The nature and extent of media influence

Does the Media have the power to influence our thoughts and behaviors?

If it does, how does the media do this? (the nature of media influence) and... who can be influenced and by how much? (the extent of media influence) For instance does the extent of media influence apply only to certain individuals or can large groups in society – a ‘mass’ audience, be influenced simultaneously?
Terminology

**Passive Audience**
Passive audiences are said not to exercise choice. They receive any media targeted at them and accept the message without any interpretation or questioning. Such audiences (if they exist) are highly susceptible to media influence whether they want to be or not.

**Active Audience**
Active audiences are said to exercise choice. They pick and choose the media they want to consume, and can ignore or accept other media messages that may be targeted at them. Active audiences question and interpret media message. Such audiences are not susceptible to media influence - unless they want to be.
**Terminology**

**Closed Text**
A message is embedded in the text. The text can only be understood in the way it was intended to be read.

**Open Text**
The text can be read in multiple ways. Its reading depends not only on those who created the text but also on those who read and interpret the text.
Terminology

**Top-down**
Communication theories that seek to explain what media does to audiences - the assumption is the media has the power. It is in control of the production distribution and reception of media texts and is therefore very influential.

**Bottom-up**
Communication theories that seek to explain what audiences do with media - the assumption is audiences have the power. They are in control of how they receive, consume and interpret media texts and therefore the concept of media influence is more personal and less straightforward.
An intended meaning is put into the text by its maker which is then *imparted directly* to the audience.

Shannon and Weaver’s Traditional Model of Communication: This model of communication stresses linear communication. The sender sends messages to the receivers. Although those messages are affected by noise (disruptions, technological issues, accents etc.), according to this theory, messages should reach their destinations without much trouble.
The main **EFFECTS** theory is

- The Bullet or Hypodermic Needle theory

‘effects’ theories hold that the media is all-powerful with the capacity to directly influence the behavior of mass audiences (e.g. the mass hysteria created by Orson Welles’ radio play “War of the Worlds”, the wide-reaching effectiveness of WW1 & WW2 propaganda, the prevalence of alleged copycat violence after watching films like “Child’s Play 3”, “Natural Born Killers”, “The Dark Knight Rises” etc.)
The main LIMITED EFFECTS theories are

✓ The Two-step Flow theory
✓ The Agenda-setting function theory
✓ The Cultivation theory

‘Limited effects’ theories hold that the media does have the potential to influence audiences (e.g. regular media consumers may cultivate the view that the world is a fearful place in which to live – the so-called ‘mean-world’ syndrome. This could be because some audiences are exposed to many hours of media that contains violence, and/or, media organisations that set agendas by foregrounding fear stories that ultimately create moral panics.
Meaning arises from the interaction the audience has with the text. According to Stuart Hall, the audience / receiver may decode the message in one of three ways:

- **Dominant-hegemonic position** whereby the audience identifies with the message and agrees with it.
- **Negotiated position** whereby the audience negotiates an understanding of the message and maintains a neutral stance.
- **Oppositional position** whereby the audience disagrees with the message and rejects it.
The main **RECEPTION / CONSTRUCTIVIST theories are**

- The Uses and Gratification theory
- The Reinforcement theory
- Postmodernism theory

Reception/constructivist theories hold that the media has little to no power to influence audiences as it’s the audience who chooses and creates meaning from a text - not the other way round. (e.g. because audiences consciously choose the media they want to consume, and because audiences are made up of individuals shaped by years of unique socialisation, the potential for involuntary media influence is narrow. All the media can do is reinforce pre-existing tendencies in people. TV ratings is a further example of audience power rather than media power – if people choose not to watch a show, it doesn’t rate and gets taken off air.)
Terminology

POLITICAL-ECONOMY model

this model postulates that “mass-media” is a structural element within the society’s political – economic structures.

• Potential influence is tied in with questions such as who owns the media?; how important / influential is the media dollar?; is media ownership too concentrated?; who controls and regulates the media and who benefits?

• This model only looks at media influence in terms of corporate profits and political agendas – it ignores the culture within which media texts are produced and consumed.
Hypodermic Needle Theory
(aka Bullet Theory) developed by: Frankfurt School, University of Frankfurt, Germany 1923

- Top-Down theory (the Media is in complete control; audiences are unable to avoid getting the intended message - like being injected with a needle.)
- Linear Model / Effects Theory (what the media does to audiences)
- Audience is passive
- Text is closed - no room for individual interpretation
- Adorno, Horkheimer & Marcuse (known as The Frankfurt School) developed this theory after observing Nazi Propaganda pre-WWII
The text of this 1940 poster reads: "Youth Serves the Fuhrer. All 10-year-olds into the Hitler Youth." Membership in the Hitler Youth had become mandatory in 1936.

The caption: "The Jew: The inciter of war, the prolonger of war." This poster was released in late 1943 or early 1944. Courtesy of Dr. Robert D. Brooks.

This poster from the 1930's, promotes the Nazi monthly "New People" from the party's racial office. The text reads: "This genetically ill person will cost our people's community 60,000 marks over his lifetime. Citizens, that is your money. Read Neues Volk, the monthly of the racial policy office of the NSDAP."
Hypodermic Needle Theory (aka Bullet Theory) developed by: Frankfurt School, University of Frankfurt, Germany 1923

- Frankfurt school members fled Germany at the start of the Nazi era before the outbreak of WW2.
- They re-established the school in the USA in 1935 where they would have witnessed the effects of the infamous War of the Worlds broadcast by Orson Welles.
- No real testing of this theory, based on observation and speculation.
- Theory is largely discredited however some individuals and community groups still use it as supporting evidence. Who might these people be?

http://lessonbucket.com/media-in-minutes/episode-1-the-hypodermic-needle-theory/
Two-Step Flow Theory
Developed by Paul F Lazarsfeld & Elihu Katz, 1944-55

- This theory asserts that information from the media moves in two distinct stages. Ideas often flow from the mass media to less active sections of the population through opinion leaders (for example, church/community leaders, media commentators, political activists, politically aware celebrities like Marilyn Manson as observed in Mike Moore’s “Bowling for Columbine”)

- First, opinion leaders who pay close attention to the mass media and its messages, receive the information.

- Then, these leaders pass on their own interpretations in addition to the actual mass media content.

- Bottom-Up theory (the opinion leaders rather than the Media are in control)

- Limited Effects Model because although opinion leaders may actively construct their own meaning based on their interpretations of the messages, audiences who align themselves with the opinion leaders of their choice will adopt the opinion leader’s interpretations rather than forming their own

- Texts are open to the interpretation of the opinion leaders but often closed to their followers

Agenda Setting Function Theory
Developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in (University of North Carolina) in 1972

The Media can’t tell you what to think, but it can tell you what to think about.

- Mainly a Top-Down theory (the Media is mostly in control due to the ‘gatekeeping’ element in this communication theory)
- A Limited Effects theory (what the media does to audiences) but with some elements of the Reception/Constructivist model (what audiences do with the Media) as interpretation of texts can still occur despite the selection and omission process (see next slide)
- Audience is mainly passive given the carefully filtered content and treatment but can still be active even within this carefully controlled media environment (see next slide)
- Text may be open but there’s little room for individual interpretation
- [http://www.ted.com/talks/megan_kamerick_women_should_represent_women_in_media.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/megan_kamerick_women_should_represent_women_in_media.html)
Agenda Setting Function Theory
Developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in (University of North Carolina) in 1972

- Using the process of selection and omission (aka ‘gatekeeping’) the media controls what is spoken about in the public forums it controls - eg TV and online news & current affairs, newspapers, Government advertising campaigns like the TAC ads

- People learn to read the ‘signs’ of these texts (eg with respect to print media, how the front page carries the most important story, and smaller less important articles are relegated to the back pages)

- Some issues get lots of coverage, others issues are rarely heard. Media is in control of this “amount” of coverage as they own the means of distribution

- There are 4 levels of ‘reading’ attributed to this theory which are dependent on both text and audience and explains why this theory is also sometimes included within the Reception / Constructivist group
  - 1st - Dominant Preferred - audience receive intended message
  - 2nd - Oppositional - audiences views stop or block intended message
  - 3rd - Negotiated - audience see both sides (intended & oppositional) & debate within themselves
  - 4th - Aberrant - Audience don’t understand - no message received

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvodhsMc2QM&feature=channel&list=UL
CULTIVATION THEORY
Developed 1976
ANNENBERG SCHOOL FOR COMMUNICATION  George Gerbner

- Media does have power (TOP-DOWN) but only in heavy viewing situations
- Audience is ACTIVE but certain attitudes may be developed, shaped by heavy viewing over time e.g. that ethnic minorities are mostly to blame for terrorism and crime; that crime is on the rise ('mean world syndrome')
- Begins as OPEN text but certain media representations if repeated over time may create their own reality and shape audiences’ attitudes
- Can also be seen as a hybrid limited effects and reception/constructivist model as meaning initially arises from interaction with audience and the way they interpret “signs” used by the Media – but over time, continued exposure to these texts can cultivate common attitudes (effects) replacing individual interpretations.
- The main common attitude generated according to Gerbner is the perception amongst heavy media consumers, that the world is a fearful place. These heavy consumers are more likely to act upon their fearful perceptions than non heavy viewers.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ8iE8bvLVg&feature=channel&list=UL
Uses and Gratification Theory
Developed in 1974 by Blumler and Katz - Leeds University

- Bottom-Up theory (the audience rather than the Media is in control)
- Reception-Constructivist Theory
- Audience is active choosing what and how they receive media
- Text is open to interpretation
- Developed by sociologists. (McQuail, Blumer, Lazarsfeld)
- They did research and surveys asking people if they acted due to media pressure. People responded “No”.
Uses and Gratification Theory

Developed 1940s Structural Functionalist School

- Audiences determine the media content they will consume through word of mouth and community popularity (ratings - a form of quantitative research)
- Media Industry argues “We give people what they want, if it doesn’t rate it gets axed”
- Audience use media as entertainment, nothing more. They select their media according to what they like/don’t like.
Reinforcement Theory

Developed 1960s - 1970s

Joseph Klapper

- Bottom-Up theory (the audience rather than the Media is in control)
- Reception-Constructivist Model
- Audience is active
- Text is open to interpretation depending on audiences’ socialisation
- Media texts can’t influence the adoption of new attitudes and behaviors – can only reinforce those which audiences already hold and believe.
- There are other more powerful influences that shape audiences’ reading of texts than the media including:
  - Family (primary socialisation)
  - Peer Group
  - Religion
  - School (secondary socialisation)
  - Social Class
  - Workplace
Reinforcement Theory

Developed 1960s - 1970s
Joseph Klapper

• Some Media influence may still occur but this is limited to special conditions e.g. when a media text presents a brand new topic or issue that the audience has never experienced before. In this case the media may have some influence.

• Summing up: according to this theory any message derived from media texts depends on the interaction with the reader, the text and reader's particular set of socialising agents.
Postmodernism Theory
developed in France in the 60s & 70s by Jacques Derrida & Roland Barthes

- Postmodernism theory asserts that an audience member is not an immutable entity or ‘self’. There always exists in an individual, tensions about decision making and interpretation. This tension is a consequence of conflicting knowledge, claims made by ‘experts’, and cultural differences (e.g. gender, race, class, socialisation.) Therefore, to properly study a text a reader must understand how the work is related to his or her own personal concept of self. This self-perception plays a critical role in one's interpretation of meaning. The author's intended meaning, such as it is (for the author's identity as an immutable "self" with a single, discernible "intent" is also a fictional construct), is secondary to the meaning that the reader perceives. Postmodernism rejects the idea of a literary text having a single purpose, a single meaning, or one singular existence. Instead, every individual reader creates a new and individual purpose, meaning, and existence for a given text.
Postmodernism Theory

developed in France in the 60s & 70s by Jacques Derrida & Roland Barthes

- Accordingly, media texts are always open to interpretation – that is, a media text has more than just the one ‘reading’ or message supposedly implanted by its creator. Meaning is only introduced to the text by the reader. Therefore, every ‘reading’ is different because every ‘reader’ is an individual. Thus, the media has no power to influence mass audiences but individuals might be (although the exact extent of such influence is difficult to measure.)

- Postmodernism takes very literally the view that every individual has his or her own way of reading a media text – be it a TV program, advertisement, song, article, news report etc. Postmodernists don’t like to group responses together – they believe that everyone’s response is unique and not only that, but also that people’s responses may change over time.
Postmodernism Theory

developed in France in the 60s & 70s by Jacques Derrida & Roland Barthes

For example in 1943, American movie audiences would have been highly entertained by a Warner Brothers ‘Merrie Melodies’ cartoon called “Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs”. The animation, notable for its jazz soundtrack and for being an all-black parody of the Disney feature animation “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, would have been predominantly ‘read’ as funny and clever. It also contained anti-Japanese sentiments having been made during WWII so another reading would have been patriotism. A couple of decades later however, this exaggerated, stylistic portrayal of black people using the ‘blackface’ acting technique in which white people painted their faces black and adopted exaggerated movements and dialogue to represent African Americans (a technique widely accepted in white American society at the time) was predominantly read as a racist text. The cartoon was banned in 1968 and has rarely been shown on television. It has never been officially released on home video. Today however, it is often read as a historic cultural text and often named as one of the best cartoons ever made, in part for its African-American-inspired jazz and swing music. It is considered the animator’s (Bob Clampett) masterpiece. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUpj5a968u0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUpj5a968u0)
Postmodernism Theory
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- Although the public’s ‘reading’ and response to this text has varied over time – the text has remained the same! This is exactly what postmodernists argue:
  > There is **no** single meaning in the text itself (that is, that every audience will ‘read’ the “Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs” cartoon in the same way).
  > The meaning of the text resides in the viewer.
  > There is no such thing as an authority on a particular issue and, because we are all individuals, everyone’s opinion is equally valid.
  > We can’t talk about a particular media product having a major influence over everybody because everybody will have his or her own unique way of interpreting it. In other words, there is no such thing as a dominant/preferred reading. Readings are more often negotiated or even oppositional – audiences make their own meanings.
  > Although a media product will not have major influence over everyone, a media product may influence individuals – but this cannot be measured.
  > The best conclusion we can come to in the media influence debate, is .... **for some of the viewers, for some of the time, the message they hear, see or read may overlap with the intended message and therefore could be influential.**
Summing up...

- Be able to describe, compare and contrast each theory in detail
- Describe key viewpoints about the nature and extent of media influence
- Analyse arguments and evaluate evidence about the nature and extent of media influence
- Discuss the relationship between audiences and a range of media forms and texts
- Analyse reasons for and effectiveness of regulation of media
- Discuss issues in assessing media influence