion leaders for different kinds of products. For household items, older married women were cited most often as opinion leaders, while younger women acted as opinion leaders for fashion and movie selection. Along with their role as informal persuaders for others, Katz and Lazarsfeld discovered that opinion leaders were also more likely to closely monitor the media for trends and information. This led to a new theory of media effects called the **two-step flow of communication**. Katz and Lazarsfeld reasoned that the impact of media messages flows through opinion leaders, who then pass along this influence to other audiences (see Figure 2.4). The two-step model suggested that the lack of media influence found in previous research studies (such as *The People's Choice*) was likely because scholars had not adequately understood the role that person-to-person communication played in media effects. The close connection between interpersonal communication and mass media impact was an important contribution of *Personal Influence*.

Is the two-step flow model still operative today in an era of online news and social media? Bennett and Manheim (2006) argue that audiences today have radically altered their information consumption patterns. Instead of face-to-face discussions around the proverbial "water cooler," contemporary audiences have "gained greater command of their own information environments" by seeking out small, niche groups of people online via social media. Advertisers and marketers can therefore target their messages to a very particular group of people who they know will be listening. In these scenarios, social media has therefore given rise to the *one-step flow of communication* (Bennett & Manheim, 2006, p. 216). We will discuss the impacts of social media on audiences and public opinion in Chapter 3.

# Effects of Media Violence

As the previous section illustrated, the orientation of media effects research shifted markedly after World War II. The theories of the mass audience that animated much early concern about motion pictures and radio gave way to the limited effects paradigm in the postwar years. This did not mean, however, that concerns about the potentially dangerous effects of media messages evaporated. In fact, during the 1960s and 1970s the increasingly important role of television in American households sparked new concerns about mediated violence, sexuality, and hypercommercialization. A few of the major research projects conducted during the television era are outlined here. The main focus of concern was the potential impacts of television exposure on children—more specifically, how images of violence on television affected children's attitudes and behaviors. Many of these questions about the impacts of media violence have been transferred to the newer technology of computer and video games.

## Rise of Public Concern Over Television and the Surgeon General's Report (1971)

The arrival of television in American homes in the 1950s heralded a new era for the media. Now, audiences could experience visuals as well as sound right in their own living rooms. Along with the immersive experience of the movies, television carried the immediacy of radio with continually updated news, live sporting events, and entertainment programming. By 1959, approximately 88% of all American households owned a television set (roughly 50 million sets), making television the fastest-growing media technology in history at that time (Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961, p. 12). During the 1960s, however, parents, educators, and cultural critics became concerned that much of the television diet available on the three networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) consisted of cheap, overcommercialized fare, such as game shows, violent dramas, and mindless comedies. The lack of quality programming on American television received nationwide attention in 1961 when the then-chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Newton Minow, gave a speech to the National Association of Broadcasters in which he dubbed TV programming "a vast wasteland" (Minow, 2002). Concerns about television in the 1960s were in part a reflection of the growing unrest in American society. Americans were witnessing increasingly stark images of violence in the news, thanks to the deepening U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War; antiwar demonstrations on university campuses around the nation; and acts of civil disobedience to protest segregation policies against Blacks and other minorities. After the deeply troubling assassinations of key American political figures such as President Kennedy, his brother Robert, and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., many began wondering whether violence was becoming a nationwide epidemic.

U.S. Sen. John O. Pastore of Rhode Island suggested that violence had become a "public health risk," and he worried that images of violence on television (both in news and entertainment) were prompting children to be more aggressive. At the urging of Congress and the U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, the

surgeon general of the United States and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) recruited 40 experts in the field and commissioned 23 independent studies of television's effects on children (Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, 1972, p. 18). This rich collection of research, which spans five volumes, was referred to as the "Surgeon General's Report."

One of the key questions asked by the report was "Does mediated violence encourage aggressive behaviors in children?" One of the most memorable studies included in the report was by psychologist Albert Bandura, who was interested in **social learning theory**, or how children are socialized by their environment. In Bandura's (1965) study, children observed an adult model beating an inflatable plastic Bobo doll in an experimental setting. In one experimental condition, the adult model was chastised for this behavior, and in another condition the adult model was not chastised. Children who did not witness the adult model being reprimanded for the aggressive behavior were more likely to play aggressively when left alone in a room with the Bobo doll. Bandura observed, however, that even children who did not demonstrate aggressive play could still reproduce the behavior when asked to do so by an adult. Bandura's research was the first to provide empirical evidence that children imitate adult models, which suggested that children were internalizing behaviors they witnessed on television. Another study by Liebert and Baron (1972) determined that children who watched even a short selection from a violent television program were more willing to show aggression to other children. This aggression was measured by children turning a handheld dial that they were told would either help or hurt another child's chance to get a prize. Like the Payne Fund Studies 40 years earlier, the Surgeon General's Report stoked fears that children were uniquely vulnerable to the powerful influence of the media. The fact that children's access to television was only as far away as their living rooms prompted further discussions in government and industry about how to protect children from potentially damaging content.

## Long-Term Media Effects and Cultivation Theory

Scholars also began looking closely at the long-term effects of television exposure on children for evidence of media effects. For example, a 10-year longitudinal study of 436 children was conducted by Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, and Walder (1972) to understand the impact of television exposure on later childhood development. The researchers discovered that the TV viewing habits of 8-year-old boys were predictive of their aggressive behavior throughout their childhood and later into adolescence. The research team continued to follow the children into their 20s (Huesmann, 1986) and even their 30s (Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003), and the findings remained strikingly consistent: Children who were in the upper 20% of television exposure were significantly higher on measures of aggression than the study's other participants. Thus, negative impacts of television violence may last much longer than some scholars had anticipated.

Another key research tradition that focuses on the long-term impacts of television is **cultivation theory**. Developed by Dr. George Gerbner of the Annenberg

School for Communication, cultivation theory argues that audiences' conceptions of reality are developed through exposure to television over a period of months and years (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Through surveys, Gerbner and his colleagues found evidence for what they termed **cultivation process**: that heavy television viewers (those who watched more than 4 hours per day) were more likely to perceive the world in ways that mirrored television reality rather than other, objective measures of social reality. They found, for example, that individuals who watched more television were much more likely to believe that the world was a violent and dangerous place, even if they themselves had not personally experienced violence (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Signorielli, 1990). These effects were found regardless of the genre of television watched by viewers. Cultivation research was a significant shift in the effects paradigm because it turned the focus on the *stability of attitudes over time rather than attitude change*, thus turning on its head the central thrust of the persuasion research of the World War II era. Since it found significant **cumulative, long-term** effects of media, cultivation analysis also reignited debate about the potential for media stimuli to have powerful impacts on audiences.

## Video Game Violence and Effects

Television continues to be a dominant source of news and entertainment in people's lives; our 21st-century lives are now full of technologies that can reach audiences anywhere, anytime. School shooting incidents in the United States and elsewhere have focused the public's attention on relative newcomers to the media scene: computer and video games. In the 1980s, American children played video games roughly 4 hours per week, but more recent estimates indicate that the average is now around 13 hours per week (Anderson et al., 2008). There is an expanding volume of scholarly work that examines the impacts of video games on audiences. Many of these studies have adopted the effects theories from earlier research on television and aggression to consider what types of impacts modern video games might have on child and adult audiences.

For example, Anderson and Dill (2000) surveyed college students about their use of various types of video games. They found that the students who said they spent more time playing video games also reported more aggressive and delinquent behaviors. They also set up a laboratory experiment in which students were assigned to play either a violent or a nonviolent video game. In the laboratory setting, those playing the violent video game displayed more aggressive behaviors toward peers. A comparative study of American and Japanese children also found that respondents who indicated a higher level of violent video game play were more likely to report aggressive actions and feelings over time (Anderson et al., 2008). A meta-analysis of the research on video games and aggression in 2001 found that data from about 30 independent investigations seemed to show a "small effect of video game play on aggression, and the effect is smaller than the effect of violent television on aggression" (Sherry, 2001, p. 427). A follow-up review later in the decade (Lee, Peng, & Park, 2009) found that Sherry's conclusion was

still relevant for research on the transference of emotional or behavioral aggression from violent video games to audiences. Lee, Peng, and Park noted, however, that video game addiction (an inability to stop playing video games) had become a source of concern. Scholars have also begun investigating the effects of video games through magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to detect whether the areas of the brain that control aggression are activated during exciting, first-person shooter games (Weber, Ritterfeld, & Mathiak, 2006). It's important to note here that the research setting itself may contribute to the discovery of some of the video game effects observed. As Perse (2001, p. 9) notes, research subjects may assume that the experimenter approves of media content that is used during a research study, even if that material is violent or pornographic in nature. This form of research bias, called an **experimenter effect**, could cause research subjects to behave differently in research settings than in the real world, thereby unintentionally magnifying the observed effects of specific types of media on audiences. Thus, despite the intense public interest in isolated cases—such as the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999 and Virginia Tech in 2007—the research has found only small, negative effects from video game play, even in experimental settings.

## Mobile Media and Effects

The research findings on the effects of violent video games should certainly give us pause, but the reality is that violent video game play represents a relatively small slice of overall media consumption among audiences. But what about our exposure to mobile devices like smartphones and tablets? These portable devices are easy to carry with us, allowing us to be instantly connected to friends, family, and to online media wherever we go. Mobile devices are also ubiquitous: A 2017 Pew Research Center survey found that 77% of Americans owned a smartphone, and 20% of Americans relied on their mobile devices for access to the Internet (in other words, they did not have access to broadband Internet at home; Pew Research Center, 2018). Scholar Sherry Turkle has argued that today's teenagers are "tethered" to their mobile phones, which allows for constant connection to parents as well as to friends and peers (Turkle, 2008). The fact that millions carry their mobile phones on their physical person 24 hours a day and that these devices are perpetually connected to the Internet means that we are "always on" and available for private communications, even in public spaces (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). As Turkle has discovered in her research, teenagers feel a sense of safety and security from being "connected" to their parents via mobile technology, but they are also more distracted, become anxious when they feel as if they are missing out on communications from peers, and sometimes engage in risky behaviors such as sexting, texting while driving, and even cyberbullying (Turkle, 2008).

There are a number of potential effects of mobile communications that scholars have investigated. Negative effects of smartphones are becoming more and more acute since mobile phone use is on the rise, particularly among teenagers. A 2015 Pew Research Center survey found that 24% of U.S. teens are online "almost constantly," using social media apps like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter

Figure 2.5   Teens Are "Tethered" to Their Mobile Devices, Parents, and Each Other

*Source:* iStock.com/nemke.

(Lenhart, 2015). According to a recent report issued by Common Sense Media (2016), half of teens report feeling "addicted" to their smartphones. In 2002, media scholar Todd Gitlin warned that the torrent of constant media messages into the home "has swelled into a torrent of immense force and constancy, an accompaniment *to* life that has become a central experience *of* life" (emphasis in original; 2002, p. 17). Focus group research has found that mobile phone users are continually annoyed and distracted by trivial messages (Hargittai, Neuman, & Curry, 2012). In addition to this rise in "infoxification" (or intoxication by too much information), other researchers have discovered that adolescents often develop stress related to the perpetual contacts from peers since they are expected to return messages immediately, leading to anxiety about keeping up with this constant barrage (Mascheroni, 2017). In addition, all this anxiety about keeping up with our mobile devices leads us to disengage from our face-to-face conversations, negatively affect our moods, and cause spinal curvature from looking down at small screens over a long period of time (Popescu, 2018). One recent analysis of 300 adolescent narratives about friendships found that mobile communications intensified emotions of meanness, betrayal, and harassment by amplifying the number of people who can potentially see these interactions unfold in the social media space (called **scalability**; White, Weinstein, & Selman, 2018). The constant need to respond to friends and acquaintances can lead to feelings of guilt for not keeping up, thus lowering our levels of satisfaction with these friendships as a result (Hall & Baym, 2012).

Lastly, the accessibility of social media via mobile phones has encouraged more potentially problematic and risky behaviors among adolescents. For instance, young people with mobile phones have reported using their phones while doing other important tasks, such as homework or even driving. This attention to multiple simultaneous stimuli is called **multitasking**. Research by David, Kim, Brickman, Ran, and Curtis (2015) found that college students who owned mobile phones and had lots of Facebook friends were more likely to multitask while completing homework, leading to more distractions. Adolescents have also engaged in sexting, or the exchange of sexually explicit messages via social media and texting, or short messaging service (SMS). There have been numerous studies of adolescent sexting, many of which ask the question "Does teen sexting lead to other risky sexual behaviors?" A meta-analysis of sexting research (Kosenko, Luurs, & Binder, 2017) found somewhat weak results on the question of whether sexting causes risky behaviors such as unprotected sex, though there was a clear connection between sexting behavior and sexual activity among young people. The increase in screen time afforded by widespread access to smartphones may even be increasing rates of adolescent depression. For example, research by a team of scholars found a connection between the rising rate of teen suicides in the United States between 2010 and 2015 and increased screen time via mobile devices (Twenge, Joiner, Rogers, & Martin, 2018).

The effects of mobile communications on audiences are not all negative, however. In fact, access to mobile technologies has been transformative in a number of ways that directly benefit society. For example, mobile phones can be vital in emergencies to call for help or to increase the sense of safety for those who carry them. There are broader social and political implications as well. For instance, the capability of mobile phones for texting has expanded democratic participation around the world by enabling what Howard Rheingold (2002) calls "smart mobs," or groups of citizens that can rally almost instantly for social or political change. One such example is in Turkey, where in 2013 citizens used the social messaging service Twitter on their mobile phones to quickly organize pro-democracy protests in Gezi Park (Tufecki, 2017). In the United States, advocacy groups like Black Lives Matter have used the video cameras on mobile phones to document police brutality of African Americans in order to bring worldwide attention to continued civil rights abuses there (Stephen, 2015). There is also evidence that individuals who use smartphones are more likely both to consume news and political information, as well as to share their own views about politics in online forums and social media, thus increasing their own political participation (Campbell & Kwak, 2010; Kim, Chen, & Wang, 2016).

All of these studies point to the complex character of mobile device effects, particularly on young people. Mobile smartphones can become important tools for social and political expression, yet they can also make us anxious, induce depression and loneliness, affect our friendship dynamics, and distract us from our surroundings by keeping us constantly tethered to our devices. Since Internet-enabled smartphones are still just over a decade old, scholarly research into the effects of these technologies is still in its infancy.

## Conclusion: Enduring Concern Over Media Effects

This chapter has mapped out a very brief history of some of the major media effects studies and theories in the 20th century. The rise in the importance of motion pictures as a major leisure-time activity, along with urbanization and radical shifts in Americans' work lives, catalyzed early concerns about the power of media messages to shift attitudes and behaviors. After World War I, the notion that mass opinion could be shaped and managed by media messages was widespread. This logic was evident in the findings on both the impact of *The War of the Worlds* broadcast and Hovland's wartime propaganda research. The focus of postwar research may have shifted to more limited effects, but concern about the vulnerability of children to violent media was transferred from motion pictures to newer forms of media, such as television and video games.

While the scope of the research in the effects tradition is vast, there are some clearly identifiable characteristics that define this research tradition. The operative notion in the effects paradigm is that the audience exists in a naturally occurring state that can be interrupted and dramatically changed, thanks to specific media messages. The notion of the anonymous, powerless mass audience is no longer the dominant assumption in effects research. Nevertheless, the media effects literature approaches the audience as a collective that potentially requires protection from dangerous outside influences. Butsch (2008, p. 127) notes that "the effects paradigm sustained the image of audiences as passive individuals, even while the research itself often contradicted fears about the power of media." In the next section of the book, we'll explore how audiences are constructed by institutions and the impacts of those constructions on our roles as citizens and consumers.

## DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

1. Either individually or in groups, conduct a brief online search for news articles that deal with some kind of media (TV, radio, film, video games, and social media are some examples) and the potential effects on audiences. Once you have gathered several stories, read them carefully and then discuss the following questions:

- What types of effects are suggested by these articles? Are they negative or positive effects or both?

- According to these articles, what is the extent of the media's effect on audiences? Are the effects serious (such as significant changes in audiences' attitudes or behaviors) or minimal?

- What inherent assumptions do these articles make about audiences and their ability to process messages? Are audiences seen as relatively passive or active in their capability to process media messages?

- Do you see a consistent pattern in news coverage of media effects?

2. Take 10 to 15 minutes and recall an episode from your childhood when you had a strong emotional, physiological, or psychological response to something that you saw in the media (on TV, in the movies, or on the Internet, for example). Write a brief first-person narrative about this episode: What particular program, film, or message made an impression on you and why? Once your narrative is complete, select a partner and exchange your narratives with each other to read. Once you have done so, answer the following questions in a brief discussion:

- What types of responses have you and your partner outlined? Are they positive or negative responses to media? Which type of response do you think is more memorable and why?

- Which medium (TV, film, Internet, etc.) did you and your partner remember most vividly? Why do you think this is the case?

- Do you see any similarities between the two narratives? What are they?

- Do any of the media effects theories outlined in this chapter help to explain you or your partner's experiences? Which one(s) and why?

3. Reread the portion of the chapter that outlines Albert Bandura's *social learning theory.* Next, think about how this theory might apply to newer forms of online social networking, such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, Snapchat, and others. How might the interactivity offered by these forms of social media affect children's social learning as outlined by Bandura? Do you think Bandura's research on social modeling from the 1970s has relevance for these online services today? Why or why not?

4. How "tethered" are we to our mobile devices? Try this exercise to evaluate your own exposure to mobile phones. First, install a free "app tracker" for your mobile phone (Moment for iOS, or simply use the built-in features of Screen Time; Quality Time for Android). After you create a free account and enable it on your phone, these apps will run in the background and track your usage of the phone (onscreen time; apps used; amount of time on each app, etc.). Do this as soon as possible and have the app running in the background of your phone for several days (3–4 days is optimal). After several days, look at your patterns of smartphone use and make some notes. Then answer the following questions in a brief paragraph or in classroom discussion:

- How much screen "on" time did you have daily (on average)? Did it change from day to day? What times of day did you have more concentrated use of the phone? Why do you think this is?

- What types of apps did you use most often on your smartphone during this time? (Give some specifics about which apps and how much time). What does this tell you about the uses or affordances that you value most in the phone?

- Lastly, does anything surprise you about your use of the phone (either amount or type of use)? Are you concerned about this at all?

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# Audiences as Institutional Constructions

The next two chapters mark a new section of the book. In this section, we will examine audiences not as objects of media power, but instead as *artifacts of social processes* such as public opinion polling (Chapter 3) and commercial audience ratings (Chapter 4). We will focus our attention on the strategies with which institutions actively construct notions of the audience through different research methodologies. The term **institution** here refers to "complex social forms that reproduce themselves, such as governments, the family, human languages, universities, hospitals, business corporations, and legal systems" (Miller, 2011). Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1986, p. 24) notes that institutions "by definition are the more enduring features of social life." We will be considering a number of important institutions in our society, such as the government, the press, and the media marketplace.

If we wish to have governments and market systems that respond to the will of the people, it is vital for our institutions to obtain feedback about the public's wants and needs. However, the method by which these institutions gather intelligence about the audience is often fraught with conceptual and logistical pitfalls. The source of these problems can be traced to the Industrial Revolution. As outlined in Chapter 1, the Industrial Revolution created an artificial separation between the workspace and the home (or leisure space). This meant that audience consumption of media messages took place in private, domestic spaces (such as the home) that were not under the direct supervision of private companies or the government. As we'll discuss in this section of the text, the fact that our product consumption, voting, and other forms of political engagement now take place outside of the public realm poses some thorny problems for institutions. These institutions want to ascertain our behaviors, attitudes, wishes, and desires but are often blocked by the legal and social protections that we have set up to protect our private spaces from outside influence. Indeed, the Declaration of Independence takes language from Enlightenment philosopher John Locke that the goal of government should be to enable citizens' unfettered access to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

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Since individuals in democracies do not live under the constant surveillance of a police state, institutions must turn to more indirect means for gathering feedback from the citizenry. This feedback takes many forms, such as public opinion polling, audience ratings, market surveys, and, increasingly, an analysis of "trending" topics on social media like Facebook and Twitter. There are some important implications to consider here. First, institutionalized forms of feedback always involve a time delay because of the nature of the process: Measuring audiences is complicated, costly, and sometimes slow; therefore, the feedback provided always reflects the past rather than the present. Secondly, because most modern, industrialized societies are extremely large, formal feedback solicited by institutions will always be incomplete since there are simply too many people in the audience to provide input on any one issue (and institutions would not be able to adequately process all of that information even if it were possible to gather it all). Sampling the audience is therefore necessary.

Thirdly, the process for gathering feedback from the audience is often *subject to institutional pressures.* This means that social institutions have particularized ways of knowing about message receivers because their techniques for information gathering and processing often *reflect institutional motives and needs.* For example, you might experience a plethora of complex reactions to a program that you see on television, but those reactions are of little concern to audience measurement firms like the Nielsen Corporation. These firms need to know only who was present in the audience in order to fulfill a business contract with an advertiser. Likewise, major social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter present their users in ways that privilege and emphasize certain kinds of hyperpartisan discourse that does not necessarily capture the complexity of our political discourse.

This disconnect between how you understand yourself and how audience measurement firms or social media platforms understand you might not seem that strange or problematic until you realize that institutions make critical decisions that can constrain the universe of actions or choices available to you. Indeed, governments, law enforcement, and the legal system have the power of life or death in their hands (Douglas, 1986). Returning to Giddens's theory of structuration, this means that institutions are powerful *structures* that can affect individual agency. Thus, while forms of audience measurement may be crude and imprecise, these constructions have real power to change decisions that affect millions of people. For this reason, it is critical that we understand how and why these institutions construct audiences.