

Different models of media effects

A2

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Read first: [Theories of the media and influences on media content](#), [Media representations of class, gender, ethnicity, and age groups](#)

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What you need to know

By the end of this topic you should be able to explain and evaluate:

1. **Direct effects models**, above all the **hypodermic syringe model**: the idea that media messages go straight into the audience's heads and change what they think and do, quickly and in the same way for everyone. Its Marxist relative, **mass manipulation**, belongs here too.
2. **Indirect effects models**, which say the media's influence is real but filtered through something else:
 - the **uses and gratifications model** (people use the media to meet their own needs),
 - the **two-step flow model** (messages pass through opinion leaders and conversation),
 - the **normative model** (the media shapes what people see as normal, and behaviour follows those norms),
 - the **cultural effects model** (slow, long-term shaping of beliefs and "common sense").
3. **The debate about the models**: what each gets right and wrong, and how they compare.
4. **How far the media really changes behaviour**: the arguments and evidence on both sides, and why it is so hard to measure.

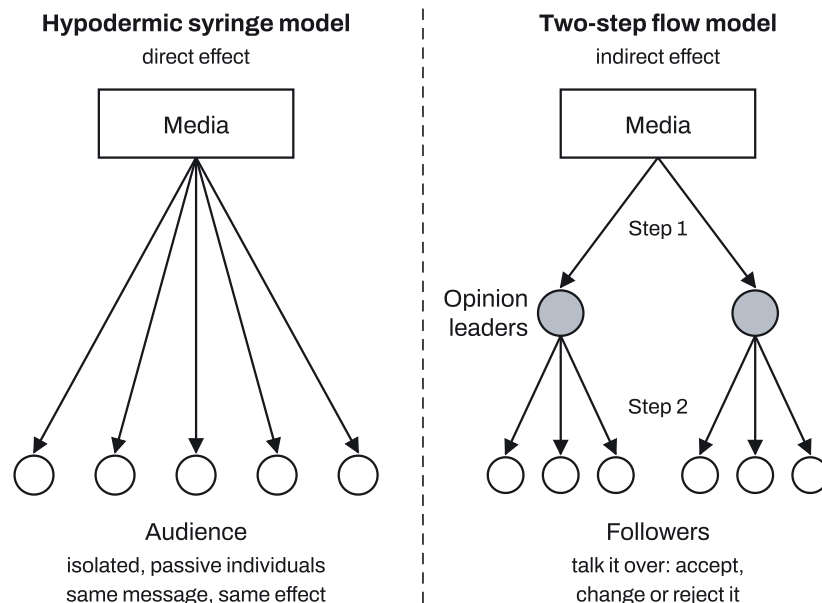
Why the media shows what it shows is covered in *Theories of the media and influences on media content*; particular behaviours (violence, crime, health, politics) are in the next topic, *The impact of the media on behaviour*.

Understand it

The question every model tries to answer

Every model answers one question: **when the media sends a message, what happens to the people who receive it?** At one end the **audience is passive** and effects are **direct**, quick and the same for everyone; at the other the **audience is active** (choosing, interpreting, discussing) and effects are **indirect**, slow, varied or small. The models appeared roughly in this order, each partly a reply to the last.

Period	Model	The audience is...	Key names
1920s–1930s	Hypodermic syringe (and Marxist mass manipulation)	a passive mass of separate individuals	Frankfurt School; later Bandura's experiments
1940s–1950s	Two-step flow	members of social groups who talk to each other	Lazarsfeld; Katz and Lazarsfeld
1960s–1970s	Uses and gratifications	active choosers meeting their own needs	Blumler and McQuail; McQuail, Blumler and Brown
1970s	Normative	people who follow norms, some of which the media supplies	DeFleur
1970s onwards	Cultural effects	slowly shaped by years of the same messages	Glasgow Media Group; Gerbner; Philo
1970s onwards	Reception analysis (used to evaluate the others)	active interpreters who decode messages differently	Hall; Morley



Direct effects: the hypodermic syringe model

The idea. The media works like a drug injected into the bloodstream. The message is "injected" into the audience, and it takes effect at once: people believe it, copy it, or act on it. Everyone who receives the same dose reacts in roughly the same way. Some books call it the **magic bullet** model.

Why it seemed obvious in the 1920s and 1930s. Cinema and radio were new. Industrial cities had pulled people away from villages, extended families and churches, so sociologists described a **mass society** of **atomised** individuals (cut off from each other like separate atoms), linked to the wider world mainly by the media. Propaganda had worked in the First World War, and the Nazis set up Joseph Goebbels's propaganda ministry in **1933**. With nothing between the media and the individual, its power looked enormous.

Mass manipulation: the Marxist version. Marxists of the **Frankfurt School**, who had fled Nazi Germany, gave the syringe a purpose. **Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer** (1944) argued that a **culture industry** pours out standardised entertainment that keeps working people passive, distracted and willing to accept capitalism. The media becomes a ruling-class tool to **manipulate** what the masses buy, vote for and accept as fair. A modern echo is **Herman and Chomsky's** *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), which argued that ownership, advertising and reliance on official sources filter American news so that it serves powerful interests. Keep the two terms straight: the hypodermic syringe is a model of **how** influence happens; mass manipulation is a Marxist claim about **who** uses it and **why**.

Evidence its supporters use.

- **The War of the Worlds** (30 October 1938). Orson Welles's radio play presented a Martian invasion as live news bulletins, and newspapers the next day reported panic in the streets. **Hadley Cantril** (*The Invasion from Mars*, 1940) estimated that about **6 million** people heard it and about **1 million** were frightened.
- **The Bobo doll experiments.** **Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross and Sheila Ross** showed young children an adult hitting and kicking an inflatable Bobo doll, first in person (**1961**) and then on film (**1963**). Children who had watched the attack were more likely to attack the doll themselves, often copying the exact actions and words. This suggests children **imitate** what they see on screen.
- **Copycat claims.** After the murder of the toddler James Bulger in **1993**, newspapers linked the killers to a horror video; psychologist **Elizabeth Newson's** report (**1994**), signed by many child experts, argued that violent videos could harm children. Crimes said to copy a film or game still make headlines.
- **Propaganda and moral panics.** Wartime propaganda, state-run media in one-party states, and **moral panics** (Cohen's *Mods and Rockers*) all show the media changing what large numbers of people fear and do, sometimes within days.

Where the model runs into trouble.

1. **People don't all react the same way.** Cantril's own figures show that about **five in six** listeners were *not* frightened, and he found that people who checked other stations or had more education were the least likely to panic. Historians also think the newspapers exaggerated the panic to make radio, their rival, look dangerous.
2. **The laboratory is not real life.** The Bobo doll is a toy built to be knocked over, the children were tested minutes after watching, and they may have thought hitting it was what the adult wanted. Hitting a toy is not hurting a person.
3. **Natural experiments find little change.** Television only reached the island of **St Helena** in **1995**. **Tony Charlton's** team watched children's behaviour before and after for about five years and found no rise in aggressive or antisocial behaviour. **Hagell and Newburn** (*Young Offenders and the Media*, **1994**) found that persistent young offenders watched no more violent TV than other teenagers, and often had less access to it.
4. **Audiences are not atomised.** People watch with family, discuss the news at work and share posts with friends. The two-step flow model was built on this point.

Even so, the syringe is worth keeping as a **benchmark**: it is the strongest claim anyone makes about media power, so every other model can be measured against it. Some recent events have brought that claim back (see "Old media or new?" below).

Indirect effects models

The two-step flow model

Where it came from. Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet (*The People's Choice*, 1944) followed voters in Erie County, Ohio, through the 1940 US presidential campaign, expecting to measure how radio and newspapers changed votes. Very few people changed their minds because of the media. People who did change usually mentioned a **person**: a relative, a workmate, a neighbour who followed politics closely.

Elihu Katz and Lazarsfeld (*Personal Influence*, 1955) tested this with about **800 women** in Decatur, Illinois, asking who influenced their choices about shopping, fashion, films and public affairs.

How it works (see the diagram):

1. **Step 1**: media messages reach **opinion leaders**: people who follow the media closely on a topic and whom others trust on it. Each field has its own leaders: the friend who knows about phones is not the one people ask about politics.
2. **Step 2**: opinion leaders pass the message on in conversation, adding their own judgement. Their followers may accept it, change it or reject it, depending on what the leader says and what their group already thinks.

So the media's influence is **indirect**: it depends on **social relationships**, and the audience is made of groups, not isolated individuals.

What the model got right.

- It was the first serious challenge to the syringe: it showed real audiences in their communities and found the media's direct effect on votes was small.
- It made **conversation** part of the story. People still talk about last night's match, a viral video or a news story, and what friends say shapes what they make of it.
- It fits **influencers** surprisingly well. An influencer with a loyal following is an opinion leader with a camera. Brands pay them because a recommendation from someone followers trust works better than an advert: a business model built on the second step.
- It opened the way to the later active-audience models.

Its problems.

- **Too neat.** Many messages are never discussed at all, and plenty of people get the news straight from a screen. Influence can pass through several people (a **multi-step flow**), and opinion leaders are themselves influenced by others.
- **Opinion leaders get their views from the media**, so the media may still set the agenda; the model moves its power one step back rather than removing it.

- **It is dated.** The studies are from small-town America in the 1940s, when a few radio stations and newspapers reached everyone. Today's media is **fragmented**, and much of it is watched alone on a phone, so there is less shared viewing to talk over.
- **The leader is a black box.** The studies show that leaders matter but not what gives them their pull, and they never trace a message from start to finish to see how much it changes on the way.
- **Other models say the individual matters more:** uses and gratifications (what each person wants) and reception analysis (how each person decodes) give the opinion leader a smaller role.

The uses and gratifications model

The idea. Instead of asking what the media does **to** people, ask what people do **with** the media. Audiences are **active**: they choose what to watch, read or scroll through to **gratify** (satisfy) their own needs. The same programme can serve different needs for different people, so it has different effects on each.

Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail (*Television in Politics*, **1968**) studied why British viewers watched party election broadcasts in the **1964** general election: some wanted to judge the leaders, some to find out what would happen, some to have something to argue about. **McQuail, Blumler and Brown (1972)** grouped the reasons people use the media into four needs:

Need	What it means	Today's example
Diversion	escape from routine, problems and boredom	a comedy box set after a long day
Personal relationships	company, and something to talk about with others	a group chat about a reality show; feeling you "know" a podcaster
Personal identity	comparing yourself with others, exploring who you are	following creators who share your interests or background
Surveillance	finding out what is going on	checking the news, weather or exam results

James Lull (*Inside Family Viewing*, **1990**) watched families at home and found that TV meets **social** needs too: it marks the time of day, fills silences, gives a reason to sit together, or lets someone avoid a conversation.

What it gets right.

- The **active audience** idea is now widely accepted, and the model was one of the first to make it central.
- It explains why the same content affects people differently: a crime drama is escapism for one viewer and a source of fear for another.
- It fits **the new media** very well: people build their own playlists, follow and unfollow, skip adverts and search for exactly what they want.
- It helped break the "mass society" picture and led on to reception analysis.

What it misses.

- **It describes use, not effect.** Knowing *why* someone watches tells you little about *what the watching does* to them.

- **Where do the needs come from?** Marxists argue the media creates the very needs it then satisfies: **Herbert Marcuse's** "false needs". Apps are designed to keep people scrolling, and recommendation algorithms decide what is offered, so "free choice" is shaped before it is made.
- **It is functionalist:** it assumes using the media is good for people because it meets needs, and ignores **dysfunctions** such as addiction, anxiety, body-image pressure or being misled by fake news.
- **It treats people as separate individuals.** Class, gender, age and ethnicity affect what people need and what they can access; Lull saw the family in the room, but the model rarely asks how the group shapes the needs.
- **Not everyone is equally active.** Some people choose carefully; others leave the TV on all evening.
- **It ignores power.** Firms spend fortunes on advertising and governments regulate what children can see; both assume the media acts on people, which the model never examines.

The normative model

The idea. People's behaviour is guided by **norms**: shared expectations about what is normal and acceptable. **Melvin DeFleur (1970)**, in what he called **cultural norms theory**, argued that the media influences behaviour **indirectly** by shaping people's sense of what those norms are. By showing some behaviour again and again as ordinary, praised or punished, the media can:

1. **reinforce** norms people already have (families shown sitting down together at mealtimes);
2. **create** new norms where none existed (sharing your daily life online; a new way of dressing or speaking that spreads from a series);
3. **change** existing norms (attitudes to smoking, drink-driving or same-sex relationships shifting as screen portrayals change).

People then act on those norms, so the media changes behaviour **through** norms rather than by direct command. The effect is filtered: whether someone adopts a norm depends on the norms of their own **family, friends and community**, which can reinforce or block what the media shows.

Evidence. **Anne Becker** studied teenage girls in Fiji, where television arrived in **1995**. Traditional Fijian culture valued a large body. By **1998**, after three years of mostly American and Australian programmes, the share of girls with signs of disordered eating had risen from about **13%** to about **29%**, more than double, and many said they wanted to look like the women on TV. The media had supplied a new **norm** of the ideal body. Health campaigns rely on the same mechanism: they try to make wearing a seat belt, or not smoking, seem what normal people do.

Strengths. It explains **gradual** change in whole societies, which the syringe cannot, and it explains why the same message works in one group and fails in another (it fits the group's norms or it doesn't).

Weaknesses. It is hard to tell whether the media changed a norm or merely reflected a change already happening (in Fiji, the economy and contact with tourists were changing too). It says little about **who** decides which norms the media shows, which is the cultural effects model's question.

The cultural effects model

The idea. The media's power is real but **slow** and **cumulative**. One programme changes little; **years** of the same kinds of message, repeated across news, drama and adverts, gradually shape what people take for granted. Think of water dripping on stone rather than an injection. The effect works through **framing** (how a story is told) and **agenda-setting** (which stories are told at all), so audiences come to see one way of understanding the world as **common sense**.

Its roots are neo-Marxist. Antonio Gramsci's idea of **hegemony** says the ruling class keeps power mainly by winning **consent**: getting its view of the world accepted as natural. The cultural effects model says the media is one of the main places this happens. It sits **between** the syringe (strong, immediate effects) and the active-audience models (weak effects): the media matters a great deal, but only over time, and audiences can still resist.

Evidence.

- **The Glasgow Media Group** (*Bad News*, 1976) analysed TV news on industrial disputes and found it framed strikes from management's point of view, using the language of disruption and unreasonable demands.
- **Greg Philo** (*Seeing and Believing*, 1990) asked groups of people, a year after the **1984–85** miners' strike, to write their own news stories from a set of photographs. Their stories closely matched real TV news, and many believed the picketing had been mostly violent. People with **direct experience** of the strike (some police officers, people who had been on picket lines) often rejected the TV version: when people have no other source, the media's version wins.
- **George Gerbner and Larry Gross** (1976), in **cultivation theory**, found that heavy TV viewers overestimated how much violent crime there was and saw the world as more dangerous than light viewers did (a "**mean world**" view).
- **Ben Baumberg, Kate Bell and Declan Gaffney** (2012) found that readers of newspapers that ran more stories about benefit fraud gave higher estimates of how common fraud was.

Strengths. It explains influence that is **subtle** and builds up, which matches how most of us rely on the media for things we never see ourselves (foreign wars, crime rates, what other groups are like). It allows for an active audience (Philo's direct-experience group) without throwing away media power. It links media effects to **who owns and controls** the media. A teenager who checks a phone dozens of times a day meets the same kinds of image thousands of times a year, and drip-by-drip influence is exactly what that **media-saturated** life would produce. **Postmodernists** add support: **Jean Baudrillard** argued that media images have become **hyperreal**: copies so constant and vivid that they feel more real than the world they copy.

Weaknesses. Long-term effects are very hard to **prove**: over ten years a person is shaped by family, school, work and friends as well as the media. Gerbner's link may run the other way (fearful people stay in and watch more TV). Research on soap opera fans finds they know perfectly well that the drama is not real life. Uses and gratifications and reception analysis argue that people bring their own needs and views to the media; class, ethnicity, religion and community still shape how they read it. And with thousands of channels and creators, it is harder for one "common sense" to dominate.

Reception analysis: the active audience, in more detail

The mark schemes reward using this model to evaluate the others. **Stuart Hall's** encoding/decoding model (1973) says producers **encode** a preferred meaning into a message, but each audience member **decodes** it in one of three ways:

- a **dominant** (preferred) reading: accepting the intended meaning;
- a **negotiated** reading: accepting parts and questioning others;
- an **oppositional** reading: rejecting it, or reading it against the grain.

David Morley (*The 'Nationwide' Audience*, 1980) showed the same episode of a BBC current-affairs programme to different groups. Bank managers mostly accepted its message, trade unionists negotiated it, and Black further-education students rejected it as irrelevant to their lives. How people decode depends on their social position and existing views, so the media has no single effect.

Comparing the models

Model	Effect	Audience	Biggest strength	Biggest weakness
Hypodermic syringe / mass manipulation	direct, quick, uniform	passive, atomised	explains propaganda, panics and copying	ignores differences between people; weak real-world evidence
Two-step flow	indirect, through opinion leaders	social groups	puts conversation and trust in the picture	many messages are never discussed; dated
Uses and gratifications	depends on the user's needs	active choosers	explains different reactions to the same content	says little about effects; ignores where needs come from
Normative	indirect, through norms	norm-followers in groups	explains slow social change (Fiji)	hard to separate from other social change
Cultural effects	indirect, long-term	slowly shaped, can resist	explains common sense and hegemony	very hard to prove over the long term

Four debates run through every essay.

1. **Passive or active audience?** Only the syringe and mass manipulation say passive.
2. **Short-term or long-term?** The syringe looks at minutes or days; cultural effects and normative models at years.
3. **Individual or social?** The two-step flow, normative model and reception analysis put the group first.
4. **Old media or new?** Every classic model was built on a world of a few TV channels and newspapers. The new media can be argued both ways:

- **For stronger effects:** platforms gather data on each user and **micro-target** them. The **Cambridge Analytica** scandal (revealed in **2018**) showed that data from millions of Facebook users had been used to target political messages in the **2016** US election; fake news and conspiracy theories spread fast, and **algorithms** keep feeding people more of what they already watch, which can push them towards extreme views.
- **For weaker effects:** audiences can now check other sources, answer back, and make their own content. Citizen journalists and leaked documents (the **Panama Papers**, published in **2016**, exposed the hidden offshore wealth of politicians and the super-rich) show the media also challenging the powerful, which is hard to square with mass manipulation.

How far does the media influence behaviour?

The evidence for a **large** influence comes in three kinds: what powerful people do (firms would not pay for adverts and influencer deals, nor governments set film age ratings and the UK's **9 pm watershed**, if the media changed nothing), short- and long-term studies already met above (propaganda, panics, Fiji, Philo, Gerbner), and a great deal of **anecdotal** testimony from people who say a programme changed their diet, purchases or opinions. The evidence for a **limited** influence is the real-world studies (St Helena; Hagell and Newburn), the active audiences of the indirect models, and the weight of family, peers, school, religion and class.

Why it is so hard to measure.

- **Too many variables.** Nobody is exposed to the media alone, so isolating its effect from everything else in a person's life is very difficult.
- **Laboratory or real life.** Experiments control variables but are artificial and short; field studies are realistic but can't control what else is going on.
- **Cause and effect.** If violent young people watch violent films, the films may not have caused the violence: the violent may *choose* violent films.
- **Defining the effect.** Is pushing a doll "aggression"? Is believing a story the same as acting on it?
- **Ethics.** No researcher can deliberately expose children to years of harmful content to see what happens.

Key facts and formulas

There is no formula list in Sociology. "Learn it" means you must remember it.

Key term	Status
Direct effects (strong, quick, the same for everyone) against indirect effects (filtered, slow, varied); passive against active audience	Learn it
Hypodermic syringe (magic bullet) model; mass society; atomised audience; Goebbels's propaganda ministry 1933	Learn it
Mass manipulation (Marxist): culture industry (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944); <i>Manufacturing Consent</i> (Herman and Chomsky 1988)	Learn it

Key term	Status
War of the Worlds broadcast 1938; about 1 million of 6 million listeners frightened (Cantril 1940)	Learn it
Bobo doll experiments (Bandura, Ross and Ross 1961 and 1963); Newson report 1994 after the Bulger case (1993)	Learn it
Evidence against direct effects: St Helena, TV from 1995 (Charlton); <i>Young Offenders and the Media</i> (Hagell and Newburn 1994)	Learn it
Two-step flow: opinion leaders; <i>The People's Choice</i> (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1944), 1940 election; <i>Personal Influence</i> (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), about 800 women; multi-step flow	Learn it
Uses and gratifications: <i>Television in Politics</i> (Blumler and McQuail 1968); diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, surveillance (McQuail, Blumler and Brown 1972); <i>Inside Family Viewing</i> (Lull 1990); false needs (Marcuse)	Learn it
Normative model: cultural norms theory (DeFleur 1970); reinforce, create, change norms; Fiji, TV from 1995, disordered eating about 13% to about 29% by 1998 (Becker)	Learn it
Cultural effects: hegemony (Gramsci); framing, agenda-setting; <i>Bad News</i> (Glasgow Media Group 1976); <i>Seeing and Believing</i> (Philo 1990); cultivation, mean world (Gerbner and Gross 1976); benefit fraud (Baumberg, Bell and Gaffney 2012); hyperreality (Baudrillard)	Learn it
Reception analysis: encoding/decoding, dominant, negotiated, oppositional readings (Hall 1973); <i>The 'Nationwide' Audience</i> (Morley 1980)	Learn it
New media: micro-targeting, Cambridge Analytica (2016 election, revealed 2018); algorithms; Panama Papers 2016; influencers as opinion leaders	Learn it
Paper 4: two essays from different sections, each 35 marks: AO1 9, AO2 11, AO3 15, so $9 + 11 + 15 = 35$	Learn it

How to do it

We have tagged 9 questions for this topic (2021–2026), all 35-mark "Evaluate this view" essays from Paper 4. One of them was set in two papers of the same session, so there are 8 different questions, each about one model.

Question type	Questions
Evaluate the hypodermic syringe model or mass manipulation	4
Evaluate the two-step flow model	2
Evaluate the cultural effects model	2
Evaluate the uses and gratifications model	1

Paper 4 lasts 1 hour 45 minutes for two essays, so allow about 50 minutes for each, including 5 minutes to plan. The normative model and the general question of how far the media influences behaviour have not yet had their own question here, so the worked examples cover them.

Every type uses the same frame. Each question names one model and claims it is "the best explanation", "accurate" or has "many strengths and few limitations". So:

1. **Explain the named model** (AO1): idea, origin, key study, concepts, a current example.
2. **Make the case for it** (AO2), tied to the question's words.
3. **Evaluate it** (AO3) in two ways, and do both:
 - **direct criticism**: weaknesses in its assumptions and evidence;
 - **comparison**: what the **other models** explain better, each linked back to the named model (a tour of models with no link stays low).
4. **Conclude** on the exact claim: "best" means better than the rivals; "accurately describes" asks whether it fits what really happens; "many strengths and few limitations" asks you to weigh them.

1. Evaluate the hypodermic syringe model or mass manipulation (4 questions)

Asked as: the hypodermic syringe model provides the best explanation of how the media influences behaviour (2, the same question in two papers); the hypodermic syringe model accurately describes how people are influenced by the media (1); the influence of the media on human behaviour is best explained by the concept of mass manipulation (1).

1. **Introduction**: define the model; set out the direct against indirect debate.
2. **Explain it in its setting** (mass society, atomised individuals, propaganda): **why it once seemed convincing** is itself a point for it.
3. **The case for it**, organised by the kind of support:
 - **What people saw happen**: War of the Worlds; moral panics; propaganda in wartime and in one-party states today.
 - **What experiments found**: the Bobo doll studies; the Newson report.
 - **What powerful people act on**: advertising budgets, influencer marketing, age ratings and the watershed.
 - **What the new media adds**: micro-targeting and Cambridge Analytica, fake news, algorithms pushing people towards extreme content, celebrity and influencer power.
 - **Why it can't be ruled out**: nothing can be measured cleanly either way, and personal accounts of change are common.
4. **Evaluate it**:
 - **Its own evidence cuts both ways**: Cantril's five in six who weren't frightened; the artificial Bobo doll set-up.
 - **Real-world studies**: St Helena; Hagell and Newburn.
 - **Audiences are social and active**: two-step flow (people talk it over); uses and gratifications (people choose); reception analysis (Morley's groups decoded the same programme differently).

- **Indirect power:** the cultural effects and normative models agree the media is powerful, but say the effect is slow and filtered, not an injection.
 - **Today's media is too varied** for one message to reach and change everyone the same way.
5. **Conclusion:** for example: true of short-term, high-fear moments when people have no other source; as a general explanation it fails, and indirect models explain more.

The mass manipulation variant. Put **Marxism** at the centre, as the examiners expect: the culture industry, ruling-class ownership, Herman and Chomsky's filters, propaganda. Then show the syringe model as **support** (it describes the mechanism mass manipulation needs). Evaluate with:

- **later Marxists:** Gramsci's hegemony and the cultural effects model accept media power but drop the crude idea of manipulation in favour of slow consent;
- **pluralism:** media content reflects what audiences want, not what owners dictate, and ownership is spread across many firms and outlets;
- **the media exposing the powerful:** the Panama Papers, and citizen journalism on social media;
- **active-audience models** and the **lack of convincing evidence** for direct effects.

Examiners noted candidates who argued that audience models *supported* mass manipulation; they are the counter-argument, not the support.

2. Evaluate the two-step flow model (2 questions)

Asked as: the two-step flow model provides the best explanation of media influence (1); the two-step flow model accurately describes how people are influenced by the media (1).

1. **Introduction and explanation: opinion leaders;** Erie County and Decatur (Katz and Lazarsfeld); the two steps; the first reply to the syringe.

2. **The case for it:**

- **Against the syringe:** it showed audiences are neither passive nor atomised, and that effects depend on who you talk to.
- **Everyday life:** think how often a match, a trailer or a viral clip comes up at lunch or in a group chat, and how a friend's verdict colours your own.
- **Influencers:** modern opinion leaders, and brands pay them because personal trust works.
- **Its legacy:** uses and gratifications and reception analysis grew from its active, social audience.

3. **Evaluate it:**

- **Not everything is discussed,** and much is received directly.
- **Opinion leaders take their views from the media,** so media power remains; the multi-step flow is more realistic than two neat steps.
- **Dated:** 1940s small-town America; today's fragmented, individual, on-demand media leaves fewer shared experiences to discuss.
- **No theory of why** people follow leaders, or how much the message changes on the way.
- **Rival models:** uses and gratifications and reception analysis (the individual first); cultural effects (leaders are shaped too).

- **Measurement:** separating the leader's influence from the media's is very hard.
- 4. **Conclusion:** for example: right to bring in relationships, revived by influencers, but too simple for fragmented media.

3. Evaluate the cultural effects model (2 questions)

Asked as: the cultural effects model provides the best explanation of how the media influences behaviour (1); the cultural effects model has many strengths and few limitations (1).

1. **Introduction and explanation:** long-term shaping of common sense; Gramsci's hegemony; framing, agenda-setting and the "manufacture" of news (selected and shaped, not found).
2. **The case for it:**
 - **The evidence trail:** Glasgow Media Group; Philo's miners' strike stories; Gerbner's mean world; Baumberg, Bell and Gaffney on benefit fraud.
 - **Dependence on the media:** most of what we know about distant events and unfamiliar groups comes from it.
 - **Postmodernist backing:** Baudrillard's hyperreality, where the line between image and reality blurs.
 - **More convincing than the syringe:** subtle, long-term influence, with room for resistance.
3. **Evaluate it:**
 - **Proof:** long-term effects are almost impossible to isolate; correlation is not cause (Gerbner).
 - **Audiences know the difference:** soap fans know drama is not life.
 - **Active audiences:** uses and gratifications (people meet existing needs), reception analysis (oppositional readings; Philo's own direct-experience group).
 - **Other identities still matter:** class, ethnicity, religion and community shape how media is read.
 - **Rivals on either side:** the syringe says effects can be immediate (Bobo doll, Newson); pluralists say the media follows audiences rather than leading them.
 - **The new media:** thousands of voices make one dominant "common sense" harder, though algorithms may create new echo chambers.
4. **Conclusion:** for example: the best account of slow change in beliefs about things people never see, but its evidence suggests rather than proves.

"Many strengths and few limitations": weigh the strengths (mainly explanation) against the limitations (mainly evidence).

4. Evaluate the uses and gratifications model (1 question)

Asked as: the uses and gratifications model accurately describes how people are influenced by the media (1).

1. **Introduction and explanation:** what people do with the media; Blumler and McQuail; the four needs; Lull.
2. **The case for it:**
 - **Online life:** personal feeds, skipping and searching are choice in action.
 - **Variety:** one programme, many needs, many effects; Lull's families add the social side.

- **History:** it made the active audience mainstream, and reception analysis built on it.

3. Evaluate it:

- **The trap in the question:** it says how people *use* the media, not how they are *influenced*. Make this point early.
- **Needs shaped by the media:** false needs (Marcuse), addictive design, algorithms.
- **Functionalist blind spot:** ignores harm (dysfunctions) such as anxiety, body image and misinformation.
- **Uneven activity:** some people choose carefully, some barely choose.
- **Social structure:** class, gender and family shape needs, which the model rarely explores.
- **Power ignored:** advertisers and regulators act as if the media changes people.
- **Rivals:** cultural effects (long-term shaping); reception analysis (what shapes interpretation); fake news and micro-targeting suggest people control less than they think.

4. **Conclusion:** for example: accurate about choice, but it explains motives, not influence.

Worked examples

Both are new 35-mark essays on parts of the topic that have not yet had their own question. The marks are given the way the levels mark scheme works: by assessment objective and level, not by points. In the exam, write each bullet as a full paragraph.

Example 1

'The normative model provides the best explanation of how the media influences behaviour.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Define norms and the normative model (DeFleur's cultural norms theory): the media changes behaviour indirectly, by shaping what people see as normal. Place it among the indirect effects models.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **How it works:** reinforce, create, change norms, with an example of each.
- **The Fiji evidence:** TV in 1995, disordered eating among girls more than doubled by 1998 as a new body ideal arrived; a norm, not a single message, made the difference.
- **It explains variety:** a norm shown on screen takes hold where it fits a group's own norms and fails where it doesn't, which a direct model can't explain.

Against the view (AO3).

- **Cause or reflection?** In Fiji the economy and tourism were changing too; the media may mirror norms already shifting.
- **Slow effects are hard to measure,** the same problem the cultural effects model faces.
- **Cultural effects goes further:** it asks whose norms the media spreads (Gramsci's hegemony), which the normative model ignores.

- **Direct effects still happen:** panics and copying can be fast (War of the Worlds, the Bobo doll children).
- **Active audiences:** uses and gratifications and Morley's decoding say people choose and interpret, so norms on screen may be laughed at or rejected.

Conclusion. The normative model explains slow, society-wide change better than the syringe, and fits Fiji well; but it struggles to separate the media from other social change and says nothing about power, so it is one strong explanation rather than the best.

How it would be marked. Accurate knowledge of the model and its mechanism with Becker's study (AO1 7–9), every point tied to "best explanation" of behaviour (AO2 10–11), and evaluation that compares it with at least three other models and reaches a reasoned verdict (AO3 12–15).

Example 2

'The media has only a limited influence on human behaviour.' Evaluate this view. [35]

This is the hardest kind: no model is named, so you must choose and organise the models yourself around the question of **how much**.

Introduction. Define influence on behaviour (what people do, not just what they think); set out the spectrum from direct to minimal effects.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Real-world studies:** St Helena; Hagell and Newburn.
- **Filters:** opinion leaders and conversation (two-step flow); group norms block media norms (normative model).
- **Choice and interpretation:** uses and gratifications; Hall and Morley.
- **Measurement:** correlation, anecdote and lab behaviour prove little.

Against the view (AO3).

- **Short-term direct effects:** propaganda, panics, War of the Worlds, the Bobo doll.
- **Long-term indirect effects:** cultural effects (Philo, Gerbner, benefit fraud estimates); norms (Fiji).
- **What powerful people believe:** advertising and influencer spending; ratings, the watershed.
- **The new media:** micro-targeting (Cambridge Analytica), algorithms, fake news, influencers.
- **"Limited" depends on the measure:** an advert that changes the choices of 2% of viewers is a small effect per person but huge across millions.

Conclusion. The media rarely changes behaviour directly and immediately for everyone, so the syringe is wrong; but through norms, framing and repetition over years it has a considerable indirect influence, especially where people lack other sources. "Only limited" underestimates it.

How it would be marked. Accurate use of at least four models and their studies (AO1 7–9), consistently applied to how **much** influence, and to **behaviour** rather than only beliefs (AO2 10–11), and a sustained weighing of short-term against long-term and direct against indirect effects to reach a judgement (AO3 12–15).

Common mistakes

- **Opinion instead of sociology.** The weakest answers give personal views about how the media affects people. Every paragraph needs a model, a concept or a named study.
- **Describing the models without evaluating.** Laying out five models one after another, with no comparison to the one in the question, stays in the low levels. Each other model must be used as a criticism of, or support for, the named one.
- **Only attacking the model.** Many answers on the syringe list its weaknesses and never give its strengths; the better ones explain why it seemed convincing and where it still fits.
- **Confusing who supports what** in mass manipulation questions: the support comes from Marxism (and the syringe as a mechanism), not from the active-audience models.
- **Thin knowledge of the named model.** Two-step flow essays that never mention opinion leaders or Katz and Lazarsfeld, or cultural effects essays that never mention hegemony or a study, stay low.
- **Forgetting the new media.** The examiners reward contrasting traditional and new media; it is the easiest way to test whether a 1940s or 1960s model still fits.

How to get the marks

- **"Evaluate this view" (35 marks):** one long essay, marked by levels for each assessment objective.
- **AO1 knowledge and understanding (9):** the top level (7–9) needs a wide range of accurate, detailed knowledge using concepts, theory and research. Name the sociologists and their studies, and use the terms: direct and indirect effects, atomised mass, opinion leaders, gratifications, norms, hegemony, cultivation, encoding and decoding.
- **AO2 interpretation and application (11):** the top level (10–11) needs material that is accurate and **consistently applied to the question**. Keep returning to the named model and the claim ("best", "accurately", "many strengths").
- **AO3 analysis and evaluation (15):** the top level (12–15) needs evaluation that is **explicit, detailed and sustained**. A brief outline of the other side stays in the 4–7 band; explicit evaluation that is not kept up reaches 8–11.
- **Evaluate in two ways:** criticise the named model's assumptions and evidence, **and** compare it with the other models.
- **Use the distinctions:** short- and long-term, direct and indirect, traditional and new media, individual and group.
- **Reach a judgement** that answers the exact words: in what situations, and for which audiences, the model works best and worst.
- **Answer two questions from different sections;** the paper is out of $2 \times 35 = 70$.

Quick check

1. Give the four needs in McQuail, Blumler and Brown's uses and gratifications model, with an example of each.
2. Cantril estimated that about 1 million of the roughly 6 million people who heard *The War of the Worlds* were frightened. What percentage is that, to the nearest whole number, and what does it suggest about the hypodermic syringe model?
3. What did Philo find when people who had direct experience of the miners' strike were asked about the picketing, and which model does this support?
4. Name the three ways the normative model says the media can affect norms, and one problem with the Fiji evidence.

Answers

1. **Diversion** (escaping into a comedy after school); **personal relationships** (talking about a show with friends, or feeling close to a presenter); **personal identity** (comparing yourself with people on screen); **surveillance** (checking the news).
2. $\frac{1}{6} \times 100 = 16.7\%$, so about 17%. More than four in five listeners were **not** frightened, so the same message did not affect everyone the same way, which goes against the syringe's idea of a uniform, direct effect.
3. They often **rejected** the TV news version that picketing was mostly violent, while people without direct experience tended to accept it. This supports the **cultural effects** model (the media shapes views where people have no other source) and shows its allowance for an active audience.
4. **Reinforce, create** and **change** norms. Problem: Fiji was changing in other ways at the same time (the economy, tourism), so the rise in disordered eating may not be due to TV alone.

Past questions to try

- 9699/43/M/J/21 Q4: essay on whether the hypodermic syringe model describes media influence accurately.
- 9699/42/F/M/22 Q4: essay on whether the two-step flow model describes media influence accurately.
- 9699/42/O/N/22 Q3: essay on the strengths and limitations of the cultural effects model.