



CHAPTER 3

# What Is a Media Effect?

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## What Is a Media Effect?

**T**his chapter focuses on the idea of media effect. The chapter begins with an analysis of the key elements that we must consider when thinking about media effects, then uses those elements to build to a broad definition. The chapter then presents two Media Effects Templates (METs) as a way of organizing the great variety of effects. These METs serve as the maps of media effects that will be used to structure all remaining chapters.

### DEFINING MEDIA EFFECT

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It is important to use a broad perspective on media effects in order to understand the incredibly wide range of influence the media exert and also to appreciate the truly wide range of effects research that has been produced by media scholars. However, when people in their everyday lives think about media effects, they typically limit their thinking to negative things that happen to other people after watching too much “bad” content. For example, people believe that exposure to media violence causes aggression; media stories with sexual depictions lead to risky sexual behaviors; and bad language leads to coarse expression in the population. These beliefs continually show up in public opinion polls. And these topics are popular among media effects researchers. This type of public opinion and this type of research are so prevalent that many people have come to think of media effects as primarily being negative behaviors that show up immediately after exposure to particular media messages. This perspective is a useful starting place for thinking about media effects, but then we need to move on to a broader perspective. To begin this movement toward a broader perspective, let’s examine the key issues we need to deal with when considering a complete conceptualization of media effects.

### Key Issues in Media Effects Definitions

When we look across all the ways that scholars write about media effects, we can see that there are eight issues that concern them. These issues are timing (immediate vs. long term), duration (temporary vs. permanent), valence (negative or positive), change (difference vs. no difference), intention (or non-intention), the level of effect (micro vs. macro), direct (or

indirect), and manifestation (observable vs. latent). When you understand these issues, you can appreciate why we have such a wide variety of things that have been identified as media effects.

*Timing.* In everyday life, most people think that media effects are things that show up during a media exposure or immediately afterward. For example, if parents notice that their young children begin to wrestle aggressively when they watch Saturday morning cartoons, those parents are likely to see a connection between the TV shows and their children's aggressive behavior. Of course, the media exert immediate effects, but they also exert influences on people over the long term, when it takes a long time before we can see any evidence of an effect.

*Duration.* Some effects last a short time, then go away, while other effects are permanent. For example, Cindy may listen to the words of a new song on her iPod and remember those words the rest of her life, or she may not be able to remember them an hour later.

*Valence.* In everyday life, people typically think of media effects as being negative, such as exposure to violence leading to antisocial behavior. But the media also exert positive effects. We can learn all kinds of useful things by reading newspapers, magazines, books, and websites. We can use music and stories from all kinds of media to shape our moods and trigger pleasant emotions. We can use the media to interact with other people and make us feel part of interesting communities, both real and virtual.

There are times when a particular effect can be either negative or positive depending on the context. Let's take the desensitization effect as an example of an effect that can be either positive or negative. Desensitization can be positive when a therapist helps her patient overcome an irrational fear of flying in airplanes by showing her patient television shows about people happily boarding airplanes and enjoying air travel. But desensitization can be a negative effect when people lose their natural inclination to feel sympathy for other people after watching years of characters being victimized by violence.

*Change.* When we think of effects, we typically think of change, that is, a change in behavior or a change in attitude. If there is no change, some people argue that there is no effect. But some effects—perhaps the most important and powerful media effects—show up as no change. For example, most advertising has as its purpose the reinforcing of existing habits among consumers. Advertisers do not want their brand-loyal customers to change; instead they want to reinforce existing buying behaviors. If we ignore the reinforcement effect—where there is no change in behavior—then we will have too narrow a perspective on media effects.

*Intention.* When the media industries are criticized for negative effects, one of their defense strategies is to point out that they did not intend to create a negative effect. For example, when the media are criticized for presenting so much violence in Hollywood movies, producers of those movies will say that they are merely trying to entertain people, not teach them to behave violently. However, there are many effects that occur even though the producers of those media messages, as well as the consumers of those messages, did not intend them to occur.

*Level.* Most of the research on media effects looks at individuals as the targets of the effects. Scholars have produced a very large literature documenting a wide array of effects on individuals. But the media also exert influences on more macro-level entities such as the public, society, and institutions.

The research studies that examine individual-level effects differ fundamentally from the research studies that examine macro-level effects. These differences are not only in methods needed to measure the effects but also in the types of questions addressed and the types of conclusions presented. Typically, individual-level studies use an experiment or a survey as they focus on how individual people respond to different media messages. In contrast, macro-level studies gather aggregated data from institutions, such as the courts (rates of conviction and incarceration), education (rates of graduation, average scores on standardized achievement tests by school district, and such), religion (size of memberships, attendances at various services, and such), politics (voting rates, public opinion polls on various issues and support for candidates, and the like).

*Direct and Indirect.* Sometimes the media exert a direct effect on individuals, while other times the effect is more indirect, such as through institutions. For example, a direct effect occurs when a person watches a political ad and decides to vote for a particular candidate. An indirect effect occurs when the media continually raise the prices for political advertising, so that candidates must spend much more time raising money, which makes them more beholden to organizations that give them the most money, which influences the



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policies they support most, which influences the services that governmental bodies provide, which influences us as individuals. Even people who are never exposed to political ads are affected by them indirectly.

*Manifestation.* Some effects are easy to observe, such as when someone changes her behavior soon after being exposed to a particular media message. For example, Heather might be watching TV and see an ad for a special offer for a pizza. She grabs her phone, dials the number on the screen, and orders a pizza. But other effects are very difficult to observe; this does not necessarily mean they are not occurring or that the media are not exerting an influence.

## The Definition

Now that you have seen the list of issues that underlie the thinking about media effects, you are ready for the working definition that structures this book. That definition is, Media-influenced effects are those things that occur as a result—either in part or in whole—from media influence. They can occur immediately during exposure to a media message, or they can take a long time to occur after any particular exposure. They can last for a few seconds or an entire lifetime. They can be positive as well as negative. They can show up clearly as changes but they can also reinforce existing patterns, in which case the effect appears as no change. They can occur whether the media have an intention for them to occur or not. They can affect individual people or all people in the form of the public. They can also affect institutions and society. They can act directly on a target (a person, the public, an institution, or society) or they can act indirectly. And, finally, they can be easily observable or they can be latent and therefore much more difficult to observe.

This definition of media effect is, of course, very broad. As such, it includes many things. That is the point of the definition. Remember that media messages are so constant and so pervasive that we are continually being exposed to media information either directly from media exposures or indirectly by other people talking about media exposures. Therefore, we need to acknowledge that the media are continually exerting an influence on us. However, this does not mean that the media are constantly causing effects in us, because we are always able to reject the media influence and create our own effects. But in order to reject the media influence, we have to know what it is we are rejecting, that is, what effects will occur if we do not do something to head them off. For this reason, it is important that you learn what the full range of media effects are and how the media influence contributes to those many effects.

## Need to Organize Media Effects

Because this definition is so broad as to capture the full range of media effects, it encompasses a great many such effects. See a partial list of those effects in Exhibit 3.1. With such a large number of effects, it is important that we organize them in some way to make the challenge of understanding the full set manageable. For Exhibit 3.1, I organized the effects alphabetically. But this alphabetical organization is not a useful one unless you already knew of an effect and wanted to see if it appeared on this list; then the alphabetical listing

**Exhibit 3.1** Partial List of Media Effects

Advertising	Cultivation	Homogenization
Affluent society	Cultural imperialism	Imitation
Agenda building	Culture of narcissism	Indirect effects
Agenda setting	Decision making	Information flow
Aggression	Diffusion of innovations	Information seeking
Associative network building	Direct effects	Integrated response
Attitude construct creation	Disinhibition	Interpretation by social class
Audience as commodification	Disposition altering	Interpretive resistance
Audience construction by media	Distribution of knowledge	Knowledge gap
Audience flow	Double action gatekeeping	Double jeopardy
Audience polarization	Drench	Least objectionable programming
Automatic activation	Elaboration likelihood	Levels of processing
Availability-valence altering	Elite pluralism	Limited capacity information processing
Buffering	Empathy activation	Marketplace alteration
Capacity limits	Encoding-decoding	Mass audience
Catharsis	Excitation transfer	Media access
Channel repertoire reinforcement	Exemplification	Media as culture industries
Character affiliation	Expectancy value	Media culture
Civic engagement	Fraction of selection	Media enjoyment
Coalition building	Framing	Media enjoyment as attitude
Cognitive dissonance	Gatekeeping	Media entertainment
Cognitive response	Global village	Media flow
Conservative/moralist decision making	Gratification seeking	Media system dependency
Consumer culture creation and reinforcement	Gravitation	Medium as message
Cue activation	Hegemony	Message construction
	Heuristic processing	Mood management
	Hidden persuaders	

*(Continued)*

## Exhibit 3.1 (Continued)

Motivated attention and motivated processing	Power elite	Social construction of meaning
Neo-associationistic thinking	Priming	Social construction of media technologies
Neo-mass audience	Principled reasoning	Social identity
Network political priming	Profit-driven logic of safety	Social learning
News content	Program choice	Social norms
News diffusion	Proteus effect	Sociology of news
News factory	Pseudo-events blur reality	Spiral of silence
News frame creation	Psychodynamics	Synapse priming
News selection	Psychological conditioning	Technological determinism
Newsworker socialization	Rally effect	Television trivialization of public life
One-dimensional man	Reasoned action	Third-person effect
Parasocial interaction	Reception	Transactional effects
Perception of hostile media	Resource dependency	Transmission of information
Persuasion	Revealed preferences	Transportation of audiences
Play	Ritual reinforcement	Two-step flow
Pluralistic ignorance	Selective exposure	Uses and dependency
Political socialization	Selective gatekeeping	Uses and gratifications
Political signification	Selective perception	Videomalaise
Polysemic interpretations	Semiotic interpretations	
	Social cognitions	

could be useful. However, this form of organization does not help us see the underlying structure revealing how the various effects are related to one another.

Another way to organize effects is by topic area, such as violence, news, persuasion, sex, new technologies, social groups (Blacks, Latinos, gays, Arabs, older adults, and so on), sports, religion, occupations of characters, and invasions of privacy. While these and other topics are certainly interesting and relevant to media effects, they hardly constitute a coherent set. That is, there are some effects that span across several topic areas. Also, there are many effects that do not fit into an organization by topic, and many media effects would be left out of such an organizational scheme. Therefore organizing media effects by topic leaves us with an organizational scheme that is incomplete.

In the following section of the chapter, I present a design that is broad enough to include the full range of media effects and that is organized such that it shows how the different



effects are related to one another. This organizational scheme begins by making a distinction between individual-level effects and macro-level effects. This individual/aggregate distinction is concerned with whether the effect is focused primarily on the individual person or whether the effect is focused primarily on a group of people. Individual-level effects can be studied by looking at changes (or non-changes) in one person at a time. Each person is a unit. Researchers ask questions of each person or observe the behavior of each person. Results of these research studies are reported as how the media affect individuals either immediately or over time. In contrast, aggregate effects are those that act on large groups of people where the focus is on the group rather than on individual people. Aggregate units are typically the public, society, and institutions, such as the criminal justice system, the economy, the political system, and so on.

## ORGANIZING INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL MEDIA EFFECTS

How can we organize all the media effects that researchers have discovered? With those effects on individuals, there are two dimensions that are particularly useful. One of these is the type of effect, such as whether the effect influenced a person's behavior, attitude, emotion, and so on. The second of these is how the media exert their influence on the individual. When we put these two dimensions together we construct a matrix that has enough categories to help organize all these effects.

### Type of Effects on Individuals

There are six types of effects on individuals. These six differ in terms of the part of the person affected or the character of the experience of the effect within an individual. These six are cognition, belief, attitude, affect, physiology, and behavior. All individual-level media effects studies examine how the media exert an influence on one or more of these six types.

A *cognitive media effect* occurs when media exposure influences a person's mental processes or the product of those mental processes. The cognitive effect that is easiest to document is the acquisition of factual information from media messages, particularly from books, newspapers, television news stories, and informational websites. The human mind can absorb this information through the process of memorization. However, the human mind can do far more than memorize; it can transform information into knowledge. This transformation of information can take the form of inferring patterns across media messages. The human mind can also group media messages in different ways to create new meanings. It can generalize beyond media messages to generate principles about real life. All of these mental activities are cognitive effects on individuals.

*Beliefs* have been defined as cognitions about the probability that an object or event is associated with a given attribute (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Simply stated, a belief is faith that something is real or is true. The media continually create and shape our beliefs by showing us more of the world than we are able to see directly for ourselves. None of us has ever met George Washington, but we all believe he existed and was one of the founders of the United States as a country, because we have read about him in history books and websites and seen films about him. Each of us holds beliefs about the existence of a great many

things that we have never seen directly in our real lives; many of these beliefs have come from media messages.

**Attitudes** are judgments about something. For example, people see a character in a film and make judgments about that character's attractiveness, hero status, likeability, and so on. When the media also present stories about people, events, issues, and products in the real world, these stories often trigger the need for us to make our own judgments about controversial issues, political candidates, advertised products, and such.

**Affect** refers to the feelings that people experience. This includes emotions and moods. The media can trigger emotions, especially fear, lust, anger, and laughter. The media also provide people with lots of opportunities to manage their moods, such that when we are feeling stressed with all the problems in our real lives, we can chill by listening to music, forget our problems by watching television, or lose ourselves in the experience of playing games on the Internet.

A **physiological effect** is an automatic bodily response. The body response can be either purely automatic (such as pupil dilation, blood pressure, galvanic skin response) or quasi-automatic (heart rate, sexual responses). For example, when people watch an action/adventure movie, their heart rates and blood pressure typically increase. Their muscles tense and their palms sweat. They are experiencing a fight-or-flight response that has been hard wired into humans' brains. Threats trigger attention, and the body prepares itself to fight a predator or to flee. This fight-or-flight effect has enabled the human race to survive for thousands of years.

**Behaviors** are typically defined as the overt actions of an individual (Albarracin, Zanna, Johnson & Kumkale, 2005). Media effects researchers have conducted a lot of studies in which they observe people's media exposure behaviors to see which media they use and how they use those media. Researchers also expose people to particular media messages, then observe their subsequent behaviors for things like aggression, use of advertised products, and debating of political issues.

## Media-Influenced Functions

When any of the six types of effects occur in an individual, we need to determine whether or not that occurrence was influenced by the media. If we conclude that the effect was influenced by the media, then we have a media effect. This does not mean that the media were the sole cause of the type of effect; instead we mean that the media played some sort of a role in bringing about that effect.

How do the media exert their influence? There are four possible ways. These four ways generally span across all six types of effects. They are functions in the sense that they refer to distinct actions that influence and shape the character of an effect differently in each of the six categories of type.

These four media-influenced functions are acquiring, triggering, altering, and reinforcing. The first two of these functions influence immediate effects that would show up either during the exposure or immediately after. The third—altering—has features that can show up immediately during exposure as an immediate effect, but it also has other features that may take a longer period of time to manifest themselves. And the fourth function is a long-term effect that would take a long time to manifest itself. Let's examine each of these functions in some detail, then we will use them to construct a map to organize the range of individual level effects.

*Acquiring.* Every media message is composed of elements, and during exposures to these messages individuals acquire and retain some of these elements. Message elements include things like facts, images, sounds, a pundit's attitude about something, the depiction of a sequence of events, and so on. During a media exposure, a person could pay attention to certain elements in a message and keep those elements in his or her memory. This is an immediate effect because the element is committed to memory during the exposure to the message. This memory might last a few seconds or a few years, but it is not how long the memory lasts that determines whether the effect is an immediate one or not—it is when the effect first occurs.

The acquiring function is applicable to all types of effects except for physiology, where media messages have no power to *create* a physiological element in an individual. Individuals acquire information and store it in their memory structures. People can also acquire beliefs, attitudes, affective information, and behavioral sequences in the same manner through the use of the skill of memorization. With all of these types of effects, the media are creating something in a person's mind that was not there before the exposure. It is possible to argue that all of these effects are essentially cognitive, because they all require the use of the cognitive skill of memorization and the retention of information in the individual's memory. And that is a valid point. However, while the process and the skill used may be the same across categories, the nature of what is retained is very different. Thus the function remains the same, but the effect itself is different and requires different categories of cognition, attitude, and belief.

*Triggering.* During media exposures, the media can activate something that already exists in the individual. The triggering effect is applicable for all six categories of effects. A media message could activate the recall of previously learned information, the recall of an existing attitude or belief, an emotion, a physiological reaction, or a previously learned behavioral sequence.

The media can also trigger a process that sets a person off on a task involving many steps. For example, when people read some news coverage about a political candidate that they have never heard about before, they have no existing attitude about that candidate. During exposure to this news coverage, people can take the information from the news story and compare it to their standards for political candidates and create an attitude. This is different than simple acquisition, because the person is not memorizing someone else's attitude presented in the media but instead going through a construction process in the creation of his or her own attitude; in this case the media message element of a new piece of information triggered in the person the construction of a new attitude.

The media can also trigger a reconstruction process. A media message might present information that does not conform to a person's existing knowledge structure, so the person must do something to incorporate the new information into his or her existing knowledge structure. For example, let's say that Mark has a very favorable attitude about a particular breakfast cereal but then is exposed to a media message that presents facts about the breakfast cereal using contaminated ingredients; this new information is likely to trigger a reevaluation of his previously positive attitude.

*Altering.* During an exposure, the media can alter something that is already present in the individual. The altering effect works with all types of effects. Media messages can alter a

person's knowledge structures with the addition of new facts. A belief can be altered when the media present a fact revealing that an individual's existing belief was faulty. The media can alter individuals' standards for use in constructing attitudes. Individuals who continually expose themselves to arousing elements in stories of horror and violence will have their natural fight-or-flight responses worn down. By shifting content, the media can alter a person's mood. When individuals continually play interactive games, this practice serves to improve their hand-eye coordination and reduce reaction times to stimuli.

The alteration can show up immediately (that is, during an exposure or immediately after the exposure to the media message) or it can take a long time to show up. The alteration can be temporary (and disappear after a few seconds) or it can last a long time. Most of the research on long-term media effects is based on assumptions of long-term media influence as a gradual shaping process. This is a kind of a drip-drip-drip process of message after message slowly altering our knowledge structures. Greenberg (1988) reminds us that there are also "drench" influences. He says that not all media messages have the same impact and that not all characters in media stories are equally influential on our beliefs and attitudes. Some portrayals stand out because they "are deviant, are intense, and thus are more important viewing experiences" (p. 98).

*Reinforcing.* Through repeated exposures, the media gradually and continually add greater weight to something already existing in a person, thus making that something more fixed and harder to change. The reinforcement function is applicable to all six types of effects. When the media continually present the same people and events in the news over and over, individuals' knowledge structures about those people and events become more rigid and less likely to open to change later. When the media present the same beliefs and attitudes, individuals' comfort levels with those beliefs and attitudes become so strong that they are not able to change them. When the media present the same kinds of messages every week or every day, individuals' behavioral patterns of exposure become more fixed and harder to change.

## The Media Effects Template for Individual-Level Effects

The Media Effects Template (MET) for individuals is displayed in Figure 3.1. Notice that the template contains 24 boxes—each representing a different kind of media effect on individuals. These 24 boxes are the result of crossing the six types of media effects with the four types of media influences. These 24 boxes indicate the fundamental building blocks of media-influenced effects. By building blocks, I mean the essential elements from which all media effects are composed. The template provides a useful device to help us think about the essential building blocks of effects on individuals and provides us with a common language from which to define those effects in a consistent manner and help clear up some of the definitional clutter.

The layout of the MET makes it look like the four functions are different from one another and the six types are different from one another. While there are important differences, there are also overlaps. For example, with functions, over the long term the altering function appears very much like a reinforcement function. Also, the six types are interrelated both in the sense that some scholars share definitions across types as well as that certain types are used as explanations or components for other types. To illustrate, some types of effects are strongly influenced by and are even dependent on another type:

- Cognitions influence belief formation (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973; Wyer & Albarracin, 2005), affect (Isen, 2000), as well as attitude formation and change (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Wegener & Carlston, 2005).
- Beliefs influence attitudes (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Kruglanski & Stroebe, 2005), and attitudes influence beliefs (Marsh & Wallace, 2005; McGuire, 1990).
- Behaviors influence attitudes (Festinger, 1957; Olson & Stone, 2005), and attitudes influence behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977, 2005), both consciously (Allport, 1935; Dulany, 1968) and unconsciously (Bargh, 1997).
- Affect influences attitudes (Clore & Schnall, 2005; Zajonc, 1980) as well as behaviors (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 2000).

These overlaps create ambiguity and lead to confusion. So in this book, where my purpose is to achieve clarity in providing you with a strong, broad introduction of media influenced effects, I may err on the side of simplicity; that is, I will sharpen the differences between the rows and across the columns.

**Figure 3.1** Media Effects Template: Individual-Level Effects

Type of Effect	Media Influence Functions			
	Acquiring	Triggering	Altering	Reinforcing
Cognitive	Memorize message element	Recall information	Change memory structure	Strengthen skills Construction of a pattern Reinforce connections
Belief	Accept belief	Recall belief	Change belief	Strengthen generalization Construction of a belief
Attitudes	Accept attitude	Recall attitude	Change attitude	Strengthen evaluation Construction of a new attitude Reinforce attitudes
Affects	Learn emotional information	Recall emotion	Change emotional sensitivity	Strengthen emotional connection
Physiology	Mood change	Reinforce mood	Automatic response	Reinforce reactions
Behavior	Learn behaviors	Recall of behavior	Behavioral change Imitation of behavior	Reinforce habits Performance of novel behavior

## ORGANIZING MACRO-LEVEL MEDIA EFFECTS

Up to this point, this chapter has focused on media effects on individuals. We dealt with this topic first, because the literature on how the media have influenced individuals is much greater than the literature on larger aggregates such as the public, institutions, and the media themselves (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). However, it is also important to understand how the media exert effects on aggregates.

Aggregates, at first, might seem to be the simple sum of effects on individuals. After all, isn't public opinion (which is an aggregate effect) really just the adding up of all individuals' attitudes? Mathematically that is correct. Public opinion is assessed in nationwide surveys of about a thousand or so individuals who are asked about their attitudes and beliefs, such as their approval of the way the president is doing his job. If in such a survey 600 individuals say they approve of the way the president is leading the country, while the other 400 individuals say they disapprove, then public opinion is 60% approval. But conceptually the idea of public opinion is more than the sum of individual attitudes. It is something else. To illustrate this, ask yourself if you are particularly interested in the opinion of a random individual halfway across the country. Your answer is likely to be no. Why should you care about his or her one opinion? Now think about some social issue that you care about—such as changing the age for drinking, driving, voting, or military service. Would you be interested in hearing about what the public in America thinks about the issue? The answer to this question is likely to be yes, because that information would provide context for your own opinion. That aggregate opinion would also be far more illuminating to you. For example, if you knew that a random guy in Nebraska was in favor of making military service mandatory for all males and females ages 18 to 22, it would not likely concern you. But what if you were told that public opinion was strongly in favor of mandatory military service for all citizens—male and female—ages 18 to 22? That would likely be of high interest to you. Also, other aggregates, such as institutions and society, seem to be entities that have a life of their own apart from individuals. Sociologists have known for a long time that studying aggregates is important (Mills, 1959).

The Media Effects Template that was developed for individual-level effects has been modified a bit to be useful in organizing macro-level effects (see Figure 3.2). The macro-level

**Figure 3.2** Media Effects Template: Macro-Level Effects

Type of Effect	Media Influence On		
	The Public	Institutions	Media Themselves
Cognition	Public knowledge	Institutional knowledge	Media knowledge
Belief	Public beliefs	Institutional beliefs/norms	Media beliefs/norms
Attitudes	Public opinion	Institutional attitudes	Media attitudes
Affect	Public mood	Institutional mood	Media mood
Behavior	Public behavior	Institutional practices	Media practices

## Structured Glossary of Terms About Media Effects

**Media effects** The processes and products of media influence that act directly on targets (individuals and macro units of society and institutions) as well as indirectly on targets through other units. These effects can be intentional or nonintentional on the part of both the media senders as well as the target receivers. They can be manifested or hidden from natural observation. They are constant and ongoing. And they are shaped not just by the media influence but within a constellation of other factors that act in concert with the media influence.

- Individual-level effect: Effect on an individual person
- Macro-level effect: Effect on an aggregate, such as the public, institutions, society, or the media industries themselves

**Type of effect** One of the six categories of effects: cognitive, belief, attitudinal, affective, physiological, and behavioral.

- Cognitive effect: Media exposure exercising an influence on an individual's mental processes or the product of those mental processes; typically involves the acquisition, processing, and storage of information
- Belief effect: Media exposure exercising an influence on an individual's perception that the probability that an object or event is associated with a given attribute
- Attitudinal effect: Media exposure exercising an influence on an individual's evaluative judgments; typically involves providing people with elements to evaluate or shaping standards of evaluation
- Affective effect: Media exposure exercising an influence on an individual's feelings such as emotions and moods
- Physiological effect: Media exposure exercising an influence on an individual's automatic bodily responses to stimuli
- Behavioral effect: Media exposure exercising an influence on an individual's doing something

**Media-influenced functions** Generic ways the media can influence individuals. There are four in this conceptualization: acquiring, triggering, altering, and conditioning.

- Acquiring: The media influence the person to obtain something he/she did not have prior to a particular exposure

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- **Triggering:** The media influences the person by activating something that already exists in the individual
- **Altering:** The media influence the person to change something that the person already had
- **Reinforcing:** The media influence the person by gradually making something in the person more difficult to change over time

**Media Effects Template (MET)** A two-dimensional matrix that is used to categorize the media effects literatures. One MET is for individual-level effects and is structured by six types of effects with four media-influenced functions. The macro-level MET is structured by five types of effects with three macro structures.

MET is structured by five types of effects (behavior, cognitions, beliefs, attitudes, and affect) and three macro units (the public, institutions, and the media themselves).

Notice that the types of effects down the left side of that matrix are the same as in Figure 3.1, with the exception of physiological effects, which apply well to the human body but not to the public or other macro-level units. Also, the functions of acquiring, triggering, altering, and reinforcing were eliminated as column headings. These were important to classify the large literature of media effects on individuals; however, the literature of media effects on macro units is much smaller and at this time it would not be useful to classify it by functions. Instead, the columns represent the three major kinds of macro units that have been examined in the media effects literature: the public, institutions, and the media themselves.

## SUMMARY

This chapter presents a broad definition of media effects that includes immediate as well as long-term changes and reinforcements. It includes positive as well as negative effects and the effects on individuals as well as larger aggregates, such as the public, institutions, and the media themselves.

In order to organize the many media effects included in this broad definition, the chapter develops an organizational scheme that is displayed by two Media Effects Templates—one for individual-level effects and the other for macro-level effects. Each of these is a two-dimensional matrix that categorizes the thinking and research of media effects.

The individual-level Media Effects Template (MET) is structured by type of media effects (cognitions, beliefs, attitudes, affects, physiology, and behavior) by media influence functions



(acquiring, triggering, altering, and reinforcing). The macro-level MET is an alteration of the individual-level MET so that it can better organize the much smaller literature of media effects on larger aggregates.

### Review Questions

1. Why is it important to have a broad definition of media effects?
2. What are the eight key issues that should be considered when defining media effects?
3. What is the definition of *media effects*?
4. What are the six types of effects on individuals?
5. What are the four media influence functions?
6. How is the MET for individual-level effects different from the MET for macro-level effects?

### Further Thinking Questions

1. Now that you have read the introduction to the six types of media effects on individuals, which of the six do you think you experience most often?
2. For each of the six types of effects on individuals, can you list several examples of effects that have occurred in your life?
3. What institutions are most important to you?
  - Can you think of any ways the media have influenced those institutions?
  - Which of those institutions do you think has been most influenced by the media?