

ACADEMIC APPROACHES

The way we think about the communication and media influence is underpinned by different academic approaches.

	THE EFFECTS TRADITION	CULTURAL STUDIES	POLITICAL ECONOMY
OVERVIEW	The effects tradition is an approach to the study of media influence which focuses on the effect that media texts have on audiences. This way of thinking about the media developed in the early days of the mass media and has become a dominant way of thinking about communication.	Rather than focusing simply on the effect of the media, the cultural studies approach sees the act of communication and the issue of media influence within the context of society and culture. It acknowledges that the media are part of society, aiming to look at the 'whole picture' by examining media consumption in our everyday lives.	The political economy approach to communication has its origins in Marxism and concerns itself with who owns the media. It suggests that the mass media is part of a capitalist system which incorporates advertisers, corporations and government.
FOCUS	Media effects	Individual media consumption and the construction of meaning	Political and economic systems, e.g. organisations, ownership, advertisers, government and regulation.
RESEARCH	Experimental studies Quantitative evidence	Surveys and interviews Qualitative evidence	Using models, such as Chomsky's Propaganda model, to explain the operation of the mass media.
STRENGTHS WEAKNESS	The real weakness of the effects tradition is its narrow focus on media effects. As noted by David Gauntlett in '10 Things Wrong with the Effects Model', it tackles the problem backwards, starting with the assumption that the media has an effect on audiences, then attempting to prove it. The effects tradition is also criticised for treating audiences, particularly children, as inadequate and susceptible to influence. Experimental studies conducted to prove media effects usually occur in an artificial, laboratory setting which takes media consumption out of the real world. Some research into media effects has also been criticised for being driven by highly conservative lobby groups.	The cultural effects tradition approaches the idea of media influence by conducting qualitative research. Researchers ask people how they use the media. This is considered superior to the effects tradition because it doesn't make the assumption that the media influences audience. Instead, cultural studies researchers ask people to talk about their experience with the media in an attempt to gain greater insight into the process of communication. This allows researchers to deal with ideas too complex for traditional, quantitative surveys. Cultural studies has been criticised by those who adopt the political economy approach as ignoring the importance of capitalism and economic power structures in the mass media.	The political economy approach to media and communication looks at how the mass media operates. It focuses on concepts like media ownership, the importance of the advertising dollar, media regulation and the power relationships between these. It asks questions like: Who owns the media? Who does the media benefit? Who has power and why? The political economy approach has been criticised for not focusing on the culture in which media production and consumption occurs.