

Harm and offence in media content. A review of the evidence

Andrea Millwood Hargrave and Sonia Livingstone
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What kind of influence do the media have? What content is considered acceptable according to today's criteria, norms and values? How can a line be drawn between harm and offence? Is the problem one of a certain kind of content? Of certain media? Of certain groups in society? What are the indications of offence for different sectors of the population? What kinds of harm or offence have been studied empirically?

This study, led by British researchers Andrea Millwood and Sonia Livingstone, aims to answer all these questions, carrying out a broad review of the existing media content research in the Anglo Saxon world as from 2000, from television to the mobile phone and including advertising and regulation. The authors have made a selection of the research carried out and focus on empirical evidence rather than descriptive data on the market and media use.

The report is divided into ten sections that can be consulted separately and correspond to different media (television, radio, press, film, video and DVD, video-games, Internet and mobile telephony). There is also a section dedicated to music, as well as two independent sections that deal with advertising and the regulation associated with each medium.

Firstly, the authors highlight the existing debate concerning the terms *harm* and *offence*, often used indistinctly and sometimes without differentiating between them. In the academic research, they are often little discussed or differentiated. *Harm* is conceived in more objective terms, taken as a measure that can be observed by others and therefore as formally appreciable. The term *offence*, however, is generally conceived in subjective terms: it's difficult to measure, as offence is experienced and denounced individually. Reaching conclusions about

offence is comparatively easier than reaching conclusions about *harm*. As these terms displace the terms of *taste* and *decency* in discussions on regulating media content, a degree of consensus becomes necessary in defining *harm* and *offence*.

Television

The omnipresence of television has been sufficiently documented by the authors in the 50 pages that cover this section.

Existing research has focused on:

- How television can influence the audience's attitudes and behaviour
- The effects of violent content on television, especially on children and young people
- The effects of content on the sexuality of young people and other adolescent development processes (such as attitudes towards body image or substance abuse)
- The effects of stereotypes on different audiences
- Offence caused by the use of swear words and offensive language
- How facts and information are presented (especially in the news)

Millwood and Livingstone believe that practically all existing empirical research on harm and offence has been based on content broadcast by the main television channels and that many studies of other media have been based on studies carried out on television. Following this line, the authors have found little academic research on offence caused by exposure to television, given that a large part of the research is focused on harm. Neither have they found much research discussing the effects to which technological changes may lead.

The main subjects of the research are children and teenagers, although it is not ruled out that there might be other vulnerable adult groups that may be negatively affected by certain content (such as people with mental disorders).

Much of the research on the possible negative effects of media content has concentrated on violence and particularly children. Everyone recognises that the media do not operate in a vacuum and that, in general, children are affected. But there are diverging opinions as to what these

effects are, how direct they are and whether there is a causal relationship between watching television and violent behaviour. The authors point out that one of the problems facing researchers when carrying out research is to establish a definition of screen violence (studies by the Gulbenkian Foundation and Morrison in the United Kingdom, Sander in Germany, Wied, Anderson in the United States), of the levels of violence and of the effects of violence on children and young people.

Regarding sexual content, the authors have found a large amount of research that has studied the attitude of adults towards sexual material (Barnett and Thomson), and the attitudes and influence on young people (Buckingham and Bragg, Eyal and Kunkel, Pardun et al., L'Engle). In any case, the authors show that studies on pornography are limited because of ethical restrictions in analysing the attitudes of children and young people towards pornography.

Regarding language, there is a preoccupation about the use of swear words and offensive language (studies by the Australian Broadcasting Authority and Ofcom, fines by the Federal Communications Commission) and although evidence of harm is not clear in the use of swear words and offensive language on television, the authors state that, in the United Kingdom, there is a preoccupation about how considerable offence may be constituted, especially when children might be exposed to this language.

Other issues tackled by existing research are body image, substance abuse, suicide and self-harm, the effects of defining reality, the quality of news on television and informed consent (does everyone understand the potential consequences of the programmes in which they take part?).

Radio

There is very little research on the issues of harm and offence on radio. The existing research is mainly focused on:

- The perception of offensive content on the part of the audience
- Interview or other programmes with audience participation by telephone or where content is generated by users
- Standardisation, the reduction in diversity and absence of minority groups (especially regarding music)

- Words of songs
- Information

The research analysed shows that radio has been offensive, on occasion, for a substantial minority of the audience, particularly regarding how presenters treat callers (importance of the presenter's response) and offensive and racist language (parents' concern for the content their children listen to).

In comparison with television, it's a fact that radio is less regulated and therefore less difficult to control.

Music

Millwood and Livingstone find that there is very little research examining harm and offence related to music. The existing research is more analytical than based on audience reactions (the content of the words of songs is taken and the effects of listening to these words is analysed), and it is mainly focused on the words of commercial music (in the last few years particular attention has been paid to rap music due to its supposedly violent, racist and homophobic words).

The authors highlight the little attention paid to sound, although now there is a growing interest in the visual representation of music videos. They also point out the emergence of literature specialised in examining the cultural value of music (construction of culture and national identity, construction of local culture).

Press

Regarding the press, the authors have found that research focuses on how readers interact with the media, as well as on the importance of the press in forming and framing public discourse on problems important to society, although the potential complicity of the media in terms of misinformation is questioned in many studies.

The authors also point out the acceptance of use of offensive language in the press because it is seen more privately or personally, as well as greater tolerance with magazines, especially those aimed at a specific audience.

The importance of the public or private nature of the press has not been analysed very much but evidence suggests

that how someone is affected by press content is closely related to this distinction.

Also interesting is the increase in new lines of research that study comics and *manga*, although the story is analysed more than their social or cultural role.

Films, video and DVD

Millwood and Livingstone note that research related to cinema has been mainly based on "adult" content: pornography and sexual violence.

There is little research into the effects of stereotypes or how reality is represented. There is research on emotional responses, such as fear, although there are no longitudinal studies.

Pornography has had considerable attention, focusing on harm to those involved in its production, male consumers, children and society (attitudes towards women). The evidence of harm in men on watching non-violent pornography proves to be inconsistent or absent (the report says nothing of women who watch pornography). The evidence of harm in watching pornography with violent content is stronger, resulting in more negative or aggressive attitudes and behaviour towards women, as well as the desire to watch more extreme content. As we have already mentioned, evidence that watching pornography harms children continues to be scarce, given the ethical restrictions of exposing children to certain images. In this respect, if less regulated content became more accessible for children, researchers would need to find a way to overcome these methodological difficulties, due to the apparent growth in material combining sexual and violent content. The authors also point out that conditions for watching a film are changing and that we still do not know much about children's conditions of access to different kinds of harmful content.

Following this perspective, other vulnerable groups have been studied with evidence that the harmful effects of violent content are particularly greater in those who are already aggressive, in children with behavioural disorders, in young delinquents with a history of domestic violence and among sexual delinquents, in the case of pornographic content.

However, the authors state that it is not clear whether the potential victims of the violence or pornography portrayed

are those individuals directly exposed to this content or those around them. Whether children become more aggressive when surrounded by violent media: are they the victims or are those who attack and intimidate them the victims?

It should be noted that, at the same time, the public's attitude to film content is generally more tolerant than for television, although tolerance is lower with regard to the representation of sexual violence.

Video games

Research on video games is relatively new and, in the words of the authors, strongly polarised between the psychological and experimental focus, which argues that electronic games have harmful effects, and a cultural and qualitative focus, which defends that games are only entertainment that is sometimes beneficial.

The authors criticise, on the one hand, that the approaches taken concerning psychological effects reveal weak evidence when examined more thoroughly and, on the other hand, cultural studies implicitly lose ground by assuming certain kinds of effects.

Internet

There is very little empirical research studying the harmful impact of Internet content on the public, in contrast with the considerable volume of research on the harmful effects of more established media.

The authors have found that a lot of attention has been paid to researching the possible harm of pornography and other undesirable content. There is a growing interest in the risks of peer-to-peer, contacts, with paedophiles, cyber harassment and growth in content with racial hatred. Websites have also been studied on suicide, with violent content and those commercially exploiting children, and there are currently lines of research investigating the behaviour of children and adolescents regarding making friends online.

The authors find that, although there is proof that the Internet and mobile communications are involved in the practices of bullying, harassment and other malicious forms of sharing information, it is not clear whether these technologies are responsible for an increase in the incidence of these practices. This might be due to a lack of information

from previous years. But it is true that the conditions of access, privacy and anonymity suggest that cyber bullying, cyber harassment, etc. might introduce new problems for users and exacerbate others that already exist.

On the other hand, people's response to harmful content tends to be more tolerant, with the justification of free speech, although it may be found to be offensive. However, we still know little about how the target groups respond (especially ethnic minorities).

Mobile telephony

With mobile phones becoming a part of everyday social interaction, this is the area that has grown fastest in terms of research.

There is a line of research that relates advertising and offence. This line takes into account the cultural variation within and between cultures in which content is considered offensive, as well as which people consider it to be offensive.

The authors find there is evidence of mobile telephony being able to cause harm by creating fear and humiliation via bullying. They have also found academic research on the potential risk of harm and offence caused by access to content produced professionally for mobiles.

Quite rightly, however, the authors also point out the pro-social effects of mobile telephony: a new form of social interaction, a creative tool, a form of entertainment, providing safety for parents, etc.

And, with a wider perspective, they question whether mobile technology is used in the same way as other media and whether, when carrying out research, it should be considered in the same way as non-mobile technology.

Advertising

There is a moderate amount of research analysing the (modest) effects of intentional and incidental advertising messages, mainly examined with regard to stereotypes and, more recently, with regard to obesity and other products with health-related consequences.

With regard to children, there is evidence of the effect of advertising on children, although this research is sometimes refuted.

There is also extensive research on the development of advertising literacy, although the authors believe that it has not been clearly proven that consumers are less affected by advertising when they are media or advertising literate or that actions designed to increase literacy actually reduce the harm caused by the media.

The authors also point out that little is still known about how audiences (adult and child) recognise advertising, sponsorship, product placement, etc. in the new media.

Regulation

A review of the existing research shows that users generally accept the regulation of content (parents more than other groups) and have particular areas of concern, such as violence in the media, although these are not necessarily translated into complaints or other active protests.

There is growing support for those interested in the importance of media literacy and in systems to label content and information, as well as increased awareness of the difficulty in ensuring this knowledge is distributed fairly among the population.

To end, Millwood and Livingstone point out some priorities for future research work:

- Research into marginalisation and/or vulnerable groups (including the elderly, homosexuals, ethnic minorities or people with mental difficulties).
- Research into new technologies (Internet, mobile and other interactive media) and new content (interactive content, new kinds of advertising and promotion or extreme content).
- Longitudinal or long-term studies on the effects of harm, following changes in the levels and types of offence and identifying changes in expectations and knowledge of the media among the public.
- Research into the definition of reality/stereotypes; research into the new themes presented by the new media, particularly regarding the generation of malicious content to be shared by users.
- Research that contextualises the effects of the media, aiming to understand the role they play in the multifactor explanation of a particular social phenomenon (e.g. violence, gender stereotypes, etc.).

- Research that directly compares the public's responses to the same content when accessed via different media (e.g. violence on television, in films, in computer games, online), and that helps to understand the differences in conditions of access to a medium.
- Research into the factors that potentially obstruct or exacerbate some effects of exposure to the media (e.g. level of media literacy, parents' mediation role, difference between accidental and deliberate exposure, etc.).

Really, this is an exhaustive review of the research carried out in English since 2000 in this academic field. In this book of 256 pages, published by Intellect Books (a publisher dedicated to academic works), we can find an extensive bibliographical repertory of the studies carried out on different media. This report shows the need for more exhaustive research in order to discover what makes some people more vulnerable than others and the long-term consequences of media use, especially in the case of the new media.

Related books

WILSON, C.; GUTIERREZ, F.; CHAO, L. M. *Racism, sexism, and the media: the rise of class communication in multicultural America*. Sage Publications Inc., 2003. (344 pages)

CURRAN, James (ed.). *Mass media and society*. A Hodder Arnold Publication, 2000. (416 pages)

DOWNING, John D.H. *Questioning the media*. Sage Publications Inc., 1995. (544 pages)

BERGER, Arthur. *Media research techniques*. Sage Publications Inc., 1998. (184 pages)

DINES, Gail. *Gender, race and class in media: a text-reader*. Sage Publications Inc., 2002. (792 pages)

CROTEAU, David R. *Media / society: industries, images and audiences*. Pine Forge Press, 2002. (432 pages)