Chapter

14 Theories of Media Processing and Effects

At the turn of the last century (i.e., from the 19th to the 20th), a discussion of communication media would have been a short one indeed. The only media of communication with any widespread use at that time were face-to-face interaction and print sources such as books and newspapers. Since then, however, the number of media types and sources has exploded. In a typical day, you likely access multiple media including newspapers, radio, network and cable or satellite television, the Internet and World Wide Web, telephone (both cellular and landline), electronic mail, video and audiotape, and the list goes on. Oh yes, and we still talk to each other in face-to-face conversations! In short, the volume of communication we are involved in has increased substantially, as has the variety of channels through which we send and receive messages. It is not surprising, then, that social scientists have been extremely interested in how contact with these media affects our beliefs, attitudes, interaction, and other behaviors.

In this chapter, we consider theories that deal primarily with the ways individuals access and process media content and the ways contact with mass media sources influences those individuals. We discuss three major theoretical approaches: social cognitive theory, uses and gratifications theory, and media systems dependency theory. Before we move on to these theoretical frameworks, however, it is important to put them in historical context. Thus, we first take a brief historical trip through the study of media effects, concentrating on some important developments that occurred during the middle of the 20th century.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDIA EFFECTS RESEARCH

Basic textbooks on mass communication (e.g., DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; McQuail, 1994) point to a number of important developments in the history of mass communication. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) chart the movement from "the age of signs and signals" to "the age of speech and language" to "the age of writing" to "the age of print." These ages, not surprisingly, span thousands of years of human development. However, not until "the age of mass communication" was ushered in by widespread distribution of newspapers (in the 19th century), by the development and popularization of motion pictures (at the turn of the 20th century), by the invention of radio and its adoption in many households (1920s through 1940s), by the invention and diffusion of television (1950s and 1960s), and by the exploding use of the Internet (1990s and beyond) could commentators really see the reach of communication media to mass audiences. Today, the power of the media is enormous. As Downing, Mohammadi, and Sreberby-Mohammadi (1995, p. xvi) summarize, the "media present us with often overwhelming amounts of information and images, about ourselves and about other people. They serve to define what is of political concern, of economic importance, of cultural interest to us. In short, we live in what is often described as a media culture."

The history of mass communication research—that is, the study of how the media effect our lives—began in earnest in the 1920s and 1930s. During this time period, newspaper circulation increased and hence reached a widespread audience, motion pictures and other media were used extensively for national and social propaganda (e.g., during World War I), and radio use was reaching a peak in the everyday lives of Americans. Thus, it is not surprising that social scientists wanted to understand the effects of these media on the way people thought and behaved. A recounting of the explanations of the time will undoubtedly oversimplify those views (see Lang & Lang, 1993); however, it is important to consider the development of ideas about how the mass media influence us in order to put current theories into proper focus. In the next few sections of this chapter, then, we chart the changes in scholarly approaches to media effects throughout the 20th century.

"This is the mass society as conceptualized by early theorists—an audience of undifferentiated individuals very open to the influence of strong and powerful leaders, or strong and powerful media."

The Bullet and the Needle

In the 1920s and 1930s, scholars were concerned with making sense of the influence of both wartime propaganda and what were seen as widespread effects of radio and newspapers on the attitudes of individual citizens. The words of Harold Lasswell, a prominent mass communication researcher during this time, reflect the thinking of that time period. In *Propaganda Techniques in the World War*, Lasswell (1927) wrote,

> But when all allowances have been made and all extravagant estimates pared to the bone, the fact remains that propaganda is one of the most powerful instrumentalities in the modern world. . . . In the Great Society it is no longer possible to fuse the waywardness of individuals in the furnace of the war dance; a newer and subtler instrument must weld thousands and even millions of human beings into one amalgamated mass of hate and will and hope. A new flame must burn out the canker of dissent and temper the steel of bellicose enthusiasm. The name of this new hammer and anvil of social solidarity is propaganda.
> (pp. 220–221)

Thus, the view of media effects that developed during the 1920s and 1930s was one of very strong effects, for only a very powerful influence could "meld thousands and even millions of human beings into one amalgamated mass." This view has been labeled, in retrospect, by the memorable monikers of the **magic bullet effect** and the **hypodermic needle effect.** In short, these views see the mass media as capable of shaping public opinion and swaying behavior in whatever direction is preferred by the communicator. The media are seen to work as a magic bullet or a hypodermic needle, shooting the desires of the source directly into the thoughts, attitudes, and subsequent behaviors of the receivers.

The magic bullet theory seems quite simple and straightforward, but several points about this view of the media bear mentioning. Specifically, this view brings with it not only assumptions about the media (as a strong needle and powerful bullet) but also assumptions about the audience. The audience in this formulation is seen as a **mass society.** DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) chart the development of this view of society, primarily through the work of sociologists in the 19th and early 20th centuries. These scholars (e.g., Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Emile Durkheim) looked at the increasing complexity of society through industrialization, urbanization, and other factors and concluded that individuals were becoming isolated and thus unable to form meaningful connections of community with each other. This view of the mass society emphasized the following characteristics (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989, p. 159):

- Individuals are presumed to be in a situation of psychological isolation.
- Impersonality prevails in individuals' interactions with each other.
- Individuals are relatively free from the demands of binding informal social obligations.

Individuals in this conception of society were seen as easy targets of the magic bullets from the media. Individuals in a mass society were disconnected, or atomized; hence, the powerful media could affect them directly and strongly. In viewing the audience as isolated and impersonal, the media were seen as having a uniform and powerful impact on all members of society. Picture in your mind the classic pictures of crowds of German citizens, saluting as one in political gatherings as Adolf Hitler rose to power. This is the mass society as conceptualized by early theorists—an audience of undifferentiated individuals very open to the influence of strong and power leaders, or strong and powerful media.

Alternatives to Strong Effects

The magic bullet and hypodermic needle theories proposing strong effects of the mass media did not hold sway for long, however. Several factors served as an impetus to change thinking in this regard. First, on philosophical grounds, the picture of the individual as the unthinking and easy dupe of the media was untenable for many commentators. Scholars were uncomfortable with this view of the public as powerless, while democratic ideals and beliefs about the strength of the individual held sway in much of the Western world. Second, theoretical developments in psychology and sociology discredited the view of the individual inherent in theories of mass society. These developments emphasized both cognitive and social factors that needed to be considered when looking at how messages from the media might influence individual attitudes and behaviors. Finally, empirical research into the effects of the mass media on individuals provided data that were contrary to the **strong effects model.** Because of these philosophical, theoretical, and empirical developments, scholars began to look for factors that reduced the effects of the media, and the era of the **limited effects model** was ushered in.

The initial concept that media had limited effects was based not as much on a model of media content, then, but on shifting views about the nature of the audience. In the parlance of basic psychological theory, a strong effects paradigm can be viewed as a simple stimulus-response (S-R) model. That is, the stimulus (i.e., the media in the magic bullet or hypodermic needle model) instigates a direct response in the individual (i.e., in the form of an attitude, belief, or behavior). In this model, no intervening process comes between the stimulus and the response. However, in the middle of the 20th century, a variety of alternatives to the basic S-R model were developed in psychology, and related ideas in mass communication research followed suit. In the most basic sense, these are labeled S-O-R models, in which some factor of the organism (O) or person is seen as coming between the stimulus and the response. In considering the mass media, these S-O-R models look at the ways media have selective influence on the responses of individuals. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) have outlined three types of processes that replaced strong effects paradigm of the magic bullet theory in the middle of the 20th century (Figure 14.1).

Figure 14.1 highlights several factors that might come between the magic bullet of the media and the responses of individuals. For example, the factor of *individual differences* suggests that the media might influence people with different personalities, different needs, or at different stages of development in different ways. For

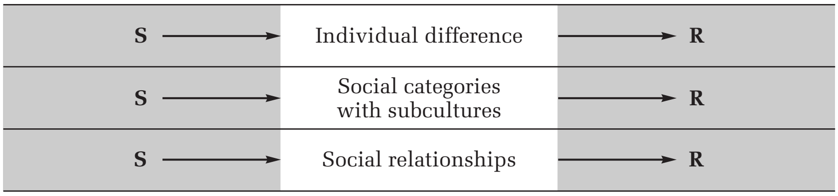

Figure 14.1 Selective Influence Theories of Mass Media Effects.
Source: From DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989, p. 196.

example, a four-year-old boy might love Power Rangers on Saturday morning cartoons, while his twin brother is frightened by these images and prefers Barney and Baby Bop. These differences are likely to be based on simple differences in temperament. Second, the media could influence various groups of people in different ways, differences based on *social categories*. For example, a sexually suggestive music video could be differently attractive—and have different influences—on audiences of college age students, their retired grandparents, and their brothers and sisters in elementary school. Third, *social relationships* and interpersonal communication could influence the effects that media have on individuals. These social relationships might influence effects through having the media influence the opinions of those who then influence family and friends. This effect (what Elihu Katz, 1957, called the "two-step" flow) can be seen in the way "buzz" for hot new television shows spread their popularity. Or, social relationships might influence the effect of the media as we talk about media in the process of consumption. For example, teenage girls might leaf through magazines together, sharing perceptions and opinions. Or parents might opt to watch controversial programming with their children, so they can help kids process the content and understand its implications.

Thus, as Figure 14.1 illustrates, mass communication scholars began to explore how the power of the media was limited or influenced by a variety of factors. Much of this research was scattered and haphazard, however, as scholars listed and investigated the factors that might limit strong effects. However, in the 1960s, ideas about the interplay between audience and media began to coalesce into several specific theoretical traditions. The first theory we consider here, social cognitive theory, takes the most specific look at the psychological processes that influence the relationship between mass media content and behavioral reactions of audience members.

SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY

As media theorists moved away from the strong effects models of the magic bullet injecting its content into the undifferentiated mass audience and toward limited effects models, many scholars relied on psychological theories that distinguished between S-R models and S-O-R models. In other words, theorists began to ask about what human qualities—in particular, what psychological qualities—came between the stimulus of the media message and the audience's response. One of the most obvious conceptualizations for this role of the organism (i.e., the "O") is to see people as learners who could think about the content of the media and whose thinking could then make a difference in the acquisition of new attitudes and behaviors. Thus, turning to learning theories as a way to understand media effects made a great deal of sense in the middle of the 20th century.

Early psychologists in the behaviorist mode (e.g., John B. Watson and B. F. Skinner) were concerned with the extent to which human action is a conditioned response to external stimuli.

This behaviorist point of view—represented by processes labeled as *operant conditioning*—is an S-R model that suggests that humans learn by being rewarded (e.g., receiving positive reinforcement) or punished (e.g., receiving negative reinforcement) when they respond to a particular stimulus. For example, imagine that a child bites her nails. Her parents might paint her nails with bitter nail polish so that she will have a bad taste experience every time she tries to bite them. This is negative reinforcement. Or a parent might promise a reward like a new toy—positive reinforcement—if the nails are grown to a particular length. By directly rewarding and punishing behavior, the parents are hoping the child will learn the preferred behavior.

However, operant conditioning is an inefficient way to learn things. Imagine, for instance, that we had to learn about the dangers of encountering fire only through direct reward and punishment when confronted with a stimulus: The hospitals would be full of burn victims! It simply doesn't make sense to presume that everyone has to learn everything through direct experience. Thus, it seems obvious that humans learn in other ways, and one of the most important alternative routes to learning is through watching others who are demonstrating behaviors (and perhaps being rewarded or punished for those behaviors) and then imitating those behaviors. As Bandura (1977b) argues,

> Observational learning is vital for both development and survival. Because mistakes can produce costly, or even fatal, consequences, the prospects for survival would be slim indeed if one could learn only by suffering the consequences of trial and error. For this reason, one does not teach children to swim, adolescents to drive automobiles, and novice medical students to perform surgery by having them discover the appropriate behavior through the consequences of their successes and failures. The more costly and hazardous the possible mistakes, the heavier is the reliance on observational learning from competent examples. (p. 237)

The concept of learning through observation and imitation was first proposed in the psychological literature by N. E. Miller and Dollard (1941). These researchers posited that if humans were motivated to learn a particular behavior, they would be able to learn by observing models and then be positively reinforced by imitating those models. That is, a child might observe another child playing with an unfamiliar toy. The observing child could then imitate the observed child and be rewarded by the pleasures of play. These ideas were the first version of **social learning theory.**

Since these early ideas were proposed about the role of imitation in the acquisition of behavior, theoretical thinking about social learning has developed. The leader in the development of social learning theory (relabeled in the 1970s and 1980s as **social cognitive theory**) has been Albert Bandura. Bandura's first key ideas in the area (Bandura, 1962) further developed Miller and Dollard's earlier ideas about imitative learning. In more recent publications, Bandura has elaborated on the process of social learning and on cognitive and behavioral factors that influence the learning process (see, e.g., Bandura, 1969, 1977a, 1977b, 1986, 1994, 1995). In the next few sections, we outline some of the key components of social cognitive theory and then discuss how this theory has been instrumental in studying the effects of mass media presentations on individuals in the audience.

Key Concepts in Social Cognitive Theory

As should already be clear, the key concept in social cognitive theory is the notion of **observational learning.** When there are "models" in an individual's environment—perhaps friends or family members in the interpersonal environment, people from public life, or figures in the news or entertainment media—learning can occur through the observation of these models. Sometimes the behavior can be acquired simply through the modeling process. Modeling, or imitation, is "the direct, mechanical reproduction of behavior" (Baran & Davis, 2000, p. 184). For example, when a father teaches his daughter how to tie her shoes by demonstrating the technique over and over again, this is a simple modeling process. In addition to interpersonal imitation processes, modeling processes can also be seen with regard to media sources. That is, you might learn a new trick for rolling out pie dough simply by watching a cooking show on television. But there are times when simple modeling is not enough to influence or change behavior. In these cases, social cognitive theorists turn to the basic operant conditioning concepts of rewards and punishments, but place those concepts in a social learning context.

Baranowski, Perry, and Parcel (1997) state that "reinforcement is the primary construct in the operant form of learning" (p. 161). Reinforcement processes are also central to social learning processes. In social cognitive theory, reinforcement works through the processes of inhibitory effects and disinhibitory effects. An **inhibitory effect** occurs when an individual sees a model being punished for a particular behavior. Observing this punishment will decrease the likelihood of the observer performing that same behavior. For example, social cognitive theory would predict that when we observe criminals on television being incarcerated for their misdeeds, we will be less likely to engage in crime. In contrast, a **disinhibitory effect** occurs when an individual sees a model being rewarded for a particular behavior. In this situation, the observer will be more likely to perform the behavior. For example, if a documentary focuses on an individual who has received public commendation for working with the homeless, social cognitive theory would predict that the observer will be more likely to volunteer in a local homeless shelter.

The effects posited here depend not on actual rewards and punishments but instead on vicarious reinforcement. According to Bandura (1986), vicarious reinforcement works because of the concepts of outcome expectations and outcome expectancies. **Outcome expectations** suggest that when we see models being rewarded and punished, we come to expect the same outcomes if we perform the same behavior. As Baranowski et al. (1997) state, "People develop expectations about a situation and expectations for outcomes of their behavior before they actually encounter the situation" (p. 162). That is, there is the expectation of jail time for breaking the law. Furthermore, individuals attach value to these expectations in the form of **outcome expectancies.** These expectancies consider the extent to which any particular reinforcement observed is seen as a reward or a punishment. The outcome expectancy for jail time would undoubtedly be negative, but social cognitive theory also considers the possibility that different things are rewarding to different people and that the value of the reward to the particular individual will influence the extent to which social learning will occur. For example, an individual watching the homelessness documentary might be extremely shy and hence not see public commendation as a reward for public service.

This is the basic process of learning posited in social cognitive theory. However, several other concepts posited in the theory will influence the extent to which social learning takes place. One important addition to the theory has been the concept of **identification** with the model in the media. Specifically, social cognitive theory argues that if an individual feels a strong psychological connection to a model (i.e., if he or she feels a sense of identification with the model), social learning is more likely to occur. According to White (1972), identification "springs from wanting to be and trying to be like the model with respect to some broader quality" (p. 252). That is, if a child wants to be like a favorite sports hero, he might imitate that sports hero in terms of clothing and food choices.

Social cognitive theory also considers the importance of an observer's ability to perform a particular behavior and the confidence the individual has in performing the behavior. This confidence is known as **self-efficacy** (Bandura, 1977a), and it is seen as a critical prerequisite to behavioral change. Think back again to our example of learning a new way to roll out pie dough from a cooking show on television. Social cognitive theory would argue that learning from the model would not occur if an individual had always bought pre-formed pie crusts and had always believed that making and rolling out pie dough was an incredibly difficult task best left to professional pastry chefs. It is likely that this individual would not have the necessary level of self-efficacy regarding pie dough to effectively learn from the model in the cooking demonstration.

Social Cognitive Theory and the Communication Media

To this point, we have sketched out some of the basic ideas proposed in social cognitive theory. Learning occurs when an individual observes a model performing a behavior and being rewarded or punished for that behavior. From this observation, the learner develops expectancies about what will happen when he or she performs the behavior and these expectancies will influence learning and subsequent behavior. However, this learning will be moderated by the extent to which the individual identifies with the model and the extent to which the individual feels a sense of self-efficacy about performing the modeled behaviors.

From this basic framework, the applications of social cognitive theory to research in the mass media should be clear. That is, in today's society, many of the models that we learn from are those we see, hear, or read about in the mass media. These models might be people who we observe on news and documentary shows. They might be characters we see in dramatic presentations on the big or small screen or read about in books. Or they might be singers or dancers who we hear on the radio and CDs or who we see in music videos. In short, there are a plethora of models in the media who are consistently being rewarded or punished for their behavior, and many media theorists believe that children and adults change their behaviors based on the observation of these models.

One area in which social cognitive theory has had a strong impact is in the study of media violence. Gunter (1994) reviews the research on the impact of media violence on children and adults and concludes that there is a great mix of evidence regarding the effects of violent media depictions on the behaviors, attitudes, and cognitions of viewers. Social cognitive theory, most concerned with behavioral effects, would suggest that depictions of violence could lead to either increases or decreases in violent behavior, depending on whether the behavior of the model was rewarded or punished, and depending on the extent to which the viewer identified with the model. Indeed, early research by Bandura (1962) and Berkowitz (1964) supported the basic link between watching violent behavior and modeling that behavior in interaction. However, recent research has added complexity to this equation, arguing that issues such as preexisting aggressive tendencies, cognitive processing of the media, realism of the media depictions, and even diet can affect the extent to which individuals "learn" violence from the media (see Potter, 1997, for review).

The application of social cognitive theory to the study of televised violence considers how media can have unintended consequences on members of the viewing audience. However, communication scholars and action researchers have also considered more purposeful applications of social cognitive theory. For example, a growing number of scholars are now joining the concepts of *entertainment* and *education* in considering how entertainment messages can be used to bring about behavioral and social change (Singhal & Arvid, 2002). For example, telenovelas are broadcast in many countries with the dual purpose of providing entertainment and educating the public on such issues as family planning, gender equity, and agricultural reform (see Nariman, 1993). Many of these "soap operas for social change" have been designed following a social cognitive framework by using attractive characters being rewarded or punished for explicitly modeled behavior.

Social cognitive theory has been used in other public health communication applications as well (see Baranowski et al., 1997; Slater, 1999). For example, a media campaign planner interested in changing behaviors regarding the use of sunblock might use social cognitive theory in designing a campaign. That campaign might emphasize an attractive and recognizable model

REAL LIFE INSIGHT

Social cognitive theory is a straightforward model that proposes very specific conditions under which social learning will occur. Because of its specificity, it is not surprising that social cognitive theory has been very attractive to agents who are trying to institute social change, particularly in the area of public health. Change agents are eager to have theoretical models that will help them design large-scale campaigns that will reach a large portion of the public and have the desired effects on attitudes and behavior. For example, if a public health official were designing a campaign to convince teens not to smoke, social cognitive theory would seem to be an attractive template. Use attractive models that teens can identify with. Show those models demonstrating straightforward interaction strategies to refuse an offer of a cigarette. Then show those models being rewarded for their refusal through enhanced popularity, pleasant breath, and future good health.

This seems straightforward, but we all know that these campaigns don't always work. Why not? Well, it could be that social cognitive theory is wrong. But some researchers believe it is because public health campaigns do not always really follow the tenets of theories such as social cognitive theories and hence do not reap the rewards of the desired change in health behavior. For example, Michael Slater (1999) argues that it is critical to consider where audience members are in the change process and then use social cognitive theory (or other similar theories) in an appropriate way. For example, when audience members are merely considering behavior change, it makes the most sense to highlight the possible rewards and punishments to motivate the viewer to act. However, after that motivation is achieved, it is critical to model skills so viewers can develop a sense of efficacy about actually doing whatever is being recommended.

Other theorists have looked at specific public health campaigns and identified ways in which a more careful consideration of social cognitive theory could enhance a campaign's success. For example, Sandi Smith (1997) looked at a national campaign to encourage parents to immunize their children. She argued that the campaign was effective in showing the rewards for immunization but did little to build self-efficacy in the parents for following through with immunization. For example, no matter how much you want to immunize your children, if you don't have a regular doctor or an understanding of the local public health system, you are unlikely to follow through on your desires. In another example, Brown (1992) studied AIDS educational messages and found that such messages were not effective with members of the Asian Pacific community. Drawing on another aspect of social cognitive theory, Brown argued that it was important to show models of a similar cultural background in order to encourage behavioral change. These examples point to the importance of considering all of the nuances of a particular theory—such as self-efficacy and identification in social cognitive theory—when dealing with the complexities of "real life" behavior.

(encouraging identification) who is rewarded with healthy skin and compliments when using sunblock (i.e., positive reinforcement). The campaign could also emphasize the frequent application of sunblock with a high SPF factor (creating self-efficacy). Following the tenets of social comparison theory, this campaign would be expected to encourage the use of sunblock.

Summary

Social cognitive theory provides an explanation of how behavior can be shaped through the observation of models in mass media presentations. The effect of modeling is enhanced through the observation of rewards and punishments meted out to the model, by the identification of audience members with the model, and by the extent to which audience members have self-efficacy about the behaviors being modeled. This theory, though based in the field of social psychology, has had strong effects both on our understanding of the effects of media violence on adults and children and on the planning of purposeful campaigns for behavior change launched through media sources. In the next section, we turn our attention to a model of media effects that highlights the concept of an active audience, which is critical in many limited effects models.

USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY

When I wrote this chapter for the first edition of the textbook, the most popular television show in the United States, by far, was *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* on ABC. How times have changed. Now the airwaves are dominated by a wide variety of reality television shows that were unheard of even four years ago. The first episode of *Survivor* has now spawned shows such as *American Idol, Joe Millionaire, Trading Spaces, Temptation Island,* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.* Trista and Ryan are marrying on network television after their run on *Bachelorette* and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* is hard to find even in syndication. Clearly, the wheels of programming turn quickly. However, the popularity of any of these programs—or the cultural icons of the past such as *Dallas, Baywatch, M*A*S*H, All in the Family,* or *I Love Lucy* can all serve as an avenue for understanding more about why people tune into particular media programming and the ways in which such programming satisfy the desires and needs of the viewing public. In this section, we will consider a theory that looks carefully at how and why members of media audiences use particular programming to satisfy a wide variety of needs.

Interestingly, the study viewed as the first piece of research on the uses and gratifications approach was spurred by a media phenomenon very similar to the late 1990s infatuation with *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, quiz shows were popular with radio audiences, and Herza Herzog asked the simple question of why this kind of show appealed to a wide variety of people. In asking this question, Herzog countered the assumption of mass society and strong effects on audiences and considered the notion that different audience members might listen to a radio show for different reasons. In summarizing Herzog's (and other) research, McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) concluded that individuals listen to (or watch) quiz shows for reasons including (a) self-rating, (b) social interaction, (c) excitement, and (d) educational appeal. It is likely that these same categories could be used to describe the appeal of quiz shows such as *Millionaire* and *Jeopardy* in more recent years, as individuals watch the show to share in the thrills experienced by the contestant, to test and gain knowledge, or to interact with family members during the broadcast.

Thus, in the 1940s, researchers were beginning to ask questions about how the needs and desires of the audience might influence the effect of mass media programming. Swanson (1992) has labeled early research efforts such as Herzog's (1941, 1944) as the first phase in the development of the uses and gratifications approach and has noted three attributes of this research that were important in leading to the theoretical framework developed later. First, this research introduces the idea of an active audience, in which individuals have their own reasons for accessing the media. Second, this research began to conceive of these audience motives as *gratifications* that were obtained by individuals from the media (though that specific term was not used at the time). Third, research in this tradition highlighted the ability of audience members to provide useful information about their motives and desires with regard to the media.

Not until the mid-1960s and early 1970s was the uses and gratifications approach codified into a coherent theoretical framework. The first formal statement of the **uses and gratifications theory** came from Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), who enumerated basic points of the framework in the oft-quoted statement that uses and gratifications studies address:

> (1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones. (p. 20)

Palmgreen (1984), in a review of uses and gratifications theory, has noted that scholars have tended to concentrate on the middle portion of this statement, with little research attention directed toward the origin of mass media needs (1) or the unintended consequences of need gratification (7). However, there has been a great deal of theoretical and research development with regard to items (2) through (6), as scholars have considered the ways in which an active audience selectively engages and reacts to the media. The uses and gratifications approach is explained in more detail in the next two sections, in which we first examine the question of what gratifications are sought and obtained from the media and then look at the question of how the media are used in this gratification process.

What Gratifications Are Sought and Obtained from Media?

The bulk of studies in the uses and gratifications tradition have attempted to answer the question regarding the gratifications sought and obtained from the media by developing typologies of those gratifications. These studies attempt to codify ideas about why individuals choose certain media at various times and what they get out of their connection with the media. Most of these studies have relied on self-reports of audience members (Palmgreen, 1984), though observational and experimental techniques for assessing audience gratifications have also been used. A variety of typologies of gratifications have been proposed, one of which is presented in Table 14.1.

As Table 14.1 indicates, research has identified a large number of ways in which an active media audience uses the media in order to gratify various needs. For example, my 11-year-old daughter (a *Millionaire* fan in the last edition of this book!) now enjoys watching *Trading Spaces*, true crime shows such as *Cold Case Files*, and sporting events. Why does she watch these shows? She likes *Trading Spaces*, I would guess, for entertainment reasons—she finds the show funny and it's a good escape from real-life problems like homework. Perhaps she even uses it as a source of information, picking up decorating tips for her room at home. She enjoys *Cold Case Files* because she sees the episodes as puzzles and feels good about herself when she understands the cases and how the investigators solved them. She watches sports as a way of connecting with others in her social environment, as she and her father become elated or dejected with the fate of the Boston Red Sox. Thus, even within one medium (i.e., television) and for one person, a variety of gratifications—information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, entertainment—are being served. Of course, if we looked at different people and at different media, we would find a still larger variety of gratifications being sought and satisfied through media content.

Uses and gratifications theory goes beyond lists, however, in considering the concept of what uses are served by the media. Two theoretical developments are particularly noteworthy. First, some scholars have suggested that these lists of needs can be divided into fundamentally different types of gratifications. These distinctions have included content versus process gratifications (Cutler & Danowski, 1980), cognitive versus affective/imaginative gratifications (McQuail, 1984), and instrumental versus ritual gratifications (Rubin, 1984). According to Swanson (1992), these distinctions all point to the difference between "gratifications that result from the pleasurable experience of media content and are realized during consumption . . . and gratifications that result from learning information from media content and subsequently putting it to use in practical affairs" (p. 310). Thus, a person might access the World Wide Web in a search for specific information required for a class project or simply to enjoy interacting with virtual friends in a chat room.

A second important theoretical development with regard to gratification typologies is the distinction between **gratifications sought** and **gratifications obtained** (see Palmgreen, 1984, for review). This distinction makes the point that what an individual wants from the media is not

Table 14.1 Typology of Gratifications Sought and Obtained from the Media

Gratification Category	Examples
Information	▪ Finding out about relevant events and conditions in immediate surroundings, society, and the world ▪ Seeking advice on practical matters, or opinion and decision choices ▪ Satisfying curiosity and general interest ▪ Learning, self-education ▪ Gaining a sense of security through knowledge
Personal Identity	▪ Finding reinforcement for personal values ▪ Finding models of behavior ▪ Identifying with valued others (in the media) ▪ Gaining insight into one's self
Integration and Social Interaction	▪ Gaining insight into circumstances of others: social empathy ▪ Identifying with others and gaining a sense of belonging ▪ Finding a basis for conversation and social interaction ▪ Having a substitute for real-life companionship ▪ Helping to carry out social roles ▪ Enabling one to connect with family, friends, and society
Entertainment	▪ Escaping, or being diverted from, problems ▪ Relaxing ▪ Getting intrinsic cultural or aesthetic enjoyment ▪ Filling time ▪ Emotional release ▪ Sexual arousal

Source: From McQuail, 1983, pp. 82–83.

always what an individual gets from the media. Mick Jagger would argue that "you can't always get what you want," and this has certainly been found to be true in uses and gratifications studies, as gratifications sought are often distinct from gratifications obtained. For example, an individual may watch financial news programming with the hopes of gaining insider information that will lead to a financial windfall. However, as many disappointed investors will attest, this gratification is unlikely to be fully satisfied through media consumption.

How Are Media Used in the Gratification Process?

Thus, a variety of gratifications are sought and obtained from the media, and these gratifications can be described using content categories at various levels of abstraction. The theoretical question remaining for the uses and gratifications approach, then, is the process through which these gratifications relate to the behaviors and attitudes of audience members. Once typologies of gratifications were established, these questions of process captured the attention of media researchers.

One basic line of research has investigated the processes through which audience gratifications influence behavior and outcomes. Kim and Rubin (1997) summarize much of this research, noting three ways in which audience activity facilitates media contact and effects. The first of these is *selectivity,* in which individuals who seek particular gratifications will selectively expose themselves to particular media. For example, a person wanting to escape after a long day at work might choose to watch music videos rather than a news program on television. The second process is *attention,* in which individuals will allocate cognitive effort to media consumption, depending on gratifications sought. For example, a person seeking detailed information will pay more attention to the content in a home improvement magazine than a person merely leafing through the magazine to pass the time. Finally, the third process is *involvement* with the media, in which an audience member is often caught up in the message and may even develop a "relationship" with media characters. This type of involvement is sometimes called **parasocial interaction** (Horton & Wohl, 1956). For example, a large part of the attraction to reality television shows is the emotional attachments that viewers form with the "real people" shown in the programming. For example, there are always favored and despised players on each *Survivor* show, and great debate as the *American Idol* field is whittled down to the final few contestants. Clearly, viewers on the show feel that they "know" the individuals on the shows and share in their joy or disappointment as the show develops.

In addition to considering these different processes through which gratifications are connected to audience activity with the media, other scholars have worked to understand the underlying theoretical mechanism through which gratifications influence behavior. Much of this work has taken an **expectancy-value approach** based on basic social psychological processes (see, e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, and our discussions of both the theory of reasoned action and problematic integration theory in Chapter 8). An expectancy-value explanation suggests that an individual's behavior will be guided by two assessments: an assessment of the value of a particular outcome and an assessment of the probability of that outcome occurring. In the framework of uses and gratifications theory, an expectancy-value approach would suggest that we value particular things (e.g., escape, information, companionship) and that we have expectations about the probability that these things can be obtained from various media sources. These estimates of value and probability combine to predict gratifications we seek from the media, which then predict media consumption and gratifications obtained. As a result of those gratifications obtained, we may revise our assessments of both what we want and the probability of obtaining it from various media sources (see Babrow & Swanson, 1988; Rayburn & Palmgreen, 1984; Swanson & Babrow, 1989, for discussion).

For example, if you participate in a fantasy football league, you might have a strong value for current information about what players have scored in Sunday National Football League games. If you expect that such information can be gleaned from watching the halftime shows on network television, you might seek to satisfy that need through exposure to those shows. However, upon tuning in, you might find that you get very little information about who has scored in the current games and, instead, just hear ex-jocks bantering and demonstrating plays in the studio. As a result, you would likely adjust your assessment of your need for current information being satisfied through halftime shows and, instead, turn to alternative media that might better gratify your desires (e.g., logging on to the World Wide Web or listening to a radio show that continually updates scoring for current games).

Extensions and Critiques of the Uses and Gratifications Approach

The two questions discussed in the preceding sections (i.e., about what gratifications are sought and how media are used in the gratification process) make up the bulk of uses and gratifications research. However, Swanson (1992) points to some work that has looked at the precursors of the uses and gratifications approach by considering psychological and social influences on gratification seeking. This work has considered how disparate factors such as personality attributes (Conway & Rubin, 1991), psychological needs (Finn & Gorr, 1988), and social situation (Rubin & Rubin, 1982) might influence the development of particular gratifications sought through the media. For example, recent research (Sherry, 2001) has suggested that individuals have very basic differences in biologically rooted temperament that might influence different motivations for using the media. In contrast, other researchers have tried to connect various uses and gratification patterns with the effects of exposure to the media (e.g., Rubin & Perse, 1987).

These research efforts, though productive and interesting, point to one of the critiques that has been leveled against the uses and gratifications framework: that uses and gratifications research has been quite fragmented and has not led to a statement of a coherent theory. As DeFleur (1998) argues about mass communication theory in general, studies in uses and gratifications have often answered questions about individual pieces of the model, without taking the big picture into account: "Mass communication research seldom follows a programmatic approach, holding back the pace of theoretical development" (p. 92). Thus, we know a lot about parts of the uses and gratifications framework (e.g., typologies of gratifications, mechanisms connecting gratifications and exposure) but little about how well the overarching framework fits together as an understanding of individual media behavior.

The uses and gratifications model has also been critiqued as being overly narrow in two senses. First, Swanson (1992) notes that little attention has been paid to the processes through which audience members interpret the texts presented by the media. It is assumed that individuals have "latitude to interpret or decode messages in ways that serve their desires to experience particular gratifications" (p. 320). However, the specific interpretive processes at work are never specified, and uses and gratifications becomes a narrow cause-and-effect theory rather than a richer theory that encompasses processes of interpretation. (We will discuss some theoretical responses to this critique at the end of the chapter when we look briefly at *reception approaches* to the mass media.) Second, uses and gratifications research has been critiqued as being an overly individualistic theory. That is, in moving from the strong effects paradigm of the 1930s to a belief in the active audience, it can be argued that uses and gratifications theorists have swung the pendulum too far and ignored cases in which the media do have strong impacts on audiences. Uses and gratifications researchers often ignore the larger context of media consumption (e.g., economic relationships and production processes) in favor of an individualistic explanation of media exposure and effects. We will consider responses to this critique in our consideration of media dependency theory in the next section of this chapter.

Before moving on to that theory, however, a final area of expansion in the uses and gratifications paradigm should be noted. As discussed earlier, the uses and gratifications approach had its impetus in studies of radio programming and gained momentum in the consideration of television. However, the most active area of research in recent years has involved the consideration of the Internet and World Wide Web. Ruggiero (2000, p. 27) has argued that this is not surprising, as "uses and gratifications has always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications medium." That is, as new media are developed, researchers work to understand the appeal of the media and the ways in which audience members use the media to satisfy specific needs. This has clearly been true in terms of considering Internet technology. To provide just one example, a number of researchers have looked at the use of the Web in political communication and found that individuals seek and use online political information to satisfy a variety of individual needs (see Kaye & Johnson, 2002, Sadow & James, 2000).

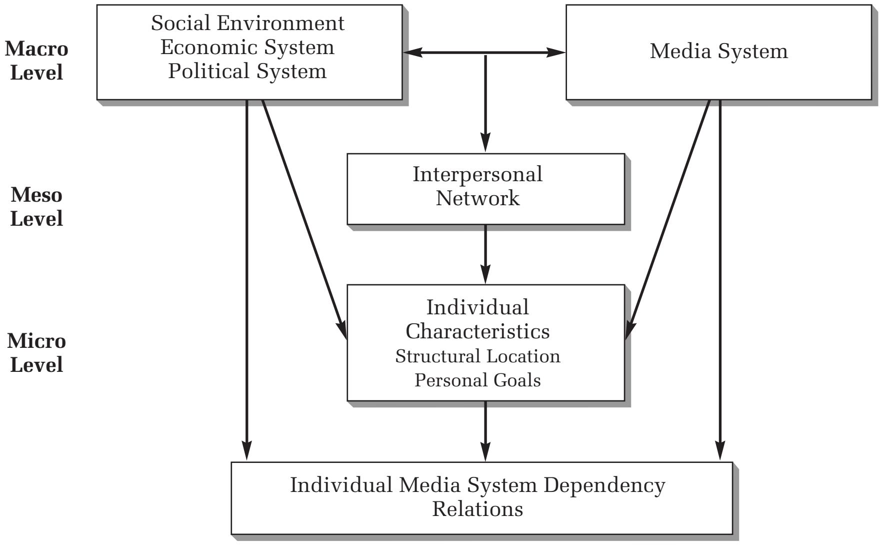
Macro Level
Social Environment
Economic System
Political System
Media System
Meso Level
Interpersonal Network
Micro Level
Individual Characteristics
Structural Location
Personal Goals
Individual Media System Dependency Relations

Figure 14.2 A Model of Media Dependency Relationships. *Source:* Adapted from Ball-Rokeach, 1985, p. 499.

MEDIA SYSTEMS DEPENDENCY THEORY

Media systems dependency theory (MSD) and uses and gratifications are often compared (or seen as nearly identical) in presentations of media theories. Indeed, there has been an attempt to combine these two theories into a "uses and dependency model of mass communication" (Rubin & Windahl, 1986). However, the developers of MSD, Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur, see their framework as distinct from uses and gratifications; hence, it is treated here as an independent theory. As we work our way through MSD, we highlight areas of comparison with uses and gratifications; but it is important to remember, as Ball-Rokeach emphasizes in the title of an article comparing the two approaches, that these frameworks represent "different stories, questions, and ways of thinking" (Ball-Rokeach, 1998, p. 5). These different stories, questions, and ways of thinking often move MSD into a more macroscopic arena than other theories considered in this chapter. Thus, MSD could easily fit into our discussion of theories of media and society in Chapter 15. However, MSD also places a strong emphasis on both individual characteristics and on interpersonal relationships among individuals. Because of these important components, and because of the ties MSD has with uses and gratifications, we discuss it here.

Media Systems Dependency Theory: The Basic Framework

MSD, first proposed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), has at its heart a complex system in which the media, individuals, their interpersonal environment, and the social environment are seen to have **dependency relationships** with each other. This system of relationships is illustrated in Figure 14.2.

Each of these system components is seen as depending on the other components in the system by drawing on resources in order to satisfy goals. In the words of Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), dependency is "a relationship in which the satisfaction of needs or the attainment of goals by one party is contingent upon the resources of another party" (p. 6). For example, a media organization might be dependent on a political structure (i.e., part of the political system and social environment) for permission to broadcast. Or a manufacturing organization (part of the economic system and social environment) might depend on media systems to advertise its products and enhance sales. Or an individual might rely on the newspaper (part of the media system) or on rumors spread by friends (part of the interpersonal network) to provide information about what apartments are available for rent. These are examples of dependency relationships, in that one portion of society relies on the resources of another portion to reach goals. MSD divides these various system components into three levels: the *macro* level of the social environment and media systems, the *micro* level of individuals with particular goals and positions within the social environment, and the *meso* level of interpersonal relationships.

In MSD, particular attention is given to the resources of media systems in modern society and the consideration of the conditions which will increase or decrease individuals' reliance on media systems. In a general sense, MSD theorists see media systems as taking on an increasingly important role as industrialization and urbanization have decreased the influence of interpersonal social networks. As Merskin (1999) explains, "As society has become more urbanized and industrialized, life has become less organized around traditional social groups, such as the family and the church" (p. 78). In such a social setting, the media control many informational resources through their capacity to create, process, and disseminate information to audiences on a national or even global scale. Because the media control these critical informational resources, individuals develop dependency relationships around the need for *understanding* (of self and others), *orientation* (regarding action and interaction), and *play* (in both solitary and social settings). As Loges and Ball-Rokeach (1993) describe this relationship, "As individuals develop expectations that the media system can provide assistance toward the attainment of their goals, individuals should develop dependency relations with the media or medium they perceive to be the most helpful in pursuit of their goals" (p. 603).

This particular relationship (e.g., the dependency of the individual on media) might sound quite a bit like a uses and gratifications explanation. Indeed, when taken in isolation, clear similarities exist between the two approaches. However, MSD goes beyond this individual-media relationship to provide a more complex picture of the dependency relationship between individual needs and media use that includes both microscopic and macroscopic influences on dependencies (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). The major way this is done is through the consideration of other dependencies that work within and between the macro, meso, and micro levels. For example, the media depend on individuals in the audience to provide feedback about programming. This feedback could occur in systematized ways during "sweeps week" or through instant online polls of the audience. For example, the *American Idol* programs relied on telephone audience votes to determine who would continue on in the competition. Further, the individual decisions of audience members (a micro-level influence) were undoubtedly influenced by the "buzz" created in interpersonal and electronic conversations (a meso-level influence) and by media coverage of the relative strengths and weaknesses of various contestants (a macro-level influence). Thus, even in this limited example, there were a variety of dependency relationships influencing both the content of the media and the reactions of individual audience members.

MSD also expands on the concept of dependency relationships by specifying antecedent conditions and consequences related to these relationships. First, the theory proposes that dependency on the media will increase during times of conflict and change within society. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1982) believe that, during such times, there will be an enhanced need for information and orientation and that established social relationships will be insufficient to provide such information. For example, Kellow and Steeves (1998) argue that during the

SPOTLIGHT ON THE THEORIST

Sandra Ball-Rokeach

Sandra Ball-Rokeach received her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Washington in 1968. She is currently a professor at the University of Southern California, with a dual appointment in sociology and at the Annenberg School for Communication. Ball-Rokeach's work has been published in a wide range of books and journal outlets, and her influence on the discipline can also be seen in her recent editorship of *Communication Research* and in her receipt of numerous research grants and contracts. One recent project, the "Metamorphosis Project," is working specifically to develop the tenets of media systems dependency theory and the related communication infrastructure theory.

Ball-Rokeach traces the beginning of media systems dependency theory to her education as an undergraduate and graduate student. She notes, "I was thoroughly trained to believe that the media had weak, if any, effects due to selective processes and to interpersonal influences, both of which were supposed to operate as barriers or buffers against media influences." However, when Ball-Rokeach looked around at the tumultuous events of the late 1960s, it was hard to believe in these limited effects. Her subsequent work set out to answer the question, "Under what conditions will the media have important effects and why, and under what conditions will they not have important effects and why?" She suspected that answering this question would involve a consideration of both institutional- and organizational-level processes as well as interpersonal processes. She also suspected that a key to this problem would be exploring the specific relationships individuals have with media. The subsequent development of media dependency theory extended these initial hunches through a theory that has "sensitized theorists and researchers to the need to conceive of media power or influence at multiple levels of analysis." To a large extent, Ball-Rokeach has been pleased with the reception of her theory, though she acknowledges that it is often difficult for scholars to break away from concentrating on either the micro or macro level of analysis. As she says about some readings of her theory, "They think they can understand the theory in the old way of talking about dependency as a personal characteristic, not as a relationship that varies in structure, intensity, and scope."

Ball-Rokeach believes that "each of us is a theorist" and that a key for understanding theory is "to look not only for how one theory is different from another, but also look for how they are alike." By making these comparisons and by examining our own assumptions, Ball-Rokeach believes that we can develop "the all-important willingness to ask questions that open us up to the experience of ambiguity." She also argues that scholars of communication must be passionate about their work if they are to be successful. She stresses that "if you are not genuinely curious about what you are studying, don't do it. This is a life where you have to put yourself on the line in so many ways—to your students, your critics, and your colleagues. If you do not have a basic love of the journey, the stress and experience of rejections will not be worth it." Thus, scholars should "hang in there" and not "defeat yourself by giving up on your curiosity," for this curiosity is the sustenance of academic life.

social and political upheaval that marked Rwandan society in 1994, the citizenry of that country came to depend on the radio coverage of a single influential station. As a result, the messages of this station may have had a particularly marked effect on the ensuing genocide in Rwanda. Another clear example is provided by a consideration of the events of September 11, 2001. Following the terrorist attacks in New York City, Washington, D.C., and the aborted attack that ended in a field in Pennsylvania, individuals in the United States (and indeed, all over the world) felt an intense need for information and understanding. Individuals thus turned to the media to cope with these needs, and the media responded with constant and wide-ranging coverage of the events (see Greenberg, 2002). However, there was also a reliance on local communities and friends and family in coping with the terrorist attacks, indicating the complex nature of relationships among various levels of the dependency model.

MSD theorists believe that this theoretical consideration regarding contexts of dependency is critical because it helps to deal with the debate between strong effects and limited effects media traditions. Recall that early considerations of media effects saw the effects as strong ones that could be compared to a "magic bullet" or "hypodermic needle." Subsequently, researchers revised their view of the media to consider effects limited by the needs and desires of the audience (uses and gratifications theory) or by the tenets of learning theory (social cognitive theory). However, MSD theory posits that the media will have strong or limited effects depending on a variety of factors such as the social climate or specific events in the social environment. That is, in times of social or political upheaval, or during crisis situations, individuals may depend a great deal on the media and be affected by the media. During these times, a strong effects model would be supported. During more stable historical periods, limited effects would likely be observed (see, also, Hirschburg, Dillman, & Ball-Rokeach, 1986).

MSD also considers some of the consequences of dependency relationships. For example, a dependency relationship might lead individuals to frame particular issues as important ones to consider. This process of agenda setting is covered in much more detail in Chapter 15. With regard to MSD, it is crucial to point out that this process, again, involves relationships among a variety of societal organizations (e.g., media, government, commercial) and hence serves as a bridge between micro-level media consumption and macro-level power relationships among societal institutions and organizations. MSD also emphasizes that dependency relationships go both ways and that media sources may adjust their content based on audience dependency relationships. For example, Ball-Rokeach et al. (1999) used these ideas to develop and implement an intervention program aimed at changing radio traffic report production policies such that aggressive driving was no longer encouraged. This indicates that MSD has a role both in understanding and explaining media relationships and in encouraging social action to change media policy and individual behavior.

Tests and Extensions of Media Systems Dependency Theory

Early applications of MSD have looked primarily at audience-media dependencies. These applications have included explanations for newspaper readership (Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993), for access to relational advice in men's and women's magazines (Duran & Prusank, 1997), for parasocial interaction and dependencies on television shopping networks (Grant, Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991; Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998), and for the development of personal advertisements by U.S. daily newspapers (Merskin & Huberlie, 1996). Though these investigations of micro-level dependencies are similar to studies of uses and gratifications, most studies in a dependency tradition also take macro-level relationships into account. For example, Grant et al. (1991) examine the dependencies among merchandisers, program producers, television networks, and local stations in explaining the dependencies that develop between audience members and television shopping programs. Similarly, Merskin and Huberlie (1996), in explaining dependencies regarding personal ads, look at both the readers' relational needs and the newspapers' desires to enhance revenue, readership, and customer service.

Theoretical developments in MSD have also revolved around the relationship between **micro-level** issues (e.g., individual use of the media) and **macro-level** issues (e.g., relationships among media organizations and other societal institutions). For instance, DeFleur and Dennis (1996) have tried to draw out these distinctions by splitting the theory into two parts: media systems dependency theory (macro) and media information dependency theory (micro). Ball-Rokeach

(1985) has taken on the task of laying out the sociological (i.e., macro) origins of media systems dependency in order to bolster our understanding of how structural factors play into the development of dependency relationships. Further, Ball-Rokeach and her colleagues have begun the development of a new theory (communication infrastructure theory) that looks at the complex array of individual, interpersonal, social, and public *storytelling systems* that vary from community to community (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001). They believe that an examination of these storytelling systems will help explain the complexity of dependency relationships that emerge in various situations and contexts.

COMPARISON AND COMMENTARY

The three theories we looked at in this chapter consider the relationship between the individual and the media in terms of exposure and effects. These theories largely adhere to the post–positivist paradigm in proposing general and causal explanations of communication phenomena and in testing theories through the accumulation of social scientific evidence, though there are influences of critical theorizing, as well (e.g., the social intervention research proposed in connection with media systems dependency theory). Beyond these general comments, though, the theories differ substantially.

Social cognitive theory provides a very basic look at processes through which social learning can occur in media contexts. The theory highlights the importance of imitative processes in conjunction with the observation of rewards and punishments, identification with media models, and the development of self-efficacy with regard to modeled behavior. The theory has been used both to explain the effect of media presentations on audiences (e.g., the effect of violence) and to plan media campaigns for behavioral change (e.g., in health promotion campaigns).

Uses and gratifications research has played a pivotal role in the investigation of the media, in that it has provided an important explanatory framework to enhance the limited effects research that replaced the magic bullet approach of the 1930s and 1940s. Specifically, this framework shifted the question from “Why don’t the media have effects?” to “What do individuals do with the media?” (Ball-Rokeach, 1998, p. 8). This question opened the floodgates for a huge amount of research that served both to catalogue relevant uses and gratifications and to explain the process by which gratifications are obtained through media exposure. However, research in the uses and gratifications tradition was often fragmented and sometimes criticized as consisting of too many lists and not enough understanding. Uses and gratifications theorists also emphasized the active audience to such an extent that little attention was paid to the constraints put on those audience members by larger societal structures and processes.

In a sense, media systems dependency theory was a response to some of these issues, though it was certainly not proposed as a replacement. Loges and Ball-Rokeach (1993) explain that uses and gratifications theory and media systems dependency theory are similar in terms of metatheoretical commitments and in terms of the object of explanation (e.g., “both emphasize the link between individual purposes and the large social apparatus of mass media” [Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993, p. 602]). However, they also differ in substantial ways. Loges and Ball-Rokeach highlight three of these differences:

- Media systems dependency theory provides a more coherent system of theoretical concepts suitable for testing.
- Media systems dependency theory weakens the power of the active audience by proposing “the audience member’s relation to the media as one of inherent subordination” (Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993, p. 603).
- Media systems dependency theory can be applied to dependency relationships at a variety of levels (e.g., group, organizational, and societal), whereas uses and gratifications deals almost exclusively with the individual-media relationship.

Thus, media systems dependency theory enlarges, codifies, and complicates some ideas that have been explored in uses and gratifications research. As such, it is a theory of much wider scope and (possibly) much greater explanatory power. However, this still is just a possibility, because scholars have tested only small portions of the theory. Indeed, many of the tests have dealt with the same individual-media relationships examined in uses and gratifications research. Though some scholars have begun to investigate the ways in which other dependency relationships play into the process, much more research is necessary before media systems dependency theory can be evaluated in terms of general explanatory power regarding both micro-level media use, macro-level relationships among media and societal institutions, meso-level relationships involving social relationships, and the complex interplay among these three levels of dependency factors.

Thus, the theories we considered in this chapter provide insightful understanding of how and why individuals use the media and are affected by the media. Challenges remain for these theories in several areas. First, one of the largest challenges for these theories is to consider newer communication media that now dominate many hours of our everyday lives. Consider this: When the first studies of uses and gratifications were being undertaken, the family gathered around the radio every night to listen to favorite programs. In the years since, we have added the media of television, cable television, theater multiplexes, and videotape. Without a doubt, though, the largest change in media behavior is now being wrought by computer technology and by widespread home access to the Internet and the World Wide Web. Will patterns of use and effects regarding the Web follow the same pattern as with television? Or is the Internet a whole new ball of wax that must be considered with unique theories of media use and effects? Undoubtedly the answers to these questions will be complex because "the entry of the Internet is not tabula rasa; rather, it occurs in context of the established media system" (Ball-Rokeach, 1998, p. 31). As noted in this chapter, both uses and gratifications theory and media systems dependency theory are responding to this need to understand the influence of the Internet and World Wide Web on media use and media effects. It is clear, though, that the changing face of media access possibilities will lead to additional important developments in our understanding of media exposure patterns and media effects.

"One of the largest challenges for these theories is to consider newer communication media that now dominate many hours of our everyday lives."

A second key area for development of understanding links between individuals and the media involves a move away from the post–positivist roots of the theories considered in this chapter. Specifically, some scholars have suggested that it is critical to understand the complexities of the context in which individuals consume media presentations, and that such an understanding can only be developed through interpretive research and the study of audience members as they interact with both the media and with others in their social environments. This approach, sometimes known as **reception theory** bringing highlights the point that "the audience is active, bringing its own values and experiences to the viewing of television . . . the emphasis on what the audience does with media output sets it in direct opposition to the mass society approach" (Downing et al., p. 490).

In some ways, then, reception theory is similar to uses and gratifications theory, but it is really quite different because it has its roots in ethnographic methods and in the intimate consideration of how the media are used in everyday life (Ang, 1991; Moores, 1993, 2000). For example, a reception theorist would be interested not just in an individual's reports about why he likes to watch soap operas but also in the details of when and where the soap operas are viewed (alone? with friends? videotaped for secret con-

INTO YOUR WORLD

What are your own media habits? Our use of the media can be so habituated, that it might be difficult for you to answer that question. However, if you logged all your media contact time for a few days, noting what media programming you're consuming and in what situations, you might begin to develop an understanding of the patterns that shape your media consumption. When you look at your own habits, can you use the theories described in this chapter to come to a better understanding of *why* you have the patterns of consumption that you do? What uses do various media and programs serve for you? Are they satisfying your needs? What influence do media programs have on your attitudes, behaviors, or sense of self? How does the context in which you consume media programming influence these factors? Some of your answers to these questions might surprise you—and perhaps even shape your media consumption in the future.

sumption late at night?), feelings about the viewing of soap operas (pleasure? guilt? shame?), other media consumption about soap operas (magazines? online chat rooms?), and conversations with others during and after the soap opera viewing. In other words, reception theorists believe that much media research has oversimplified the relationship between the audience and the media, disembedding it from important contexts and relationships. The goal of reception researchers, then, is to put the complexity back into media studies by developing thick descriptions of media consumption based on interpretive and ethnographic research. To provide just a few examples, researchers have looked at reactions to *Ally McBeal* (Cohen & Ribak, 2003), the role of women in telenovelas (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003), and the "Whassup" Budweiser guys (Watts & Orbe, 2002) using a reception framework. These and other studies point to a future with more nuanced and interpretive considerations of how individuals react to media within the context of specific cultures and personal identities.

Key Terms

magic bullet effect
hypodermic needle effect
mass society
strong effects model
limited effects model
social learning theory
social cognitive theory
observational learning
inhibitory effect
disinhibitory effect
outcome expectations
outcome expectancies
identification
self-efficacy
uses and gratifications theory
gratifications sought
gratifications obtained
parasocial interaction
expectancy-value approach
media systems dependency theory (MSD)
dependency relationships
micro, macro, and meso levels of dependency relationships
reception theory

Discussion Questions

1. How did the way theorists think about the audience change when mass communication scholars moved from a magic bullet model to the theories presented in this chapter? Do you think models of strong or limited effects are more accurate descriptors of the influence of the mass media today?
2. Explain the popularity of home improvement shows (and entire home improvement networks), using concepts from uses and gratifications theory. What gratifications are sought and obtained from this type of

show? What are the effects of obtaining these gratifications?

3. In Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* (2000), Putnam argues that television is a prime cause of the decreasing level of societal involvement in clubs and organizations. As television has gained in popularity, the number of persons joining groups has fallen. How would media systems dependency theory account for this observation?
4. How does the move to an interpretive framework proposed by reception theory change the assumptions and methods of media research? How could findings about media consumption be enriched by such a framework? Are there any shortcomings with using ethnographic methods in the study of media consumption?