

Harm and Offence in Media Content

A review of the evidence

By Andrea Millwood Hargrave
and Sonia Livingstone



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE AIMS OF THIS REVIEW

As the Television without Frontiers Directive is debated again in Europe with a view to extending it to include all audiovisual content, and as new broadcasting codes are developed in countries such as the UK and Ireland, the concepts of ‘harm’ and ‘offence’ are gaining ground. The debate mainly concerns the exposure of minors to potentially harmful or offensive material, although there are other sensibilities such as offence or harm caused to those from minority groups.

This research review is designed to examine the risk of harm and offence in relation to the usage of media content. Uniquely, it asks what evidence is available regarding content-related harm and offence, looking across the range of media. These are television, radio, music, press, film (including video and DVD), games, Internet, telephony and advertising, though it should be noted that much of the research reviewed concerns television. The focus is also on recent research (mainly post 2000), and here it should be noted that most of the research has been conducted in the US.

This review has the following aims:

- To offer a comprehensive and up to date review of an important, policy-relevant body of research literature, combining research from diverse disciplines across the academy, together with research conducted by industry and regulatory bodies
- To distinguish, and to seek to understand the relation between harm and offence, together with identifying such evidence as exists for each
- To compare findings obtained across the major forms of media (both established and new), in relation to possible content-related harm and offence
- To draw on the latest research conducted in the UK and internationally, while recognising that, in different regulatory contexts cross-nationally, different findings may be obtained and, therefore, culturally-specific conclusions may be required

- To balance an account of the empirical research findings with a recognition of the many criticisms (theoretical, methodological and political) that have long been levied at them, so as to identify stronger and weaker studies
- To identify a range of variously ‘vulnerable’ groups in relation to potential media harms, including – but not restricted to – research conducted in relation to children and young people.

WHAT THIS REVIEW DOES NOT COVER

The field of research examining claims regarding media harm and offence is vast, and so the parameters of the present review must be made clear at the outset.

- The review does not cover research evidence for the positive or pro-social benefits of the media, though these have been extensively researched elsewhere, except where they are discussed in relation to harm and offence. The review should not be read, therefore, as offering an overall judgment on the benefits and harms, taken together, of the various media
- It also does not consider other issues of public health currently being debated, such as the potential for physical harm caused by media content triggering epilepsy for example, or the possible effects of using mobile telephone handsets. Nor does the review consider areas of consumer detriment such as financial risk
- It is important also to note that the review only reflects the changing nature of media consumption insofar as it has been the subject of research which refers to harm and offence. Since there are many gaps in the empirical research base, a number of questions must remain unanswered. Further, it is clear that the changing patterns of media use continue to be significant in framing the ways in which people relate to different media (in terms of access, expectations, media literacy, etc.). Such changes should remain a priority for the future research agenda.

THE ORGANISATION OF THIS REVIEW

The review of the literature is organised according to the following rationale:

- Since questions of media harm and offence are currently on the policy agenda, we begin with the issues of concern and a brief overview of the current regulatory issues in the UK, amplified later
- Further, given the contested nature of the research findings within this field, we then offer an analysis of the theoretical, methodological and political debates and difficulties that face researchers in this field, in order to contextualise and qualify the empirical claims offered by the published literature on media harm and offence
- Hence we distinguish theories of short-term and long-term effects, direct and indirect effects, and harm and offence. We review the advantages and disadvantages of the main research methods in use (experiments, surveys, qualitative social research), noting the ethical and

political issues that structure the field of research. We stress the value of integrating qualitative and quantitative research findings, discussing each in the light of the other, where available

- The review then presents recent research conducted for each medium in turn. Within the medium-specific chapters, we have also organised the material according to types of potential harm and offence and according to categories of audiences or users (i.e. types of vulnerability). Research methods and findings are critically evaluated to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the empirical research base. They are also contextualised, insofar as such research exists, so as to identify factors that may mediate any media effects, these focusing on the conditions of access to media, the cultural/regulatory context in which the research was conducted, and the media literacy (or technological expertise) of parents or carers in managing their children's media access
- It is worth noting that although in policy discussions, 'harm and offence' is often used as a single phrase, it is not always clear just what the difference between them is taken to be, nor how they differently relate to legal or regulatory frameworks. Similarly, harm and offence are often not clearly distinguished in terms of academic research evidence, though in the main, academic research is concerned with harm rather than with offence.

TELEVISION

- Significant research effort has been expended on this ubiquitous and accessible medium, and many studies of other media are based on those from television. There is also a body of research that examines the benefits of exposure to television content but this is not considered here unless it also refers to a consideration of harm and offence
- Methodologically, one must accept the research evidence is flawed. Moreover, much of it derives from a different cultural and regulatory environment (most of the research was conducted in the US). However, it is important to evaluate what the findings are, focusing on those studies that have minimised the methodological and other difficulties so as to understand the indications of influence and effect that they provide
- The evidence suggests that, under certain circumstances, television can negatively influence attitudes in some areas, including those which may affect society (through the creation of prejudice) and those which may affect the individual (by making them unduly fearful, for example). Thus, it seems that television plays a part in contributing to stereotypes, fear of crime and other reality-defining effects, although it remains unclear what other social influences also play a role, or how important television is by comparison with these other factors
- The primary subjects of research have been children and young people¹, as they are thought to be most vulnerable to negative influences which may, in turn, affect long-term attitudes or behaviour. However, there is a growing body of evidence which suggests that there are also vulnerable groups of adults who may be negatively affected by certain types of media content; for example, people with particular personality disorders

- Many of the studies use experimental methods, and are subject to considerable criticism. They demonstrate short-term effects on attitudes and behaviours among a particular research sample (e.g. college students) and under particular conditions. It is also the case that too little of the research evidence examines the viewing of age-appropriate material, although a number of studies use content popular among the target group being examined
- Other studies use content analysis techniques to examine the nature of content, making assumptions about the way in which the images might be received. However, in the UK and elsewhere, qualitative and social research techniques show it is valuable to talk to audience groups to understand their reasoning and reactions to content they view
- The review of research showed the importance to the audience of certain variables in making sense of or justifying a portrayed act. These include the context within which the act is set and the importance of identification and empathy with the protagonists
- Transmission time remains an important variable within audience attitudes towards current television content, with established conventions designed to reduce the potential for offence
- Much of the research evidence shows that most audiences are generally able to distinguish fact from fiction. The evidence also suggests that the viewing of fictional content does not diminish the distress that may be caused by violence in real-life
- There are clear audience differences based on gender (in particular, boys seem to be more influenced by violent content) and age; but also family settings, a predisposition for a particular programme genre, the way in which the content is used and other such variables all appear to play a part in the way content is viewed and assimilated
- Much of the research has been less equivocal in demonstrating evidence for areas of offence caused (such as with regard to offensive language, violence or the depiction of sexual activity) in comparison with harm. Contextual and demographic variables are seen particularly to affect the levels of offence felt
- Importantly, some of the research literature argues that the influences or effects of television need to be understood and recognised not only by researchers and policy makers but also by those in the industry and those dealing with the media.

RADIO

- Despite being the background to so many people's lives, little recent research of radio was found in relation to questions of harm. Such concern as does arise is concentrated particularly on talk shows and similar programmes based on call-ins or user-generated content, and in relation to the lyrics of popular music
- Research shows that radio is found to be offensive on occasion by a substantial minority of the audience – particularly in relation to the treatment of callers by presenters, offensive language and racism

MUSIC

- There is little research which examines harm and offence in relation to music. The research that exists is mainly content analytic rather than based on audience reactions, except for occasional opinion surveys, and is mainly focused on popular music lyrics
- These studies reveal consistent messages in music lyrics that may be considered harmful and are considered offensive by some – including messages promoting violence among boys/men, homophobic messages, or those encouraging early sexuality among young girls/women. Some argue that these are particularly damaging for ethnic minority audiences
- There is a small body of experimental evidence suggesting that, as for other media, these messages can negatively influence the attitudes or emotions of their audience.

PRINT

- The history of the print media and the precedents set in terms of policy making have helped frame debates about other media and have also provided a framework for the way in which much media content is regulated
- Research suggests the print media, especially the press, can frame public discourse, providing important civil information. The potential complicity of the media in misinformation is questioned in many studies reviewed here. It is argued that the potential of harm that may occur not only affects the individual but also has broader consequences for society
- The importance of the public or private nature of different types of print media has not been widely researched but the evidence suggests that how strongly one is affected by print content is closely linked with this distinction.

FILM, VIDEO AND DVD

- The empirical research evidence for harm and offence in relation to film has been concerned primarily with ‘adult’ or relatively extreme sexual and violent content, such material being more available, though restricted by age, on film and video than – at present – on television
- Although concerns are consistently raised regarding the reality-defining or stereotyping effects of film, we found little recent research on this. Evidence for emotional responses to film, particularly fear, exists and is relatively uncontentious, though whether this constitutes longer-term harm is more difficult to determine given the absence of longitudinal research studies
- Considerable attention has been paid to pornography, focusing variously on harm to those involved in production, to male consumers, to children and to society (especially, attitudes towards women) more generally. The evidence for harm to men viewing non-violent (or consensual) pornography remains inconclusive or absent. However, the evidence for harm from viewing violent (non-consensual) pornography is rather stronger, resulting in more negative or aggressive attitudes and behaviours towards women as well as supporting the desire to watch more extreme content

- The evidence that viewing pornography harms children remains scarce, given ethical restrictions on the research, though many experts believe it to be harmful. Other vulnerable groups have been researched, however, with some evidence that the harmful effects of violent content especially are greater for those who are already aggressive, for children with behaviour disorders, for young offenders with a history of domestic violence and – for pornographic content – among sexual offenders
- Public attitudes to film content are, generally, more tolerant than for television. This is partly because the public is aware, and supportive of, current levels of regulation in film, and partly because people understand the decision process behind choosing to watch violent or sexual content. Tolerance is lowest (or offence is greatest) for the portrayal of sexual violence. Studies of audience interpretation of potentially harmful or offensive content in film throw some light on the complex judgements made by the public in this area
- The conditions for viewing film – both at home and in the cinema – are changing, yet too little is known regarding the conditions under which people, especially children, may gain access to different kinds of potentially harmful content.

GAMES

- Although research on electronic games is relatively new, it is strongly polarised between the psychological/experimental approach that argues that electronic games have harmful effects, and the cultural/qualitative approach that defends games as merely entertaining, even beneficial on occasions
- In the psychological/effects approach, a growing body of research is accumulating which suggests harmful effects, especially for games with violent content and especially on boys or men who play them. However, this research remains contested in terms of how far it can be applied to aggressive situations in everyday life
- It also remains unclear how much this evidence concerns media violence in general and how much it is video game specific. One empirical comparison across research studies found that the effect of violent video games on aggression is smaller than that found for television violence. However, more research is required to compare the effects of, for example, violent television and video games. On the one hand, it has been argued that television imagery has hitherto been more graphic/realistic and hence more influential (although technical advances in video game technology are allowing them to ‘catch up’). On the other hand, it has been argued that video games require a more involved and attentive style of engagement – a ‘first person’ rather than a ‘third person’ experience – which may make games more harmful.

INTERNET

- The widespread accessibility of the Internet, along with its affordability, anonymity and convenience is seen by many to increase the likelihood of media harm and offence. While some argue that there is little new about online content, familiar contents merely having moved online, most disagree, expressing concern about the accessibility of more extreme forms of content that are, potentially, harmful and offensive

- The lack of clear definitions of levels or types of pornography, violence, etc. on the Internet, where the range is considerable, impedes research, as do (necessarily) the ethical restrictions on researching the potentially harmful effects of online content, especially but not only on children
- As many defend online pornography as suggest it to be harmful, though there is a growing body of research – though still small – suggesting such content to be particularly harmful for vulnerable groups, specifically people who are sexually compulsive and/or sexual abusers
- For children, despite the lack of evidence (and the lack of research) on harm, there is a growing body of national and international research on children’s distress when they accidentally come across online pornography and other unwelcome content
- There is a growing literature on the potentially harmful consequences of user-generated contact. This includes everything from the school or workplace bully to the grooming of children by paedophiles. It has become evident that many children and adults experience some risky contact
- Further, research shows that when people – adults and children – receive hostile, bullying or hateful messages, they are generally ill-equipped to respond appropriately or to cope with the emotional upset this causes. Similarly, parents are unclear as to how they can know about, or intervene in, risky behaviours undertaken – deliberately or inadvertently – by their children. As for pornographic content, the consequences of exposure seem to be more harmful for those who are already vulnerable
- People’s responses to ‘hateful’ content tends to be more tolerant, on the grounds of freedom of expression, though they find it offensive. Little as yet is known of how the targeted groups (mainly, ethnic minorities) respond
- In general, the case for further research seems clear, firstly in relation to the characteristics of vulnerable groups (including strategies for intervention) and secondly in relation to the ways in which the Internet seems to support or facilitate certain kinds of harmful peer-to-peer activity.

MOBILE TELEPHONY

- There is growing evidence that mobile telephony may cause harm through the creation of fear and humiliation by bullying, for example. Although it is evident that new communication technologies are being incorporated into practices of bullying, harassment and other forms of malicious peer-to-peer communication, it is not yet clear that these technologies are responsible for an increase in the incidence of such practices
- There is little substantive academic evidence for the potential risk of harm or offence caused through access to the professionally produced content market for mobiles, although inferences are being made about such possible effects from other media

- It is questionable whether mobile technologies are used in the same way as other fixed media, particularly because they have rapidly become personal and private forms of communication. This is an area where the lack of research evidence is especially felt.

ADVERTISING

- There is a moderate body of evidence pointing to modest effects of both intentional (i.e. product-promoting) and incidental (i.e. product context) advertising messages. This suggests that advertising has some influence on product choice, and that the nature of its portrayals has some influence on the attitudes and beliefs of its audience
- Specifically, a range of reality-defining effects² have been examined – in relation to the stereotyping of population segments and, most recently, in relation to obesity and other products with health consequences. Research tends to show modest evidence for harmful effects of advertising, particularly on children, although this remains contested. Since the influence of advertising is not large, according to the evidence, research is needed to determine what other factors also influence these harmful outcomes (stereotyping, obesity, smoking, etc.)
- This question of intent has implications for media literacy. In relation to advertising, the intent to persuade is generally considered acceptable provided the public recognises this intent. In relation to children, considerable research exists on the development of ‘advertising literacy’ with age, though it has not been clearly shown that more media literate, or advertising literate, consumers are less affected by advertising (or other media), nor that interventions designed to increase literacy have the effect of reducing media harm
- Little is yet known of how all audiences – adults as well as children – recognise advertising, sponsorship, product placement etc. in relation to the new media environment
- There is also a body of research linking advertising to offence. This research reveals the considerable cultural variation, both within and across cultures, in what content is found offensive and by whom.

REGULATION

- There are legal provisions in place which ban the supply of illegal harmful content to the public. Attempts are being made to extend some of these provisions to cover the new communications technologies, and some are being written to meet the particular challenges created by these
- The UK has a sophisticated and well-established regulatory framework with many different models – statutory, co-regulatory and self-regulatory – designed to respond to the needs of the different media they serve, dealing principally with content that is legal but may be harmful, and content that may be, to some, offensive
- Regulation must be based on an assessment of the detriment caused to society or the individual by the availability of certain content, and should aim to be a proportionate response to that risk. It is argued that the research evidence suggests a likelihood of risk that makes some regulation of media contents necessary

- Research shows that users are generally accepting of regulation of content and have particular areas of concern such as violence in the media
- There is a move away from content regulation towards the provision of more information and more access prevention tools for users. Many respondents in research say they welcome this. It is clear however, that they accept this greater ‘empowerment’ only within a (currently) regulated framework. Thus there is growing support from stakeholders for the importance of media literacy and for systems of content labelling and information, together with an increasing awareness of the difficulties in ensuring that such knowledge is fairly distributed across the population
- The research suggests that active parental mediation works best in homes where there is already a strong communications environment and that different forms of mediation work better for different groups, often depending on the age of the subject.

CONCLUSIONS

(1) The meaning of ‘harm’ and ‘offence’

As noted at the outset, ‘harm and offence’ is often used as a single phrase, with little clarity regarding the difference between the terms or how they may each relate to legal and regulatory frameworks. Similarly, these terms are little discussed or distinguished in relation to the research evidence.

- It is suggested that harm is widely (though not necessarily) conceived in objective terms; harm, it seems, is taken to be observable by others (irrespective of whether harm is acknowledged by the individual concerned), and hence as measurable in a reliable fashion
- By contrast, offence is widely (though not necessarily) conceived in subjective terms; offence, it seems, is taken to be that experienced by and reported on by the individual, and hence is difficult to measure reliably
- Since these terms are increasingly used in discussions of media content regulation, replacing the former term, ‘taste and decency’, we would recommend further consideration and, ideally, a degree of consensus, regarding the definition of both ‘harm’ and ‘offence’.

Nonetheless, drawing conclusions about offence is comparatively straightforward. Looking across all media, the research evidence shows a sizeable minority of the population find certain content offensive. This is especially the case for women and older people, though most are nonetheless tolerant of the rights of others to engage with the media of their choice. In particular, new forms of media occasion greater public concern and anxiety than do more familiar media. For these latter, the public is, in the main, supportive of the current regulatory framework. However, findings are mixed on whether people are satisfied with (or even aware of) the available processes for making a complaint about media content.

Drawing conclusions about harm, on the other hand, is difficult, and to attempt this, we must begin with the limitations of the evidence base.

(2) Limitations of the evidence base

This review has noted a range of theoretical, methodological and political difficulties in researching the possible harm and offence in relation to media content. In many respects, the evidence base is patchy and inconsistent. Many questions remain difficult to research. Particularly, research can only offer evidence towards a judgement based on the balance of probabilities rather than on irrefutable proof.

Persistent questions remain regarding:

- How far the largely American findings may be applicable to the UK situation
- How far the largely experimental research findings may be applicable to ordinary contexts of media use
- How far the largely television-based research may be applicable to other, especially newer media.

A key aim of this review has been to pinpoint gaps in the existing evidence base. As a result, we identify the following priorities for future research:

- Research on the range of marginalised and/or vulnerable groups (including the elderly, gay, ethnic minorities, and those with psychological difficulties)
- Research on new media technologies (especially Internet, mobile, other new and interactive devices) and new contents (interactive content, new forms of advertising and promotion, niche/extreme content)
- Longitudinal or long-term panel studies to follow up the effects of short-term harm, to track changes in levels and kinds of offence, and to identify changing expectations and understandings of media (including the access conditions) among the public
- Research on reality-defining/stereotyping effects that relates to recent changes, especially in UK-originated media content, as well as in imported content
- Research on the new issues arising from new media, particularly in relation to user-generated and malicious peer-to-peer content and contact
- Research that puts media effects in context, seeking to understand how the media play a role in a multi-factor explanation for particular social phenomena (e.g. violence, gender stereotyping, etc.). This should include a comparative account of the relative size of effect for each factor (including the media) in order to enable regulatory decisions based on proportionality
- Research that directly compares the public's responses to the 'same' content when accessed on different media (e.g. violence on television, in film, in computer games, online) so as to understand whether and how the medium, or the conditions of access to a medium, make a difference

- Research on the range of factors that potentially mediate (buffer or exacerbate) any effects of media exposure (e.g. level of media literacy, role of parental mediation, difference between accidental and deliberate exposure, etc.).

It must be observed that calling for multi-method, long-term, cross-media research on a diverse range of audience/user groups is to call for expensive research. Just as regulation increasingly requires a multi-stakeholder approach, it may be that research also requires the cooperation of government, regulator and industry groups, together with the expertise of the academic research community.

(3) A risk-based approach

This review has argued that the search for simple and direct causal effects of the media is, for the most part, no longer appropriate. Rather, this should be replaced by an approach that seeks to identify the range of factors that directly, and indirectly through interactions with each other, combine to explain particular social phenomena. As research shows, each social problem of concern (e.g. aggression, prejudice, obesity, bullying, etc.) is associated with a distinct and complex array of putative causes.

The task for those concerned with media harm and offence is to identify and contextualise the role of the media within that array. The result will be a more complex explanation of what are, undoubtedly, complex social problems. This should, in turn, permit a balanced judgement of the role played by the media on a case by case basis. In some cases, this may reduce the focus on the media – for example, by bringing into view the many factors that account for present levels of aggression in society. In other cases, it may increase the focus on the media – for example, in understanding the role played by the Internet in facilitating paedophiles’ access to children.

A risk-based approach seeks to take into account a wide range of relevant factors, as these establish the conditions under which any particular factor (such as media exposure) operates. Many such factors are culturally-specific, including national traditions of content regulation, approaches to parenting, and moral frames for judging content or determining offence. In addition to such factors, and to the important differences across the media and hence across media access conditions, we have also sought to stress that content does not affect all audiences equally. Research suggests that there can be greater negative influences on those who are ‘vulnerable’. No standard definition of ‘vulnerability’ exists (and again, public discussion of this term would be valuable), but research findings do suggest that vulnerable audiences/users may include children and young people, especially boys, together with a range of other groups among the adult population (including psychologically disturbed individuals, people who are depressed, sexual offenders, young offenders, etc.).

(4) Reviewing findings on a case-by-case basis

As indicated in the medium-by-medium review above, the evidence points to a range of conclusions depending on the social problem at stake.

- For example, there is a sizeable body of evidence that televised portrayals of aggression (typically, American action-adventure dramas intended for an older audience) may negatively

influence the attitudes and behaviours of children, especially boys. Similar findings exist as regards aggressive content in film, video/DVD and electronic games, though the body of research evidence is somewhat smaller. These media are, at present, all highly regulated through labelling and age-restrictions. It seems likely that the risk of harm will be greater when children view content inappropriate for their age (i.e. intended for those older than them), though unfortunately research does not always adequately link the effects of exposure to the specific nature or age-appropriateness of the content. However, we suggest that at stake is the likelihood of risk rather than of inevitable harm, for as the research also shows, not all in the audience are affected equally and many, it appears, are not affected. Broadcasters, regulators and parents must continue to make balanced judgements of the likely risk to some children, bearing in mind the conditions of access (e.g. scheduling, intended audience, narrative context) and conditions of mediation (e.g. role of parental discussion of content or restrictions on access)

- Taking a different case, we note that although there is mounting evidence that Internet-based and mobile communication technologies are being incorporated into practices of bullying, harassment and other forms of malicious peer-to-peer communication, it is not yet clear that these technologies are responsible for an increase in the incidence of such practices. This is partly because of a lack of sound data from, say, 10 years ago, against which to compare present findings. However, research on the conditions of access points to a relative convenience and ease of use which, combined with the highly personalised, private and often anonymous conditions under which these technologies are used, suggests that cyber-bullying, cyber-harassment, etc. may introduce new kinds of problems for users, as well as exacerbating old ones. In some ways, it seems, online and offline communication work differently; but in key ways also, they work together, with, for example, offline bullying or harassment continuing or extending offline, rather than remaining entirely distinct. Given the difficulties faced by parents in understanding how to manage the conditions of access to these forms of content and contact, the implications for regulation may be judged differently, in terms of balancing the responsibility across the industry, regulators, parents and children for controlling access and exposure
- For some putative harms, the evidence is generally lacking. For example, despite widespread public concern over the exposure of children to adult or pornographic images, there remains little evidence that such exposure has harmful effects, with the notable exception of material that combines sexual and violent content. This lack of evidence partly reflects the methodological limitations of the evidence (one cannot ethically expose children to certain images, there is no agreed definition of pornography, it is difficult to measure long-term psychological disturbance, etc.). But it may also suggest that, at least in our present largely regulated content environment, the images available to children are not harmful, though they may be offensive or even briefly disturbing. If less regulated contents become more accessible to children (e.g. through the Internet), researchers will need to find a way to overcome these methodological difficulties, particularly given the apparent growth in material that does combine sexual and violent content
- For other putative harms, the cultural context is crucial. Researchers have long pointed to the media's role in relation to reality-defining effects, arguing that the media provide frameworks

or expectations with which the public understands the world around them. This has been, in various ways, considered harmful – potentially reinforcing stereotypes of marginalised groups, providing a biased account of current affairs, exacerbating a fear of crime, promoting a commercialised culture of childhood, encouraging the early sexualisation of girls, and so forth. However, the evidence is patchy and, by and large, neither recent nor UK-based. The difficulty here is that, as noted above, any effect of the media operates only in combination with many other social influences, and the effect is to be measured not in terms of an immediate impact on an individual but rather in terms of gradual shifts in social norms over years or decades. While few would suggest that the media play no role in socialisation or cultural influence, it remains difficult to obtain convincing evidence that the media play a primary causal role.

(5) Looking ahead

In the body of our review, we have noted research on the potential role of the media in contributing to a range of social problems. In each case, the evidence has been evaluated and conclusions drawn where possible. But it is important to note that we have avoided over-arching conclusions to be applied across all media and all segments of the public, for the evidence does not warrant such grand conclusions.

- To those who fear, then, that the media are responsible for a growing range of social problems, we would urge that the evidence base is carefully and critically scrutinised, for such findings as exist generally point to more modest, qualified and context-depending conclusions
- To those who hope, however, that the media play little or no role in today’s social problems, we would point to the complex and diverse ways in which different media are variably but crucially embedded in most or all aspects of our everyday lives, suggesting that it seems implausible to argue that they have no influence, whether positive or negative.

We therefore urge our readers to ask specific questions of the evidence base, as follows:

- What specific social, cultural or psychological problem is at issue?
- Which media contents are hypothesised to play a role?
- Which segments of the public give rise to concern?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the research methods used to generate the relevant evidence?
- Under what conditions are these media contents being accessed in everyday life?
- What kinds of risk, and what scale of risk, does the evidence point to, if at all, and for whom?
- Given a public consensus in favour of proportionality in regulation, what kinds of intervention, and by whom, are most likely to be effective in reducing the risk, and what advantages and costs might be associated with this?

Last, in a context of converging technologies and media content, we are particularly concerned at the lack of evidence providing a secure basis for making comparisons across media platforms. An audit of the media used by different segments of the population (to be published by Ofcom, early 2006) will provide more cross-media information regarding both use and attitudes/skills for a range of platforms than is currently available. However, as we have noted, comparisons across different media regarding the nature or size of effects are difficult in methodological terms, though such research could and should be attempted.

Nonetheless, research on the conditions under which people access and use media in their daily lives makes it clear that many contextual variables are important in framing the ways in which people approach the media, this in turn impacting on the kinds of effects these media may have. This points to difficulties with the premise of regulation that is technology-neutral, since research shows that the public does not treat technology as equivalent and that the domestic and technological conditions of access vary; these and other factors differentially affect, at least at present, how people approach and respond to different media. Regulation, as currently implemented, draws on and is in many ways justified by reference to a complex base of media- and audience-specific research evidence. The balance to be struck between individuals (often, parents) and institutions (industry, regulators) in managing conditions of access should, we have suggested, vary for more established and newer media.

Last, as homes become more complex, multi-media environments, and as media technologies converge, it must be a priority to develop and extend the available evidence base so that we sustain our understanding of the differences across, and relations among, the changing array of media and communication technologies. The challenge is to seek ways of minimising risks, while also enabling the many benefits afforded by these technologies for our society and for the socialisation of our children.

NOTES

1. Where appropriate, ages of research subjects have been given. However it should be assumed that the term 'children' generally refers to primary school-age children and 'young people' to secondary school age children, though the latter sometimes includes young adults (i.e. students).
2. McQuail (1987) defines these as the systematic tendencies of the media, through the repetition of many similar messages, to affirm and reinforce the particular cognitions that fit one version of social reality (e.g. stereotyping or exclusion of certain groups or experiences).

CONCLUSIONS

This literature review was designed to examine the evidence that exists for the risk of harm and offence caused by media-delivered content. It was not designed to examine the evidence for the benefits or positive effects of the media, and it is important to bear this in mind when reading this review.

The review has been primarily organised by medium, and secondarily by types of material and/or grouping of audiences/users. It is designed to address some key questions currently facing regulators, industry, researchers and the public. Uniquely, the review brings together findings across a range of different media, and findings in relation to both harm and offence, looking across a range of audience and user groups.

In organising what follows, we have slightly rephrased our original questions in order to summarise the main findings of the review. However, as discussed at the start, we must first note that the body of research on media harm especially, less so for offence, has long been subject to considerable contestation on theoretical, political and, particularly, methodological grounds. There will be, therefore, no uncontentious summary of research findings, nor will there be any simple answer to the question of media harm or any definitive empirical demonstration or 'proof'.

Further, the review has not sought to examine other forms of potential media-related harm such as consumer detriment or physical health risks, nor does it look at the changes in media use environments except as they may impact on issues of content-related harm and offence.

Consequently, our strategy in this review has been to incorporate, and balance against each other, the different kinds of findings, based on different methods (from experiments, surveys and qualitative social research) and different perspectives on the debate over media harm and offence, while accepting the different cultural and regulatory perspectives from which they derive. Further, though we do consider that more evidence is needed, especially for new media and for vulnerable groups, we note that the precautionary principle suggests that judgements may be reached assuming probable influence rather than postponing regulatory decisions to await the outcome of further research.

DISTINGUISHING HARM AND OFFENCE

In policy discussions, ‘harm and offence’ is often used as a single phrase. It is not clear, however, just what the difference between the terms is taken to be, nor how they differently relate to legal or regulatory frameworks. Similarly, harm and offence are often not clearly distinguished in terms of research evidence. Indeed, other than in relation to legal or philosophical discussions of the terms as used in regulation, we have not found the terms used very much at all in the academic literature.

While there is a large literature on harm (usually labelled ‘effects’), we have found little academic research on offence. Our assumption is that this is because, on the one hand, experimental researchers are unimpressed by the self-report methods used, necessarily, to assess offence (i.e. they would identify problems of reliability in relation to offence), while on the other hand, cultural researchers fear that research on offence opens the door to a culture of censorship. Nor have we found any theory relating to ‘offence’ (though there are many for media influence), this also helping to explain the lack of research on offence.

From a regulatory or industry point of view, however, ‘offence’ provides a route to acknowledging and responding to audiences’ or users’ concerns about media content without necessarily framing this as ‘harm’. These bodies have, therefore, conducted a fair amount of research, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, charting the extent and focus of ‘offence’ among the public, including some longitudinal tracking studies.

It follows that the distinction between harm and offence (or its relation to taste and decency) is not always clear. However:

- We suggest that harm is widely (though not necessarily) conceived in objective terms; harm, it seems, is taken to be observable by others (irrespective of whether harm is acknowledged by the individual concerned), and hence as measurable in a reliable fashion
- By contrast, offence is widely (though not necessarily) conceived in subjective terms; offence, it seems, is taken to be that experienced by and reported on by the individual, and hence is difficult to measure reliably (and, equally, difficult to deny in the face of claimed offence).¹

The terms vary in other ways:

- It may be argued that media harm can affect both the media user themselves and others around them. Harm may last for a short time or longer (though the evidence is largely lacking for the long-term effects frequently hypothesised by media effects theories). The risk of harm may apply at the level of the individual, group or society. Offence, by contrast, may be thought to affect only the media user themselves (or, perhaps, group of individuals), and it is assumed to apply only in the moment (i.e. offence is not taken to last a long time, though it may be remembered)
- One implication is that it is potentially easier to demonstrate offence than harm, harm setting a high threshold in terms of evidence. Another is that the risk of harm merits greater attempts at prevention than does offence. A third is that the market may be assumed to address offence

(since it damages the brand) while public intervention may be required additionally to prevent harm.

Each of these implications and assumptions can, of course, be contested: our point here is that the terms ‘harm’ and ‘offence’, although widely used, have attracted surprisingly little discussion or clarification.

Interestingly, harm and offence are generally discussed differently in relation to children and adults:

- Harm is assumed to vary by vulnerability, being greater for children and for vulnerable adults. Considerable research attention has, therefore, gone into identifying the risk factors for harm, and most research is concentrated on the at-risk groups (typically, children)
- By contrast, offence is not seen as related to vulnerability. Older people and women are generally found to find more media content offensive; yet this is not apparently related to vulnerability except insofar as differential levels of media literacy may make it harder for these groups to control their exposure to certain contents
- Notably, there is little research on whether the media offend (rather than harm) children, and only recently is there some research on the response of marginal or low-status groups (adults and children) to the sometimes negative representations of them in the media (and whether this concerns harm or offence is unclear). This results in some inconsistencies when relating research findings to regulation: for example, if a child is upset by viewing violence, this is taken as evidence of harm; if an adult is upset by the same image, this is likely to be seen as offence.

LIMITATIONS OF THE EVIDENCE BASE

This review has noted a range of theoretical, methodological and political difficulties in researching the possible harm and offence in relation to media content. In many respects, the evidence base is patchy and inconsistent. Many questions remain difficult to research. Particularly, research can only offer evidence towards a judgement based on the balance of probabilities rather than on irrefutable proof.

Persistent questions remain regarding:

- How far the largely American findings in the published academic literature may be applicable to the UK situation, given differences in culture, in regulatory context, in the media content available (and researched)
- How far the largely experimental research findings may be applicable to ordinary contexts of media use, given the often unnatural circumstances in which experiments expose people to media content and the ways in which they tend to measure the effects of such exposure; similarly, questions remain as to how correlational evidence (from surveys) relates to causal claims regarding media effects, for few studies eliminate the possibility of alternative explanations

- How far the largely television-based research may be applicable to other, especially newer media, given the likelihood that different expectations, knowledge and concerns attach to different kinds of media and communication technology.

Other problems also exist. For example, in certain domains (e.g. rap music lyrics or gender stereotyping in advertising), the main body of evidence is based on content analyses; yet qualitative social research consistently shows that different people (e.g. children vs. adults, fans of a genre vs. those who only occasionally view) do not interpret content in the same way, making it risky to draw conclusions about effects from content analysis.

We have noted other problems – theoretical, methodological, ethical, practical, financial and political, as these have arisen in the preceding chapters.

DEFINITIONS OF MEDIA-RELATED HARM

A wide range of definitions of harm are suggested in the research literature (McQuail & Windahl, 1993), including:

- Changed attitudes or beliefs affecting the individual (e.g. fear of crime) or society (e.g. stereotypes of the elderly)
- Changed behaviours, particularly the increased propensity to harm others (e.g. aggressive behaviour, this damaging both the perpetrator and his/her possible victims) or for self-harm (e.g. anorexia, obesity, suicide)
- Emotional responses, affecting both self and others, including fear, upset and hate, which may lead to harm if they are long-term in effect. Such responses may, arguably, be more appropriately regarded instead as ‘offence’.

Of these, we suggest that more attention is often paid to the first two than to the third, yet there are, perhaps unexpectedly, many studies showing that the media can have negative emotional consequences, often but not only in the short-term. It is clear that this is recognised in many policy-related decisions and we recommend that consideration is given to emotional responses in future research and policy regarding harm and offence.

Much of the debate about media harms starts from the argument that the negative influence on an individual will, in turn, create harm to society. This view of an inter-relationship between influences and effects has been taken up by the popular media – in reporting crimes, for example, which are linked to supposed (though not always established) media exposure. Those harms that are caused to the individual through the perpetuation of unfair or stereotypical depictions are not much discussed, except in the literature and within Codes of Practice. We suggest it would be valuable to distinguish:

- Risk of harm to the individual exposed to media content
- Risk of harm to other people
- Risk of harm to society in general.

Nevertheless it should be accepted that there may be inter-relationships between these possible harms. For example, to the extent that watching television violence encourages aggressive behaviour among boys, this risks, first, harm to those particular boys, second, harm to those against whom they might be aggressive (e.g. peers in the playground) and, third, harm to society (as aggression and fear of aggression become more widespread). However, the processes involved, the consequences, and the potential for intervention, differ for each kind of harm.

We also note:

- Among regulators and interest groups there is a call for care in the portrayal of violence or sex, especially to young people (as in the debate over in/appropriate role models for example)
- A children's rights perspective is beginning to be asserted, to complement or counter the view of children as potential aggressors in society; this perspective has become particularly salient in relation to online and mobile media, including the new problem of varieties of user-generated or peer-to-peer harms:

‘It is ironic that until recently the problem of children as aggressors has had more attention in social science than children as victims, reflecting perhaps the priorities of the adult world. It is encouraging that as the needs of children are more fully recognised, this balance is finally changing’ (Finkelhor & Hashima, 2001).

- There are other media-related social harms that are recognised through the regulatory process. For example, the regulation requiring the principal broadcasters in the UK to present balanced and impartial news programming is based on a notion that the audience must be fairly informed so as to make their own judgements. There is evidence, however, particularly from the US, that the news media negatively affect public opinion (e.g. encouraging a fear of crime by over-representing violent crime), and little is known yet of the potential effects of online or alternative sources of news (e.g. research is needed into the effects of misleading or unreliable health care information).

A RISK-BASED APPROACH

When television first arrived in American homes, the founding father of media effects research declared:

‘... for some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For some children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children, under most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial’ (Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961, p.11).

We suggest that, after a vast amount of further research findings, on the basis of ‘a balance of probabilities’, this remains a fair summary of the evidence, even if much of that evidence has been collected under a differently regulated media environment. Hence, this review has argued that the search for simple and direct causal effects of the media is, for the most part, not appropriate. Rather, this should be replaced by an approach that seeks to identify the range of factors that

directly, and indirectly through interactions with each other, combine to explain particular social phenomena. As research shows, each social problem of concern (e.g. aggression, prejudice, obesity, bullying, etc.) is associated with a distinct and complex array of putative causes.

The task for those concerned with media harm and offence is to identify and contextualise the role of the media within that array. The result will be a more complex explanation of what are, undoubtedly, complex social problems. This should, in turn, permit a balanced judgement of the role played by the media on a case by case basis. In some cases, this may reduce the focus on the media – for example, by bringing into view the many other factors that account for present levels of aggression in society. In other cases, it may increase the focus on the media – for example, in understanding the role played potentially by the Internet in facilitating paedophiles’ access to children.

A risk-based approach seeks to take into account a wide range of relevant factors, as these establish the conditions under which any particular factor (such as media exposure) operates. Many such factors are culturally-specific, including national traditions of content regulation, approaches to parenting, and moral frames for judging content or determining offence. In addition to such factors, and to the important differences across the media and hence across media access conditions, we have also sought to stress that content does not affect all audiences equally. Research suggests that there can be greater negative influences on those who are ‘vulnerable’. No standard academic definition of ‘vulnerability’ exists, but research findings do suggest that vulnerable audiences/users may include children and young people, especially boys, together with a range of other groups among the adult population (including psychologically disturbed individuals, people who are depressed, sexual offenders, young offenders, etc.).

FINDINGS REVIEWED ON A CASE-BY-CASE BASIS

As indicated in the medium-by-medium review undertaken in each chapter, the evidence points to a range of conclusions depending on the social problem at stake.

For example, there is a sizeable body of evidence that suggests that televised portrayals of aggression can, under certain circumstances, negatively influence the attitudes and behaviours of children, especially boys. Similar findings exist as regards aggressive content in film, video/DVD and electronic games, though the body of research evidence is somewhat smaller. These media are, at present, all highly regulated in the UK through labelling and age-restrictions (or scheduling restrictions in the case of television). It seems likely that the risk of harm will be greater when children view content inappropriate for their age (i.e. intended for those older than them), though research does not always adequately link the effects of exposure to the specific nature or age-appropriateness of the content. However, we suggest that viewing is not always to age-appropriate material and that this should be taken into account when ‘reading’ the research.

At stake is the likelihood of risk rather than of inevitable harm, for, as the research also shows, not all in the audience are affected equally and many, it appears, are not affected at all. Broadcasters, regulators and parents must continue to make balanced judgements of the likely risk to some children, bearing in mind the conditions of access (e.g. scheduling, intended audience, narrative

context) and conditions of mediation (e.g. role of parental discussion of content or restrictions on access).

Taking a different case, we note that although there is mounting evidence that Internet-based and mobile communication technologies are being incorporated into practices of bullying, harassment and other forms of malicious peer-to-peer communication, it is not yet clear that these technologies are responsible for an increase in the incidence of such practices. This is partly because of a lack of sound data from, say, 10 years ago, against which to compare present findings. However, research on the conditions of access points to a relative convenience and ease of use which, combined with highly personalised, private and often anonymous conditions under which these technologies are used, suggests that cyber-bullying, cyber-harassment, etc. may introduce new kinds of problems for users, as well as exacerbating old ones. In some ways, it seems, online and offline communication work differently; but in key ways also, they work together, with, for example, online bullying or harassment continuing or extending offline, rather than remaining entirely distinct. Given the difficulties faced by parents in understanding how to manage the conditions of access to these forms of content and contact, the implications for regulation may be judged differently, in terms of balancing the responsibility across the industry, regulators, parents and children for controlling access and exposure.

For some putative harms, the evidence is generally lacking. For example, despite widespread public concern over the exposure of children to adult or pornographic images, there remains little evidence that such exposure has harmful effects, with the notable exception of material that combines sexual and violent content. This lack of evidence partly reflects the methodological limitations of the evidence (one cannot ethically expose children to certain images, there is no agreed definition of pornography, it is difficult to measure long-term psychological disturbance, etc.). But it may also suggest that, at least in our present largely regulated content environment, the images available to children are not harmful, though they may be offensive or even briefly disturbing. If less regulated contents become more accessible to children (e.g. through the Internet), researchers will need to find a way to overcome these methodological difficulties, particularly given the apparent growth in material that does combine sexual and violent content.

For yet other putative harms, the cultural context is crucial. Researchers have long pointed to the media's role in relation to reality-defining effects, arguing that the media provide the frameworks or expectations with which the public understands the world around them. This has been, in various ways, considered harmful – potentially reinforcing stereotypes of marginalised groups, providing a biased account of current affairs, exacerbating a fear of crime, promoting a commercialised culture of childhood, encouraging the early sexualisation of girls, and so forth. In general, the evidence for reality-defining effects shows modest effects on social attitudes or beliefs across the population. In other words, the findings show that media exposure explains a small proportion of the variation in attitudes or beliefs. By implication, other factors also play a role, though these are not always well-researched. Reality-defining effects are theorised in terms of cultivation effects (the 'drip-drip' effect of repeated messages), agenda setting (defining what people should think about) and mainstreaming (making certain views 'normal' or standard, while marginalising other views). However, here too, the evidence is patchy and, by and large, neither recent nor UK-based. The difficulty is that, as noted above, any effect of the media operates in

combination with many other social influences, and the effect is to be measured not in terms of an immediate impact on an individual but rather in terms of gradual shifts in social norms over years or decades. While few would suggest that the media play no role in socialisation or cultural influence, it remains difficult to obtain convincing evidence that the media play a primary causal role.

PUTTING MEDIA EFFECTS IN CONTEXT

In the body of our review, we have evaluated the research on the potential role of the media in contributing to a range of social problems and drawn conclusions where possible. But it is important to note that we have avoided over-arching conclusions to be applied across all media and all segments of the public, for the evidence does not warrant such conclusions. To those who fear, then, that the media are responsible for a growing range of social problems, we would urge that the evidence base is carefully and critically scrutinised, for such findings as exist generally point to more modest, qualified and context-dependent conclusions. To those who hope, however, that the media play little or no role in today's social problems, we would point to the complex and diverse ways in which different media are variably but crucially embedded in most or all aspects of our everyday lives, and that it seems implausible to suggest that they have no influence, whether positive or negative.

Overall, it seems that the research literature points to a range of modest effects, including effects on attitudes and beliefs, effects on emotions, and, more controversially, effects on behaviour (or the predisposition towards certain behaviours). Effects on emotions have, we suggest, received less attention than they should perhaps command, most attention focusing on attitudes and behaviours; yet running through the literature is a series of findings of people being made upset, fearful or anxious by the media.

However, as we have also been at pains to point out, in each of these areas, there are some studies that find no effects, and many published studies have been contested in terms of their methodology and findings. It is particularly difficult to be clear about the scale of these measured media effects since unfortunately these are rarely compared with other putative effects (e.g. of parenting style or social background). Although it is widely argued that the effect of the media often depends on other factors also operating in the situation, the evidence here is generally weaker partly because there is no single theory of how indirect effects occur, partly because indirect effects are difficult to measure, and partly because indirect effects are often held to occur at the level of the culture not the individual (e.g. advertising → peer pressure → consumerism in society). Nonetheless, media effects appear to be one among many factors that account for the various ills in society (e.g. poverty, violence, fear of crime, stereotyping, etc.). Since unfortunately it is rare for research to identify or encompass these other factors within the same study, we cannot draw clear conclusions about which of these factors are more or less important.

Although effects are generally treated as direct (exposure to content → effect), increasingly researchers seek to identify mediating factors (exposure → mediating factor → increased or decreased likelihood of effect); such mediating factors include personality², age³, gender⁴, ethnicity⁵, parental influence, stage of cognitive development, viewing conditions, etc. This process of mediation renders the measured relation between exposure and effect to be indirect

but no less significant. For example, Browne & Pennell (1999, 2000) report that while the evidence suggests that violent media → aggression, it fits a more complex story better. This states that poor background → choice of viewing violent media → distorted cognitions → aggressive behaviour. Note that this explanation is also more accurate than the simple claim that poor background → aggressive behaviour. In other words, each intervening step, showing indirect as well as direct effects of the media and other factors, is important.

Consequently, we have recommended turning around the central question in this field and asking not, do the media have harmful effects, but rather, do the media contribute as one among several factors to the explanation of a social phenomenon (violence, racism, etc.). On a balance of probabilities, it seems less contentious to say ‘yes’ to the second question than to the first. But this also requires that any claims for media harms are contextualised in relation to the other factors contributing to the explanation. For example, to understand the role that television food advertising may play in children’s diet, one must also examine the role of parental diet, school dinners, peer pressure, and so forth. To understand the role that television violence may play in levels of aggressive play among, say, primary school boys, one must also examine parental treatment of aggressive behaviour, the rewards and punishments operating in the playground situation, gender norms in the peer group, the difficulties experienced by some children at home, etc.

WHICH GROUPS MAY BE MORE VULNERABLE?

Many research studies suggest that content does not affect all audiences equally, there being more negative influences on those who are ‘vulnerable’. In most cases, this concept of vulnerability is applied to children and young people who are in the process of forming attitudes and behaviours for later life. But it is also applied to other groups of people who may be vulnerable, for example, because of specific personality traits or disorders (this includes research on psychologically disturbed individuals, people who are depressed, sexual offenders, young offenders, etc.).

Findings on specific vulnerable groups may be summarised as follows:

- There does seem to be evidence that young males may be more consistently affected by media content, and so they can be considered among the more vulnerable of the groups. They seem more likely to respond to violent media content with aggressive behaviour than girls, for example, and the data suggest they evince greater changes in attitude when presented with various potentially harmful contents (violence, stereotyping, pornography, etc.), though there are a fair number of studies where girls also seem to be influenced negatively
- More attention has been paid to the reality-defining effects on girls of stereotyped or sexualised portrayals of gender; to the extent that these studies do show negative effects, however, they seem to occur for both genders
- Reality-defining effects are sometimes shown particularly to affect minority or less socially valued groups (women, the elderly, etc.) – harm may thus be understood as encouraging negative attitudes both in the majority (e.g. racist stereotypes) and the affected minority (e.g. low self-esteem)

- Research has examined different hypothesised harms in relation to different age groups. For example, concerns about the harmful effects of advertising tend to be investigated in relation to young children. Similarly, the effects of violent content are examined across the range from young children to young adults, though for specific media, research tends to follow usage patterns (e.g. film and games are researched for teens/young adults, television among younger children). The risks of malicious or harmful peer-to-peer contact online or by mobile have mainly been researched among teens and adults, although attention is turning to younger children
- Since different studies examine different age groups (often spanning very broad age ranges), evidence is sparse regarding developmental trends over the age range, making it difficult to pinpoint particularly vulnerable ages in relation to different media. It should also be noted that, for the most part, since research examines the effects of media on ‘typical users’, little is known about the effects on those who are not part of the typical or intended user group – further, ethical issues often preclude investigating the effects of exposure of younger children to material intended for older age groups.

IS THERE EVIDENCE THAT MEDIA CONTENTS MAY BE OFFENSIVE?

While academic research has focused on harms and the effects of the media, research into areas of offence has been conducted mainly by regulators and lobby or advocacy groups. Looking across all media, the research evidence suggests variable levels of offence. For example, in relation to television, around 1 in 3 have found something on television offensive, this more often being – as for most findings on offence – women and older people. This overlaps to some degree with our discussion of the risk of emotional effects or harms: recent research on self-reported emotional effects on being portrayed negatively as a marginalised groups (women, the poor, gay and lesbian people, ethnic minorities, the elderly and children) suggests that these groups are often angry and upset at being so portrayed in the media. Further research is needed to track the concerns of marginalised and minority groups.

Intriguingly, little research has been conducted into the offence that might be caused to children, although in the UK there have been significant projects which have spoken to children about their attitudes to material. Most of the work on offence is focused on adults. While there may be ethical reasons for this disparity, the research evidence does show that children may be offended by certain depictions, in particular but not exclusively, of sexual activity.

Most research shows that, despite a substantial minority being offended, most people are tolerant of others’ rights to view such material. The exception to this tends to be the combination of sex plus violence (as in violent pornographic material), though even for such content, audiences seem to prefer to judge offence (and any regulatory responses that might follow) in relation to the narrative and aesthetic context of the portrayal. Generally, rather than calling for more restrictions on media content, the public is more inclined to call for better and more user-friendly access controls so that they can control what they see. Public support for content restrictions is highest in relation to the protection of children.

New forms of media are discussed more widely currently in relation to regulation than are the more established media for which, in many respects, the public is broadly supportive of the current regulatory framework. However, the findings are mixed on whether people are satisfied with (or even aware of) the available processes for making a complaint about media content.

COMPARING EVIDENCE ACROSS DIFFERENT MEDIA

This review has shown that much of the research undertaken has been technology-specific, i.e. applied to particular media. There is relatively little work that has looked at the overall consumption of a particular type of content across the media although some studies have sought to do that, particularly in areas such as sexual depictions and violence.

In recognition of this, many of the regulatory structures are set up with particular technologies in mind. Studies show that consumers of different media forms often approach the content on one platform differently from the way in which they approach similar content on another platform. Nonetheless, there is an avowed determination, in Europe certainly, to move towards technologically-neutral regulation. One of the principles behind this argues that the platform will become irrelevant to the consumer as the same or similar content is delivered across different platforms.

However, in a context of converging technologies and media content, we are particularly concerned at the lack of evidence providing a secure basis for making comparisons across media platforms. An audit of the media used by different segments of the population (to be published by Ofcom, early 2006) will provide more cross-media information regarding both use and attitudes/skills for a range of platforms than is currently available. As we have noted, comparisons across different media regarding the nature or size of effects are difficult in methodological terms, though such research could and should be attempted.

For the most part, then, in seeking evidence for harm and offence across media, we can only compare findings conducted for different media in different studies – this being the main purpose of the present review. Research has tended to extend the approach developed for television to video, games, Internet etc. – asking similar questions, and using similar methods, in relation to such potential harms as violence, sex, stereotyping, etc. Where a research study has encompassed or compared across several media, the findings for effects tend to be inconsistent – some research finds the effects of television to be greater than for games; in other studies, the reverse is found.

Therefore, we would question the argument that people respond to content irrespective of platform. Rather, the evidence suggests that people's response to media content is strongly shaped by the particularities of each medium, making it difficult to generalise across platforms, because:

- Different access conditions and different public expectations (linear/nonlinear, push/pull, chosen on purpose or accidentally, culturally familiar or novel) mean that audiences anticipate and self-regulate their media exposure in different ways
- Differently regulated content makes it particularly difficult to generalise from research on highly regulated content to content where there is no regulation (e.g. do the levels of violence

on regulated, terrestrial television affect audiences in the same way, and to the same degree, as the levels of violence accessible through non-regulated media such as the Internet?)

- Broadcast (linear) media can be regulated in relation to the programming/scheduling context of particular portrayals (e.g. violence): this is important, since the context in which potentially harmful or offensive content is portrayed has often been shown to make a difference to media effects.⁶ Yet both narrative/programming contexts and temporal/scheduling contexts are difficult to regulate for new (non-linear) media, especially where short extracts are likely to be viewed (e.g. Internet, mobile telephony): the consequence is a greater unpredictability of audience response
- Older media, in the main, comprise professionally produced, mass market content, and this too is different for new media, where a growing proportion of content is user-generated (peer-to-peer, spam, blogging, forms of self-representation), unregulated, niche-content that may be amateur in production and potentially extreme.

In short, there are many difficulties with the premise of regulation that is technology-neutral, because the public does not treat different technologies as equivalent, and because the social and cognitive conditions of access also vary.

Indeed, research on the conditions under which people access and use media in their daily lives in the UK makes it clear that many contextual variables are important in framing the ways in which people approach the media – prior familiarity and cultural expectations about a medium, the degree of choice or selection involved, the domestic and technological conditions of access, including media literacy (or technological competence and critical awareness), and the presence or absence of an interpretative context or frame (within the text) – all affect how people approach and respond to different media.

If the mythic hypodermic needle had been accurate (i.e. if content was simply ‘injected’ into people), then perhaps we would have concluded that violence is always violence, or advertising is always persuasive, whatever the platform. But, since research persistently shows that many factors mediate between the media and the public, increasing or decreasing the possibility of media influence, for better or for worse, we must conclude that different kinds of harm and offence may result from different kinds of media contents and use.

This is evidently the case even for older media – the findings for television, for example, differ from those for print. One might point to the power of the image, compared with the printed word. Others have argued that film is more potent than television, partly because of the conditions of viewing in the cinema, partly because of the power of a lengthy narrative. Others argue that the daily repetition of short messages on television or in computer games is more influential, or that the interactivity in computer gaming may make effects stronger. These arguments remain unresolved, and few research studies have directly compared the influence of (harmful or prosocial) messages across different media. For new forms of media, the differences are also considerable, and even less is known about them at present.

Regulation in the UK as currently implemented, draws on and is in many ways justified by reference to a complex base of media- and audience- specific research evidence. The balance to be struck between individuals (often, parents) and institutions (industry, regulators) in managing conditions of access should, we have suggested, vary for established and newer media. Clearly, as homes become more complex, multi-media environments, and as media technologies converge, it must be a priority to develop and extend the available evidence base, so that we sustain our understanding of the differences across, and relations among, the changing array of media and communication technologies. The challenge is to seek ways of minimising risks, while also enabling the many benefits afforded by these technologies for our society and for the socialisation of our children.

NEW MEDIA, NEW CHALLENGES

One purpose of the present review was to determine what lessons could be learned from research on older media to apply to new media, especially since there is very little research on new media as yet, by comparison especially with research on television. However, such evidence as has been produced suggests that new media may pose some new challenges. In consequence, empirical research on new media is now specifically required.

- One of the main differences between many of the established media (television, radio, film, press and even advertising) is that of context (i.e., the framing of a portrayal within the text); when content is delivered in a linear way, it comes with a context that tells a story or establishes a framework of expectations that is recognised by and makes sense to the consumer. The research evidence suggests that this contextual setting affects how the content is received – and accepted – by the viewer. For example, the moral framework of a setting which contains violence will affect how ‘justified’ the violence is considered to be and, consequently, how it is received
- The newer technologies (including video but also the Internet and mobile communications) allow content to be seen out of context. One may see sets of trailers rather than the storyline in which to put the content. There is no research evidence to show how those trailers may be received, although some work on video has shown that certain groups (in this case violent offenders) choose to watch violent scenes repeatedly. Editorial context has always been important in content regulation guidelines (e.g. BBFC, Ofcom), but it may prove difficult to build into parallel guidelines for new media. However, it is clear from research on children’s accidental exposure to pornography on the Internet, that unexpected and decontextualised content can be particularly upsetting. This poses a challenge for regulators
- It is difficult therefore to project forward the research evidence from one medium into another. There has been little research undertaken on specific areas within Internet use, especially areas thought to be harmful to the young such as pornography, anorexia sites or suicide sites. Many of the concerns raised by these studies (and popular discourse) are being applied to the mobile telephone. The evidence is not available to support this view, and it may be argued that the mobile telephone is a different technology, with particular characteristics. The chief of these is the personal and private nature of the mobile handset, quite different from a computer that may be shared or accessed by a number of people, or a fixed line telephone

- While the content issues often remain the same (e.g. violence, pornography, stereotyping), the new media allow faster and more convenient access to these contents. They also allow access to more extreme content that would previously have been difficult to access; there are few effective controls available or in use to prevent such access, including by children
- The newer media offer greater opportunity to self-select. In terms of the way in which offence is caused there is some research evidence to show that self-selection makes a difference to the way in which content is perceived – people are far more likely to be offended by content on free-to-air channels than they are to content available on a niche channel that they themselves have selected, that is clearly signposted and that they are paying a subscription for. Similarly some of the research into video games suggests that the self-selecting and active nature of playing may act as a distancing mechanism from the content in a way that passive viewing of television does not
- Another key difference that the newer media bring is the ability to produce and widely disseminate user-generated content which has little or no regulation applied to it. The flexibility offered by camera telephones, with both production and diffusion capability, is quite different from hand held video cameras. Similarly, the technologies can be linked so that images from mobile cameras can be downloaded on to the Internet and disseminated well beyond one's address book. However, there is little research into these areas as yet.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONDITIONS OF ACCESS

- Conditions of access strongly influence the research agenda. Television, generally the free to air services, is the most researched medium and has received such attention because of its ubiquity and accessibility, because it is a linear (i.e. push) medium, and because of its positive public potential (i.e. there is no real option for audiences to switch it off without missing out)
- The Internet, the newest focus for research, partly merits research attention because of the ambition of ubiquity and public value – again, in an information society, it is increasingly not an option for people not to use it. As a largely unregulated medium, the Internet could provide access to a much greater range of potentially harmful and offensive content. This limits the applicability of findings from research on highly regulated media (such as television) to the Internet. However, the strictures of research ethics limit the potential to conduct research on this new medium
- Research on the Internet, unlike that for television, makes a fundamental distinction between potentially harmful material accessed accidentally and that which is sought deliberately. However, it is not clear whether this makes a difference to the degree of harm caused, though it does suggest different types of user or motivations for use (e.g. the child who seeks out pornography online may differ from the child who is upset because they found it accidentally: however, too little is known about user motivations or the consequences of different kinds of exposure)
- For material accessed deliberately, attention has instead centred on the user's motivations, with evidence suggesting that the search for violent or pornographic contents may contribute to

psychological disturbance for certain individuals. However, for both adults and children, some research suggests that, irrespective of whether content is found accidentally or deliberately, harm may still result (especially from violent pornography)

- Similarly the paucity of research for mobile telephony rests in part on the relative novelty of the technology. This means that research from the Internet is being used to make assumptions about the possibility of harm and offence in this area; whether or not this is valid remains to be seen
- At present, research finds that filters and other (physical) access control mechanisms are under-used by users or, in the case of children, children's guardians. This seems not to be because people are not concerned – it is evident that the Internet especially occasions the greatest concern of all media among the public. Rather, it is because people lack the knowledge and awareness of how to choose, install and use access controls or they feel such mechanisms are not necessary within their own families. This is not true of all new media however, and within the on-demand services, for example, the use of PIN codes and other access management systems are repeatedly advertised and marketed to the user
- The evidence suggests that the children's responses to certain media contents can be lessened or heightened by the ways in which families interact and discuss what is seen. Evidence is lacking, however, for the claim that an increase in media literacy will reduce the potential for harm, although this is widely believed (and so should be the subject of future research)
- We have noted that the evidence for possible harm from violent content is stronger than that for sexual content (with the exception of violent pornography). This might explain why in response to portrayed violence, the public is more likely to call for content regulation, while for portrayed sex, people may or may not object personally but they tend to call for tolerance (respecting the rights of others to view diverse or niche content); the right to view violence appears more difficult to defend, it seems, than the right to view pornography. Given this, it is curious that most research on new media contents has addressed sexual content (especially pornography) rather than violence, there being particularly little on the potentially harmful effects of exposure to non-sexualised violence (this may reflect the ways in which public concern, rather than theory, sets the research agenda).

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The issue of common definitions remains:

- The concept of 'harm' is implicitly understood but rarely formally defined. Hence, it is not possible to provide clear advice or a check list to regulators or content providers about specific harms. However, the concept remains a valid one; it has a legal foundation and attempts should continue to be made to define and identify it
- The concept of offence is more clearly understood. While there is little academic research into this area, there is a substantial body of work related to offence, reported on here, together with circumstantial evidence in the form of complaints and other participatory expressions.

The research evidence also suggests some links between offence and harm:

- In reality-defining effects, for example, on the one hand, opinion research (on offence) shows that certain groups resent their representation in the media; on the other hand, experimental and survey research (on harm) suggests that media representations perpetuate such stereotypes among the general population
- Another borderline area between offence and harm concerns user-generated content – racist or sexist messages are offensive to some and harmful to others in ways not yet well understood; nor is it yet understood how processes of offence and harm differ when the message source is a peer rather than, for example, a powerful broadcaster
- Some of the research also pointed to the crucial role of the media in creating an informed civil society and suggested that this role will need to be monitored, particularly as the information environment expands and innovates faster than the public’s critical literacy (to determine reliability or authenticity of information) can keep up.

In general, this literature review has shown that the evidence for harm and offence caused is constantly qualified. Such contingent answers do not make life easy for regulators, policy-makers or the industry. Nonetheless, when dealing with complex social phenomena (violence, aggression, sexuality, prejudice, etc.), many factors – including but not solely the media – must be expected to play a role. Given the complexity of this field of research, we would urge our readers to ask specific questions of the evidence base, as follows:

- What specific social, cultural or psychological problem is at issue?
- Which media contents are hypothesised to play a role?
- Which segments of the public give rise to concern?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the research methods used to generate the relevant evidence?
- Under what conditions are these media contents being accessed in everyday life in the UK?
- What kinds of risk, and what scale of risk, does the evidence point to, if at all, and for whom?
- Given a public consensus in favour of proportionality in regulation, what kinds of intervention, and by whom, are most likely to be effective in reducing the risk, and what advantages and costs might be associated with this?

There is a growing call for arguments that go ‘beyond cause and effect’, as more and more commentators are frustrated by the simplistic polarisation of censorship versus freedom of expression or regulation versus *laissez faire* (depending on one’s position). Boyle (2000) argues, for example, that the pornography debate must be reoriented towards addressing male violence in

society, rather than distracted by arguments over experimental methods. In a similar vein, Adams (2000) draws on philosophical as well as legal arguments to argue that the claim that pornography plays a causal role in rape does not, or should not, ‘let the rapist off the hook’. Rather, multiple causes are at work, as they are in many domains of life, and the assertion that pornography plays a causal role does not in any way assume that pornography is the sole, or main, cause and nor that it works in the same way on all its consumers; consequently, ‘evidence’ for the effects of pornography need not be large or consistent.

Similar arguments have been advanced in other domains. For example, in relation to advertising of foods high in fat, sugar or salt to children, Livingstone (2005) argued that the problem with causal claims is not the question of causality per se but the nature of the question asked (see also Gauntlett, 1998). Instead of asking whether advertising causes children to make unhealthy food choices, the question should be turned around to ask: what are the influences on children’s food choice and what role if any does advertising play in this multifactorial explanation?⁷

As we have seen, Kline (2003b) develops this approach through taking a public health approach: ‘rather than the causal hypothesis, the driving force behind the risk factors approach is the quest to understand what it all depends on’. Research should, therefore, focus more on establishing the range of relevant factors contributing to an outcome, identifying how important each is in explaining that outcome.

So, it is more useful, we have suggested, to turn the question around and ask not whether the media harm children but ask instead, of the many causes of particular social ills, what role do the media play? This more contextualised approach is increasingly adopted by those who are looking at vulnerable groups, in particular, and argues for a more public-health facing approach, which advocates the examination of the media’s role (and the amenability of media exposure to intervention) as part of a more complete picture of influences and effects (see, for example, Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Kline, 2003b; Savage, 2004).

THE FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

A key aim of this review has been to pinpoint gaps in the existing evidence base. As a result, we identify the following priorities for future research:

- Research on the range of marginalised and/or vulnerable groups (including the elderly, gay, ethnic minorities, and those with psychological difficulties). Too often, the population is not adequately segmented. Beyond examining differences by age and gender, research must include ethnicity, sexuality, psychological variables, and so forth when investigating possible harm and offence; even for age, too little is known about the effects of media on different age groups as children develop
- Research on reality-defining/stereotyping effects that relates to recent changes especially in UK-originated media content, as well as imported content

- Longitudinal or long-term panel studies, to follow up the effects of short-term harm, to track changes in levels and kinds of offence, and to identify changing expectations and understandings of media (including the access conditions) among the public. At present, there are no examples of UK-based longitudinal studies of media influence, though there are tracking studies on media access and use. The lack of studies of media influence, incorporating content variables that allow replication over time, makes it difficult to examine in combination the matrix of content viewed (amount and type), media platform, personality traits, life stage and other demographic variables
- In the shorter term, there is strong evidence that triangulated methodologies, bringing together different data collection systems, may work most effectively to give an insight into the way in which the media and users interact, but these too, need to be combined more effectively with other variables, such as those affecting personality. Some methods have been particularly creative – the use of citizens’ juries, for example, or the development of the news editing method – but these tend not to be reused, perhaps because they are more effortful or expensive; nonetheless, they reap dividends in terms of research insights
- Research on the under-researched media, particularly radio and music among the ‘established’ media and the Internet and mobile telephony among the newest delivery systems. For example, music attracts some concern over its lyrics, yet has barely been researched in this regard. As the content available even on familiar and well-researched media changes and diversifies, research must continue to track the possible consequences
- Research on the new issues arising from new media, particularly in relation to user-generated and malicious peer-to-peer content and contact. For example, research is beginning to accumulate on the harm and offence caused particularly by unwanted and unsought exposure to inappropriate material on the Internet: this agenda must now be extended to include mobile and other emerging digital platforms (research from the advertising literature suggests such effects not only occur but may be harder to defend against)
- Similarly, little research has examined the effects of interactivity on the way in which content is chosen and received. Indeed it is not clear as yet that the active selection of content makes a difference to media effects. Further, research is needed on the commercial or promotional aspects of new media technologies (especially Internet, mobile, other new and interactive devices) and new contents (interactive content, new forms of advertising and promotion, niche/extreme content)
- Research that puts media effects in context, seeking to understand how the media play a role in a multi-factor explanation for particular social phenomena (e.g. violence, gender stereotyping, etc.), this to include a comparative account of the relative size of effect for each factor (including the media) in order to enable regulatory decisions based on proportionality
- Research that directly compares the public’s responses to the ‘same’ content when accessed on different media (e.g. violence on television, in film, in computer games, online) so as to understand

whether and how the medium, or the conditions of access to a medium, including the regulatory environment, make a difference. Although it seems clear that the public brings different expectations to different platforms and technologies, as noted earlier, more research is needed on how they respond to the same content when delivered through different media platforms

- Research on the range of factors that potentially mediate (buffer or exacerbate) any effects of media exposure (e.g. level of media literacy, role of parental mediation, difference between accidental and deliberate exposure, etc.). Particularly, to inform the regulatory agenda, research is needed to produce a clearer understanding of how regulation can work with other mitigating or buffering processes (such as family mediation or communications literacy) to reduce any negative impact of inappropriate media content. Research on the range of possible mitigating factors remains patchy, being mainly focused on television, and must be updated as users (especially parents) continue to adjust to the changing media environment
- Similarly, users need to understand how, and when, they can use the self/in-home regulatory tools they are provided with by many of the new delivery systems, such as filters or PIN codes, and more research is needed on whether and when these are effectively used, and why they may not be
- It must be observed that calling for multimethod, long-term, cross-media, culturally-relevant research on a diverse range of audience/user groups is to call for expensive research. Just as regulation increasingly requires a multi-stakeholder approach, it may be that research also requires the cooperation of government, regulator and industry groups, together with the expertise of the academic research community. Finally, we would stress the importance, for evidence-based policy and academic knowledge, of sustaining a body of research that is relevant to the UK, that is up to date, that has undergone peer-review, and that is available in the public domain.

NOTES

1. To call these 'objective' and 'subjective' measures is perhaps too simple, for the judgements of observers are subject to biases (being a form of self report, and influenced most notably by the third-person effect), and the judgements of individuals concerned may be the only available method (how else can fear be assessed?). Of course, there are some studies that rely on self-report for evidence of harm, especially when the harm at issue is emotional, just as there are some studies of offence that rely on more objective measures (e.g. letters of complaint).
2. Several studies show greater media effects for already more aggressive participants. Others have shown greater effects of exposure to media violence among clinical populations (Browne & Pennell, 2000). Findings for offenders are more mixed: see Hagell & Newburn (1994) but also Browne and Pennell (2000) who argue that it is the violent backgrounds of young offenders that creates the vulnerability.
3. Among children and young people, the most studied groups, cognitive and social development accounts for different (and various) findings.
4. In many studies, especially of violence, the effects are found to be less, or even absent, for girls.
5. Many American studies show different (and various) results for participants of different ethnic backgrounds.
6. Perhaps curiously, both psychological and culturally-oriented researchers agree on the importance of textual (or programme) context, arguing that a violent or sexual act must be interpreted in relation to its narrative and genre context and, more importantly, that people indeed do interpret content in context, this affecting how they respond to content and whether it upsets or influences them.
7. For an influential illustration, in the field of children's food choice and obesity, see Story, Neumark-Sztainer and French (2002). In an approach that could be applied also in other domains, they suggest that the factors influencing food choice operate at four distinct levels. (1) Individual – psychosocial, biological and behavioural factors. (2) Interpersonal – family, friends and peer networks. (3) Community – accessibility, school food policy and local facilities. (4) Societal – mass media and advertising, social and cultural norms, production and distribution systems and pricing policies.

In today's media and communications environment, pressing questions arise regarding the media's potential for harm, especially in relation to children. This book offers a unique and comprehensive analysis of the latest research on content-related media harm and offence. For the first time, a balanced, critical account brings together findings on both established and newer, interactive media. Arguing against asking simple questions about media effects, the case is made for contextualising media content and use within a multi-factor, risk-based framework in order to guide future research and policy formation.

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