

## Mass Communication and Political Socialization: Specifying the Effects

GINA M. GARRAMONE AND CHARLES K. ATKIN

STUDIES examining the role of mass communication in young people's learning about politics indicate that the media contribute to political socialization, but the research does little to unravel the complexities of the process. By treating the media exposure patterns, the criterion variables, and the audience as unidimensional concepts, these studies fail to tease out the more specific effects that might exist for *certain* media, *certain* variables, or *certain* audience categories. The present study attempts to address these shortcomings by comparing the socialization effects of exposure to four media sources of political information—television news, radio news, newspaper news, and news magazines—on several specific types of political knowledge and behavior. The study also explores differences in effects for certain subgroups of young people.

**Abstract** A survey investigation of teenagers examined differential socialization effects of four news media on four types of political knowledge and behavior among several categories of youth on the basis of abilities and predispositions. Regression analyses of questionnaire responses from 280 seventh and tenth grade students show that TV news exposure is the strongest predictor variable. The broadcast media have a greater impact on current events knowledge than fundamental political knowledge, while a slight reversal occurs for the print media. Newspaper reading has the greatest effect on participation. There are predominantly uniform relationships across subgroups, providing little evidence that the news media produce knowledge or behavior gaps.

Gina Garramone is Assistant Professor of Advertising and Charles Atkin is Professor of Communication and Telecommunication, both at Michigan State University. The research was supported by the National Association of Broadcasters.

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## Four Types of Media

Although entertainment and persuasive content in the mass media contain some politically relevant messages, news items provide the bulk of political information. A number of studies demonstrate widespread consumption of hard news by young people (Gollin and Anderson, 1980; Drew and Reeves, 1980a; Atkin, 1978). The inputs from news media usage do not constitute a unidimensional phenomenon, however. The four news media differ in terms of inherent *channel mode* attributes, *conventional style* of news presentation, and nature of *content*.

The television medium can present visual images, while the other media are largely restricted to verbal modes. The print media allow considerable receiver control of information selection and processing, requiring some degree of motivated and focused attention. The sender-controlled broadcast transmissions require minimum audience effort (Chaffee and Tims, 1982).

Stylistically, the print news media tend to feature greater complexity with respect to technical readability and substantive intricacy; broadcast news is presented in a simplified and concrete style that facilitates comprehension. In addition, the dramatic, personalized, and entertaining presentational style of television news is highly engaging relative to the other media.

While the topical content differs minimally across media, newspapers convey a larger quantity of messages, and print news items are characterized by greater depth coverage, with fuller detail, broader perspective, and richer background information compared to the ahistorical and abbreviated broadcast content.

Each of these dimensions has implications for differential impact on adolescents at the cognitive and behavioral levels.

## Political Criterion Variables

### KNOWLEDGE

Past studies have found a relationship between media exposure and young persons' current events knowledge (Chaffee et al., 1970; Atkin and Gantz, 1978) and more fundamental knowledge about the political scene (Conway et al., 1975; Gollin and Anderson, 1980). *Current events knowledge* comprises knowledge of the discrete, time-bound events and associated individuals featured in the news media. In the 1981 period of this study, for example, IRA hunger-striker Bobby Sands died. Such concrete, specific events and the names of the indi-

viduals associated with them typically receive heavy media coverage. These events are not independent of the political history and extant political milieu in the respective country, of course. The historical conflict in Northern Ireland, including the religious and political orientations of the combatants, provides a certain perspective on the hunger strikers. Such *fundamental knowledge*, of political philosophies, structures, and historically significant developments, constitutes a more basic understanding underlying daily political events.

Most studies have limited their analyses to only one type of knowledge and only one type of medium, precluding comparisons of differential effects. On the basis of the mode, style, and content differences between broadcast and print media, however, we may predict differential effects likely to emerge. Television as a news medium, for example, compels contact to each story, facilitating exposure to a variety of topics. Compared to print, broadcast news stories tend to be briefer, simpler, easier to process, and more engaging in presentational style. All of these factors suggest that the broadcast media, and television in particular, should be especially effectual for young audiences, who tend to be visually oriented and less cognitively sophisticated than adults. We predict, therefore, that broadcast news exposure will be more strongly related to overall political knowledge than will print news exposure.

Chaffee and Tims (1982) noted that exposure to the superficial broadcast media may be particularly effective for learning such "itemized" cognitions as the names of political actors or parties. Regular use of print media, on the other hand, with their depth of coverage, substantive complexity, and self-paced processing, may be more likely to enable the youngster to acquire and maintain complex cognitive associations between the various elements of the political scene. We predict, therefore, that exposure to broadcast news will contribute more to knowledge regarding current events than to fundamental knowledge, while print news exposure will have greater impact upon fundamental than on current events knowledge.

#### BEHAVIOR

Although youngsters cannot participate formally in the political system, they can practice interpersonal discussion behaviors and form future participatory dispositions. The news media provide raw information that can be conversationally shared with others (Atkin and Gantz, 1978; Drew and Reeves, 1980a). By providing youngsters with information regarding others' political behavior, mass media exposure also may contribute to the development of long-range predispositions regarding such anticipated political activities as voting and campaign

work (Sheinkopf, 1973). The mode, style, and content characteristics of the broadcast and print classes of media may also determine their differential impact on the two types of political behavior. The broadcast media, with their dramatic and entertaining presentation style, should have greater impact on interpersonal discussion than on the more complex anticipated participation. The more involving and educative print media, with their detail and broader perspective, should be more strongly related to anticipated participation than to discussion.

#### Categories of Young People

The various capabilities and orientations of the young media audience will influence media effects. For example, teenagers possessing greater cognitive sophistication are predicted to acquire complex political information more broadly and deeply than do younger children (Atkin and Gantz, 1978; Drew and Reeves, 1980b). The impact of cognitive sophistication on learning from the media may also depend upon the type of medium under consideration; younger and older students should learn equally well from the *broadcast* media, but older students should outperform younger students in learning from the more complex *print* media. The organismic variable of age is most often used as an indicator of cognitive sophistication. A child's scholarly orientation (e.g., grades in school, intention to attend college) is also likely related.

Interest in politics is another significant intervening variable. Youngsters with greater interest should more readily respond to news coverage. The impact of interest, however, may depend upon the class of media under consideration. Interest may have less impact on learning from the less involving broadcast media than from print media.

Finally, antecedent variables which may shape the political learning process are assessed. Research indicates that boys are more attuned to political news and more involved politically than are girls, and that socioeconomic status is slightly related to these variables (Atkin, 1981).

In summary, it is predicted that broadcast news exposure will be more strongly related to overall political knowledge than will print news exposure. It is also proposed that broadcast news exposure will be a better predictor of current events knowledge than of fundamental knowledge, but that print news exposure will be a better predictor of fundamental than of current events knowledge. Similarly, it is predicted that broadcast exposure will be more closely related to interpersonal discussion than to anticipated participation, but that print exposure will be more closely related to anticipated participation than to

discussion. In addition, the relationships between media exposure and the criterion variables are expected to vary for subgroups of the young audience at various levels of age, scholarly orientation, and political interest.

### Method

Questionnaires were administered to public school students in two mid-sized midwestern cities with typical socioeconomic characteristics. Students were drawn from the seventh grade ( $N = 149$ ) and tenth grade ( $N = 131$ ) classrooms at each site. The questionnaire contained items measuring the four types of media exposure, political knowledge and behavior, age, scholarly orientation, political interest, gender, and socioeconomic status. The variables were operationalized in the following manner:

*Television News Exposure.* The index of exposure to television news summed items dealing with how often national network newscasts were viewed, how many days had been watched the previous week, whether the news was viewed the day before the survey, the number of days viewed in an average week, and the proportion of the program that was usually watched; in addition, the frequency of viewing morning news-variety programs was included.<sup>1</sup>

*Radio News Exposure.* The radio news listening index summed the estimated number of radio news shows heard on an average day, on the previous day, and the amount of attention paid to radio news stories. *Newspaper News Exposure.* This index summed respondents' answers to how often they read the front page of the newspaper and how many hard news articles they read per day.

*Newsmagazine Exposure.* This was measured by frequency of reading the weekly periodicals such as *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Some analyses call for a comparison of the two classes of broadcast and print media. For these analyses, television news exposure and radio news exposure are summed to form a *broadcast exposure* index. Newspaper news exposure and newsmagazine exposure are summed to form a *print exposure* index.

*Political Knowledge.* An index for overall political knowledge was

<sup>1</sup> The means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the indices are as follows: television news exposure, 17.19, 8.35, .78; radio news exposure, 6.31, 2.82, .71; newspaper news exposure, 4.72, 1.69, .62; newsmagazine exposure, 1.62, .67, estimated at .50; broadcast exposure, 23.50, 9.48, .78; print exposure, 6.34, 1.97, .63; overall political knowledge, 70.47, 8.64, .89; fundamental knowledge, 10.93, 2.08, .68; current events knowledge, 12.88, 2.34, .69; interpersonal discussion, 16.69, 5.04, .88; and participation, 6.32, 2.04, .51.

constructed by summing together 46 questionnaire items, most of the "multiple choice" variety. The typical item posed a question about events, developments, or people in the political sphere, and listed three choices and the fourth alternative of "...?" which students were encouraged to use if they were unsure.<sup>2</sup> This overall knowledge index is used in the contingent correlation analysis.

From the 46 knowledge items, the two more specific knowledge indices were constructed. The *fundamental* knowledge index was created by summing together eight items concerning historical facts or trends relevant to more current events.<sup>3</sup> To make a *current events* knowledge index comparable to the fundamental knowledge index, eight current news items were selected to match as closely as possible those measured in the fundamental knowledge index.<sup>4</sup>

*Political Behavior.* The *interpersonal discussion* index is composed of eight items dealing with interpersonal communication with both family and friends about four news topics.<sup>5</sup> The *participation* index measures anticipated election campaign activities, inclination to run for office, and plans to vote in elections.

*Contingent Variables.* Three variables were measured for contingent analyses: age, scholarly orientation, and political interest. *Age* is indicated by the student's grade in school. *Scholarly orientation* is measured by an index summing self-reported performance in school classes and intention to attend college. The *political interest* index measures how interested the student is in several news topics.<sup>6</sup> For use in the contingent analyses, each of these variables was divided at the median.

<sup>2</sup> Sample knowledge items include: "President Reagan recently made a trip to give a speech, which was the first time he left Washington since he was wounded. Where did he travel to?" "The leader of Japan visited Washington to talk with President Reagan. What did they talk about?" "What is the name of the man who is Budget Director for the U.S.?" "A few months ago, the 52 hostages came back to the United States. In what country were the hostages held prisoner?" "How many hunger strikers have died in Northern Ireland prisons?" "There have been debates about whether the U.S. should send military aid to a Central American country. Which country?" "Which country just elected a new president?" "What does Ronald Reagan want to sell to Saudi Arabia?"

<sup>3</sup> Sample items are: "Poland is run by a Communist government." "The conflict in Northern Ireland is caused by problems between two religious groups."

<sup>4</sup> Sample items are: "What are the people of Poland worried about this year?" "A man in Ireland named Bobby Sands died several weeks ago. How did he die?"

<sup>5</sup> The four topics are: President Reagan, things that happen in other countries (Poland, Russia, Israel, Iran, El Salvador are listed as examples), government and things that happen in Washington, and current problems in the news (crime, inflation, nuclear power, gun control are listed as examples).

<sup>6</sup> The topics included "things that happen in other countries," "things that President Reagan does," "government and things happening in Washington," and politics in general.

Table 1. Zero-order and Corrected Correlations Between Media Exposure and the Criterion Variables.<sup>a</sup>

	Knowledge			Behavior	
	Overall	Current Events	Fundamental	Interpersonal Discussion	Anticipated Participation
Broadcast	.43 (.52)	.39 (.53)	.26 (.35) <sup>b</sup>	.45 (.54)	.29 (.46) <sup>c</sup>
Print	.32 (.43) <sup>d</sup>	.24 (.36)	.24 (.36)	.39 (.52)	.37 (.65) <sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The correlations corrected for attenuation (Nunnally, 1967) are represented within parentheses. Corrections are made based on the internal consistency estimates (Cronbach's alpha) for each index.  
<sup>b</sup> For Broadcast exposure, the difference between Current Events versus Fundamental knowledge attenuation-corrected correlations is significant at the 5 percent level.  
<sup>c</sup> For Broadcast exposure, the difference between Interpersonal Discussion versus Anticipated Participation attenuation-corrected correlations is significant at the 5 percent level.  
<sup>d</sup> For Overall Knowledge, the difference between Broadcast versus Print exposure attenuation-corrected correlations is significant at the 5 percent level.  
<sup>e</sup> For Print exposure, the difference between Interpersonal Discussion versus Anticipated Participation attenuation-corrected correlations is significant at the 5 percent level.

**Background Variables.** In addition to the contingent variables, the student's gender and family socioeconomic status<sup>7</sup> were measured for control purposes. In some analyses, age, scholarly orientation, and political interest are also treated as background predictor variables.

**ANALYSIS**

Correlation and regression analysis are used to explore the relationship between media exposure and each of the criterion variables. Contingent correlations between media exposure and the criterion variables at high versus low levels of age (grade), scholarly orientation, and political interest also are computed.

**Results**

The results are described in the following order: (1) the relationship between media exposure and political knowledge, (2) the relationship between exposure and political behavior, (3) the contingent analyses.

**POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE**

Zero-order correlations were computed between broadcast and print classes of media exposure and overall political knowledge, current events knowledge, and fundamental knowledge. Because of the different reliabilities of the indices, the correlations are corrected for attenu-

<sup>7</sup> Socioeconomic status is indexed by parental occupation, social class of neighborhood, and family member college education.

Table 2. Regression of Criterion Variables on Demographic and Media Variables

	Knowledge			Behavior	
	Overall	Current Events	Fundamental	Interpersonal Discussion	Anticipated Participation
SES	.08 <sup>a</sup>	.06	.08	-.04	.06
Gender <sup>b</sup>	.25	.26	.13	.06	-.06
Grade <sup>c</sup>	.27	.28	.27	.03	-.16
Scholarly orientation	.39	.28	.31	.38	.33
(R <sup>2</sup> for step)	(.33)	(.25)	(.23)	(.14)	(.14)
Television	.27 <sup>a</sup>	.27	.16	.25	.08
Radio	.07	.10	.02	.14	.08
Newspaper	.04	.02	.05	.19	.22
Newsmagazine	.09	.04	.09	.04	.07
(Incremental R <sup>2</sup> for step)	(.11)	(.09)	(.04)	(.17)	(.09)

<sup>a</sup> Coefficients in the first four rows are standardized beta weights controlling for other demographic variables;  $\beta > .11$  significant at 5 percent level.  
<sup>b</sup> Gender is coded female-male.  
<sup>c</sup> Grade in school is coded 7th-10th.  
<sup>d</sup> Coefficients in the bottom rows are standardized beta weights controlling for demographic variables and other exposure variables;  $\beta > .11$  significant at 5 percent level.

ation (Nunnally, 1967) using the internal consistency estimates. Both sets of correlations are presented in Table 1. The description of results and tests of significance pertain to the attenuation-corrected correlations. As expected, broadcast news exposure is more strongly correlated with overall political knowledge than is print news exposure ( $t(3,277) = 2.78, p < .05$ ). While broadcast exposure also is strongly correlated with current events knowledge, it is significantly less strongly correlated with fundamental knowledge ( $t(3,277) = 4.03, p < .05$ ). For print news exposure, the correlations with current events and fundamental knowledge are identical.

Hierarchical regressions were computed to provide a more detailed analysis of the relationship between the media exposure and knowledge variables, with background variables controlled. Entered in the first step of the regressions were socioeconomic status, gender, grade in school, and scholarly orientation (Table 2). The four media exposure indices were added as a block for the second step.

Three of the four background variables are significantly related to overall political knowledge. Males, tenth graders, and students with a strong scholarly orientation are more knowledgeable politically. Of the four media exposure variables, the only significant predictor is television news viewing, with a standardized beta coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of .27. The next strongest predictor is newsmagazine reading.

Corresponding regression analyses were computed for current events and fundamental knowledge. As a block, the four media variables explain twice as much variance in current events knowledge ( $R^2 = .09$ ) as in fundamental knowledge ( $R^2 = .04$ ). Television news viewing is the best predictor of both current events and fundamental knowledge, but the relationship is much stronger for the former. Radio news listening is also a stronger predictor of current events knowledge than of fundamental knowledge. Both of the print media indices, however, are slightly better predictors of fundamental knowledge than of current events knowledge. Addition of the political interest variable into the knowledge regression equations has little impact on the media coefficients.

#### POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

Zero-order and attenuation-corrected correlations were computed between media exposure and interpersonal discussion and anticipated participation (Table 1). Again, the description of results and tests of significance pertain to the attenuation-corrected correlations. The predicted pattern of differences between the discussion and participation correlations emerges: broadcast news exposure is more strongly related to interpersonal discussion than to anticipated participation ( $t(3,277) = 1.66, p < .05$ ), and print news exposure is more strongly related to anticipated participation than to discussion ( $t(3,277) = 3.07, p < .05$ ).

Hierarchical regressions were computed to assess the relationship between media exposure and the political behavior indices, with background variables entered first (Table 2). Students with a strong scholarly orientation are significantly more likely both to engage in interpersonal discussion regarding politics and to anticipate future political activity. Seventh graders are more likely to anticipate participation than are tenth graders.

The four media variables make a substantial contribution to predicting interpersonal discussion ( $R^2 = .17$ ). Television news viewing is once again the strongest predictor ( $\beta = .25$ ), with newspaper news reading and radio news listening also significant predictors. For anticipated participation, newspaper news reading is most closely related ( $\beta = .22$ ), with the remaining three indices failing to reach significance. Again, addition of the interest variable into the regression equations has a negligible impact on the media coefficients.

#### CONTINGENT ANALYSES

Contingent correlations were computed between the broadcast and print exposure and criterion variables at high versus low levels of grade, scholarly orientation, and political interest. The expectation

that the contingent variables would significantly mediate the relationship between print media exposure and the criterion variables was not supported. Only one such contingent relationship emerges, and in the direction opposite to that predicted. The correlation between print media exposure and anticipated participation is stronger for students at a low level of scholarship than for those at a high level. This contingent relationship is also evident for broadcast media exposure.

#### Discussion

The present study sought to examine the impact of four types of media exposure—television news, radio news, newspaper news, and newsmagazines—on two types of political knowledge and two forms of political behavior. In addition, the relationships between media exposure and the criterion variables were examined for subgroups of young persons at various levels of age, scholarly orientation, and political interest.

The results of both correlation and regression analyses support the expectation that broadcast news exposure is more strongly related to overall political knowledge than is print news exposure. Also as predicted, broadcast exposure is a better predictor of current events knowledge than of fundamental knowledge. Contrary to expectations, however, print news exposure predicts the two types of knowledge equally well. The predictions regarding the behavioral variables were supported by the data. Broadcast news exposure is more closely related to interpersonal discussion than to anticipated participation, and print news exposure is more strongly related to participation than to discussion. Only the prediction that print news exposure would be more strongly related to fundamental than to current events knowledge failed to be supported by the data. This failure may be attributed to some of the same characteristics of print news media that led to the original prediction. These characteristics, when interpreted in light of youngsters' limited information-processing abilities, become disadvantages rather than advantages of print for youngsters' gaining fundamental political knowledge. For example, the *in-depth coverage* of print news may result in information overload for the less developed mind. Similarly, the *complexity* of print news stories may render them less comprehensible. The advantage of *self-paced processing* of print applies only to motivated people; the less interested youth may simply fail to capitalize on it.

If processing limitations inhibit youngsters' learning from the print media, then variables indicative of level of processing may mediate fundamental knowledge gain from print news media. Thus older students, brighter students, and more interested students might more efficiently extract fundamental knowledge from the broadcast media

than the younger, less bright, and less interested students. The contingent relationships for fundamental knowledge (not shown) do not reveal any consistent pattern in support of this argument, however. But age, scholarship, and political interest are only indirect indicators of processing. More direct measurement of processing suggests that "intense" processing facilitates learning from television news (Garramone, 1983), but whether it facilitates learning sufficiently to allow the extraction of the more fundamental political knowledge should be tested.

The overall pattern of findings across subgroups provides little evidence of unequal effects of exposure; the news media do not appear to produce knowledge gaps (or behavior gaps) between those adolescents who are brighter or politically interested and those who are less scholarly or uninterested. If anything, the media serve a compensatory function in some cases by more strongly stimulating the political orientations of exposed students scoring low on these background variables.

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## Not Forbidding Isn't Allowing: The Cognitive Basis of the Forbid-Allow Asymmetry

HANS-J. HIPPLER AND NORBERT SCHWARZ

SURVEY RESEARCH has repeatedly demonstrated that minor changes in the wording of a question can have a major impact on the obtained responses (see Kalton and Schuman, 1980, and Schuman and Presser, 1981 for reviews). A wording effect that has received much attention in more than four decades of research is the forbid-allow contrast identified by Rugg (1941). He reported that Americans were more likely to support freedom of speech when the appropriate question was worded, "Do you think the United States should forbid public speeches against democracy" (yes/no?) rather than, "Do you think the United States should allow public speeches against democracy" (yes/no?). Specifically, only 54 percent of the respondents who were asked

**Abstract** Previous research demonstrated that respondents are more likely to endorse the idea that something should "not be allowed" (or "not be forbidden") than to endorse the idea that it should be "forbidden" (or "allowed"), even though these expressions seem logically equivalent. The hypothesis is advanced that this asymmetry is due to the response behavior of indifferent respondents who neither endorse that something should be forbidden nor that it should be allowed, resulting in higher endorsements of the negative form of both question wordings. Data consistent with that explanation are presented and the cognitive mechanism underlying the response behavior of indifferent is discussed.

Hans-J. Hippler is Project Director, Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen (ZUMA), Mannheim, and Norbert Schwarz is Assistant Professor of Psychology, Universität Heidelberg, Federal Republic of Germany. This research was partially supported by the Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen and grant Schw 278/2 from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft to Norbert Schwarz and Fritz Strack. The authors gratefully acknowledge the stimulating discussions with Charles F. Cancell, Howard Schuman, Seymour Sudman, and Fritz Strack. Correspondence should be addressed to H. J. Hippler, ZUMA e.V., Postfach 5969, D-6800 Mannheim 1, West Germany.