

The impact of the media on behaviour A2

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Read first: [Different models of media effects](#), [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. **Violent media and violent behaviour.** The arguments and the research on both sides of the question "does watching or playing violence make people violent?", and how far the evidence can settle it.
2. **The media and crime.** How the media might encourage crime, how it distorts the picture of crime and people's fear of it, and two processes in which media reporting can **increase** the deviance it reports: **deviance amplification** and **moral panics**.
3. **Positive effects.** Ways in which the media might change behaviour for the better: learning helpful behaviour, health and safety, charity and campaigning, information, and challenging prejudice.
4. **Sensationalism and stereotyping.** How people's fears, attitudes and actions may be affected when the media exaggerates and dramatises, and when it shows groups through fixed, simplified images.

Every exam question on this topic so far has been a broad 35-mark essay on **how far** (and how directly) the media influences behaviour. To answer it you need this topic's evidence **and** the models from *Different models of media effects*, which are recapped briefly below.

Understand it

What would count as an "effect"?

Before weighing any evidence, be clear what the question is asking about. Four distinctions decide most essays:

Distinction	One end	The other end
How it happens	direct: the message itself changes what people do	indirect: the effect passes through something else (friends, norms, years of repetition, the police)
How fast	short-term: minutes, days	long-term: years of exposure

Distinction	One end	The other end
What changes	thought: beliefs, fears, attitudes	behaviour: what people actually do
Who changes	everyone, in the same way	some groups, in different ways

Some quotations are about one row ("direct"); others are about the **quality of the research** ("little evidence"). Decide which before planning.

The models in one table

Model	What it says about the audience	Evidence most often linked to it
Hypodermic syringe (and the Marxist idea of mass manipulation)	passive, an "atomised" mass, all affected alike and at once	War of the Worlds (1938); Bandura's Bobo doll; propaganda
Two-step flow	in social groups; messages filtered by opinion leaders	Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955)
Uses and gratifications	active; chooses media to meet its own needs	Blumler and McQuail; Lull (1990)
Reception analysis	interprets: dominant, negotiated or oppositional readings	Hall; Morley (1980)
Cultural effects (neo-Marxist, from Gramsci's hegemony)	slowly shaped by years of the same messages, but can resist	Glasgow Media Group; Philo (1990)

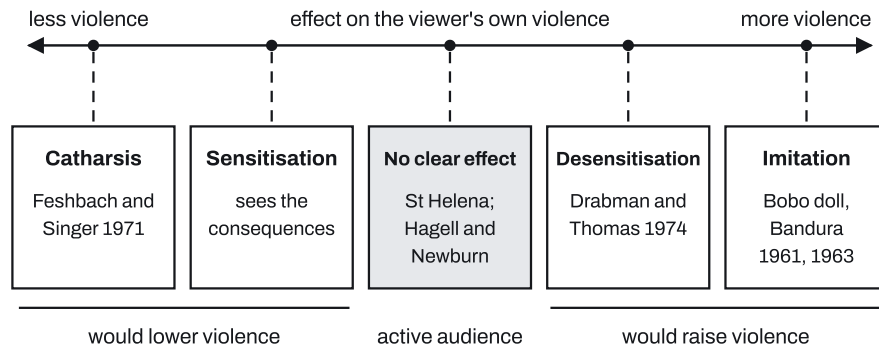
Mass manipulation is an early **Marxist** idea, developed by the **Frankfurt School** from the 1930s. In a **mass society**, people uprooted from close communities and isolated from one another depend on cinema, radio and the popular press for their picture of the world, so those who own the media can **manipulate** them into accepting capitalism and its inequalities. The hypodermic syringe describes the **mechanism** mass manipulation needs (a direct injection of ideas); Marxism supplies the **motive** (ruling-class interests). Later Marxists, following **Gramsci**, softened this into **hegemony**: the ruling class wins consent slowly, and audiences can resist, which is the cultural effects model.

Violent media and violent behaviour

Why the worry keeps coming back. Each new medium gets blamed: "video nasties" in 1980s Britain (leading to the **Video Recordings Act 1984**), then games and social media. After the murder of the toddler **James Bulger** by two ten-year-old boys in **1993**, newspapers linked the killing to a horror video, although the police found no evidence the boys had seen it. Psychologist **Elizabeth Newson** then wrote a report (**1994**), backed by many child experts, arguing that violent videos could harm children.

Four things violent media might do. It is not a simple yes or no. Sociologists and psychologists have suggested four different effects, two that would raise violence and two that would lower it.

What might violent media do to viewers?



Most research finds small or no effects for most people (Cumberbatch and Howitt 1989).

1. **Imitation (copying).** People, especially children, learn behaviour by watching others and copying it, and a screen is a source of models. This is **social learning**. Copycat crimes that seem to re-enact a film are the everyday version.
2. **Desensitisation.** Seeing violence again and again makes it feel normal, so people react less strongly to real violence and are slower to stop it.
3. **Catharsis.** Watching violence lets viewers release aggressive feelings safely, in fantasy, so they are **less** likely to act on them.
4. **Sensitisation.** Violence shown with its real consequences (pain, grief, punishment) can make viewers more aware of its cost and **more** opposed to it.

Research that seems to show a link.

- **The Bobo doll experiments.** Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross and Sheila Ross showed young children an adult attacking an inflatable doll, first live (1961) and then on film (1963). Afterwards, children who had seen the attack were more aggressive towards the doll than other children, often copying the exact blows and words.
- **William Belson (1978)** interviewed 1,565 London boys aged 12 to 17 about their viewing over many years and their own behaviour. Boys who had watched a lot of violent television reported committing more serious acts of violence than light viewers.
- **Ronald Drabman and Margaret Hanratty Thomas (1974)** showed children either a violent film clip or none, then asked them to keep an eye on two younger children (on a screen) who started to fight. Children who had just seen violence were **slower** to fetch an adult to help: evidence for desensitisation.
- **Cultivation.** George Gerbner found that heavy television viewers overestimated how violent the world was. This is an effect on **fear** more than on violence, but it shows long-term influence.

Research that questions the link.

- **Seymour Feshbach and Robert Singer (1971)** controlled the television of boys in residential schools for six weeks: some watched mainly violent programmes, some mainly non-violent ones. The boys on the violent diet were, if anything, **less** aggressive, which fits catharsis.

- **St Helena.** Television reached this remote island in the South Atlantic only in **1995**. **Tony Charlton's** team observed children's behaviour before and for about five years after, and found **no rise** in aggressive or antisocial behaviour. The island's close-knit families and schools seemed to matter more than the screen.
- **Ann Hagell and Tim Newburn** (*Young Offenders and the Media*, **1994**) compared persistent young offenders with other teenagers and found the offenders watched no more violent television, and often had less access to it.
- **Guy Cumberbatch and Dennis Howitt** (*A Measure of Uncertainty*, **1989**) reviewed the research of the previous decades and concluded it was too weak and contradictory to prove that media violence causes real violence.
- **Christopher Ferguson**, reviewing studies of video games in the 2010s, found effects close to zero and pointed out that youth violence in the USA **fell** in the years when violent games became hugely popular.
- **Children read media critically.** **David Buckingham** (*Moving Images*, **1996**) found that children are much more **media literate** than adults assume: they tell fiction from reality and know that screen violence is staged. **Dorothy Hobson** (**1982**), studying fans of the soap opera *Crossroads*, found that viewers knew it was fiction and used it to talk about their own lives.

Why the research is so hard to read. **David Gauntlett** (*Ten Things Wrong with the Media "Effects" Model*, **1998**) argued that effects research is built on shaky foundations. The main problems are:

- **Isolating the media.** A child's behaviour is shaped by family, friends, school, class and neighbourhood. No study can remove all of these to see the media's effect alone.
- **Artificial settings.** In a laboratory, a doll designed to be knocked over, an adult who seems to approve, and a test minutes after viewing are nothing like real life. Hitting a toy is not hurting a person.
- **Which way does cause run?** If aggressive teenagers watch violent films, the films may not have made them aggressive: aggressive people may **choose** violent films. Belson's findings are a correlation.
- **What counts as violence?** Cartoons, news footage, a war film and a horror game are all "violent" but are understood very differently.
- **Short-term and long-term.** Experiments measure minutes; any long-term effect is mixed up with everything else in a life.
- **Ethics.** No researcher may expose children to years of harmful material on purpose to find out.

Where most sociologists end up. Violent media is unlikely to turn ordinary people violent. It may add a little to the risk for a few people already at risk for other reasons (violence at home, a violent peer group), and it may make people more **fearful** rather than more violent.

The media and crime

How the media might encourage crime.

- **Imitation and technique.** Coverage can show how a crime is done, or make an offender famous (one reason some news outlets avoid naming mass killers).
- **Glamour.** Crime dramas, music videos and social media can make gangs, weapons or drug dealing look exciting and rewarding.

- **Relative deprivation.** John Lea and Jock Young (1984), left realists, argued that the media constantly displays consumer lifestyles that many poor young people cannot afford. They feel deprived **relative** to the people they see, and some turn to crime to get what everyone else seems to have.

How the media distorts crime. News selects stories by **news values**: what is dramatic, violent, unusual, involves famous people or can be told as a simple story of good and evil. So crime coverage is not a mirror of crime. Jason Ditton and James Duffy (1983) found that **45.8%** of crime stories in Scottish newspapers were about violent or sexual crimes, though these made up only **2.4%** of the crimes recorded by the police, so they were over-represented about **19 times**. Ordinary property crime, white-collar crime and crimes by the powerful get far less attention.

Effects of the distortion.

- **Fear of crime.** Philip Schlesinger and Howard Tumber (1994) found that tabloid readers and heavy TV viewers were more afraid of becoming victims of violent crime. Fear changes behaviour: people stay in at night, avoid areas, buy alarms.
- **Support for tougher punishment**, because the public overestimates how much serious crime there is.
- **Pressure on the police and politicians** to act against whatever crime is in the headlines.

A positive side. Reconstruction programmes such as the BBC's *Crimewatch* (from 1984) and police appeals on social media help find suspects and missing people.

Deviance amplification

Leslie Wilkins (1964) described a **deviance amplification spiral**: when the media and the authorities react strongly to a small amount of deviance, the reaction can **produce more** of it. The steps:

1. Some minor deviance takes place.
2. The media reports it in an exaggerated, alarming way.
3. The public becomes concerned and demands action.
4. Police and courts crack down harder, so they **find and record** more of the deviance, which looks like a rise in crime.
5. The people targeted are **labelled**, pushed out of normal society, and drawn closer to each other; some start to live up to the label.
6. The "rise" is reported, and the spiral turns again, bigger each time.

Jock Young (*The Drugtakers*, 1971) watched this happen to hippie cannabis users in Notting Hill, London. Drug use had been a minor part of their lives. Police targeting, backed by press stories, pushed the group to see itself as an outsider community: drug use became more central to its identity, prices rose, and some began dealing. The reaction **amplified** the deviance.

Moral panics

A **moral panic** is a burst of public alarm, whipped up by the media, about a group or behaviour presented as a threat to society's values, out of proportion to the real harm.

Stanley Cohen (*Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, **1972**) studied the reaction to scuffles between two youth styles, the **Mods and Rockers**, at Clacton over the Easter weekend of **1964**. Very little happened, but the national press reported a "day of terror". Cohen traced three ways the press built the panic:

- **exaggeration** of what happened (numbers, violence, damage);
- **prediction** that it would happen again, and worse;
- **symbolisation**: clothes, scooters and haircuts became symbols of the threat, so anyone who looked the part was suspected.

The youths became **folk devils** (a group blamed for society's problems), **moral entrepreneurs** (MPs, magistrates, campaigners) demanded action, police patrols and sentences grew, and young people who had not cared much about being "Mods" or "Rockers" began to identify with one side. The media had helped create the conflict it reported.

Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1994) gave five signs of a moral panic: **concern**, **hostility** towards the folk devils, **consensus** that the threat is real, **disproportionality** (the fear far exceeds the harm) and **volatility** (it erupts and fades quickly).

Why panics happen: three views.

- **Interactionist** (Cohen, Young): panics come from **labelling**; the media defines what counts as deviant and who is deviant.
- **Neo-Marxist: Stuart Hall and colleagues** (*Policing the Crisis*, **1978**) studied the 1970s British panic about "mugging", which the press linked to young Black men. They argued that at a time of economic crisis the panic turned public anger away from capitalism, divided the working class by ethnicity, and justified tougher policing: the panic served ruling-class **hegemony**.
- **Functionalist**: a panic marks the boundary of acceptable behaviour and draws the majority together around shared values.

Do moral panics still work? **Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton** (1995) argued that Cohen's model fits a world of a few national newspapers better than today's. Folk devils can now answer back through their own media and supporters; panics are so frequent that audiences shrug; and some youth cultures and record labels **welcome** a panic as free publicity. Critics add that some fears (knife crime, online grooming) concern real harm.

What panics show about media effects. They are some of the strongest evidence that the media can change behaviour: the public's, the authorities' and the folk devils' own. But notice **how** it happens: through labelling, public opinion, the police and the courts, over weeks. That makes moral panics evidence for a **powerful but indirect** influence rather than a hypodermic injection.

Ways the media might have a positive impact

If people can learn harmful behaviour from the media, they can learn helpful behaviour too.

1. **Learning to help.** Social learning works both ways: children copy kindness, sharing and cooperation from programmes as well as aggression. Educational television such as **Sesame Street** (first shown in **1969**) was designed to teach reading, counting and getting on with others, and research has linked it with better school readiness.
2. **Health and safety.** Campaigns on drink-driving, seat belts, smoking and HIV have helped change both norms and behaviour. Media reporting of suicide shows both sides: the **Werther effect** (a rise in suicides after sensational coverage, first measured by **David Phillips** in **1974**) and the **Papageno effect** (stories of people who found a way through a crisis seem to **reduce** suicides; **Thomas Niederkrotenthaler, 2010**). Many countries now have reporting guidelines because coverage changes behaviour.
3. **Charity and collective action.** Disaster appeals and events such as **Live Aid (1985)** raised huge sums; the **Ice Bucket Challenge (2014)** spread through social media and raised more than **\$100 million** for research into motor neurone disease. **#MeToo (2017)** encouraged many women to speak about sexual harassment and abuse.
4. **Information and democracy.** **Pluralists** and **functionalists** see the media as informing citizens, letting them choose between parties and acting as a **watchdog**. Investigations such as the **Panama Papers (2016)** exposed the hidden offshore wealth of politicians and the very rich; citizen journalists film abuses that authorities would rather hide.
5. **Challenging prejudice.** More varied and positive representations (of disabled people, ethnic minorities, LGBT people, older people) can reduce stereotyping, and on-screen role models can widen young people's sense of what they could become.
6. **Catharsis**, if Feshbach and Singer are right, is itself a positive effect.

But be careful.

- If campaigns work, harmful content can work too: you cannot claim one and deny the other.
- Many effects are **short-lived**: a share takes a second, and critics call activism without lasting action "**slacktivism**".
- **Marxists** say charity appeals present poverty as a natural disaster rather than the result of inequality.

Sensationalism

Sensationalism means presenting stories in an exaggerated, emotional and dramatic way to grab attention: shocking headlines, the worst-case angle, the most frightening image. It comes from **competition**: newspapers fight for readers, channels for ratings, and online outlets for clicks, and fear and outrage attract all three.

How people may be affected.

- **Distorted fears.** People overestimate rare, dramatic dangers (terrorism, stranger attacks on children, shark attacks) and underestimate common ones (road accidents, heart disease). Gerbner's "**mean world**" finding and Schlesinger and Tumber's tabloid readers fit here. People then change behaviour on false information: keeping children indoors, avoiding travel.
- **Moral panics and amplification**, above, are sensationalism with consequences for whole groups.

- **Copycat behaviour.** Sensational coverage of suicides, mass shootings or dangerous "challenges" can lead to imitation (the Werther effect).
- **Compassion fatigue.** **Susan Moeller** (*Compassion Fatigue*, **1999**) argued that the media's endless shocking images of famine, war and disease leave audiences numb: they stop caring and stop giving. This is desensitisation applied to news.
- **Outrage online.** Algorithms reward content that provokes strong emotion, so the most extreme versions of a story spread fastest and harden opinions.
- **Postmodernist view.** **Jean Baudrillard** argued that media images have become so vivid and constant that they feel more real than reality: a state of **hyperreality**. People then respond to the media version of events.

Limits. Many readers **discount** tabloid exaggeration, media-literate audiences (Buckingham) read critically, and sensational stories fade quickly.

Stereotyping

A **stereotype** is a fixed, oversimplified image of a group, applied to every member of it: young people as yobs, Muslims as a threat, women as carers or bodies, older people as frail. *Media representations* covers what the stereotypes are; here the question is **what they do to people**.

Effects on the people who are stereotyped.

- **Self-image and body image.** **Anne Becker** studied teenage girls in **Fiji**, where television arrived in **1995**. Before it, a large body was traditionally admired. By **1998**, after three years of mainly Western programmes, signs of disordered eating among the girls had risen from about **13%** to about **29%**, and many said they wanted to look like the women on TV.
- **Narrowed ambitions.** **Gaye Tuchman** (**1978**) called the absence or trivialising of women in the media **symbolic annihilation**. If a group rarely appears in powerful roles, its members may not imagine themselves in those roles.
- **Self-fulfilling prophecy.** Labelled again and again as troublemakers, some young people come to see themselves that way and act it out, as in the amplification spiral.

Effects on everyone else.

- **Prejudice and discrimination.** **Teun van Dijk** (*Racism and the Press*, **1991**) found that news coverage of ethnic minorities clustered around crime, conflict and "problems". Repeated over years, this can shape how employers, landlords, the police and the public treat whole groups. **Elizabeth Poole** (*Reporting Islam*, **2002**) found British newspapers presented Muslims mainly as a threat or as culturally different, and hate crimes against Muslims rose after the attacks of 11 September 2001.
- **Policing and policy.** The mugging panic (Hall et al.) shows a stereotype leading to more stop-and-search of young Black men, which then produced the arrest figures that seemed to confirm it.

Limits. Audiences can make **oppositional readings** of stereotypes (Morley); the stereotyped groups campaign against them and, with the new media, can represent themselves; and representations of many groups have become more varied.

Most of these effects are **long-term and indirect**: no single image changes behaviour, but years of the same images can. That is the cultural effects model at work, and it is why stereotyping is strong ammunition **against** the view that the media has little influence, but weak ammunition for a **direct** influence.

Putting it together: how strong, how direct?

Sorting the evidence by speed is the clearest way to handle a "direct or indirect" question.

How it works	Examples	What it suggests
Immediate and direct	War of the Worlds (1938: about 1 million of about 6 million listeners frightened, according to Hadley Cantril); Bobo doll; copycat crimes; Rwanda's RTLM radio station urging Hutus to kill Tutsis in the 1994 genocide (a 2014 study by David Yanagizawa-Drott found more killings in villages that could receive it)	direct effects happen, but in extreme moments, on some people
Short-term, through other people	moral panics; deviance amplification; voting and opinion leaders (two-step flow)	powerful, but indirect: works through labelling and social relationships
Long-term and cumulative	cultivation; Glasgow Media Group and Philo; Fiji; stereotypes and prejudice; hegemony	strong but slow and indirect; very hard to prove
Little or none	St Helena; Hagell and Newburn; Feshbach and Singer; Cumberbatch and Howitt; Ferguson	effects are small, filtered or not found

What the powerful do. Some of the strongest arguments for media influence are not studies but **behaviour of institutions**:

- **advertising** and **influencer** marketing are a market test: firms track sales after each campaign and keep paying, so they at least find some effect;
- governments set **age ratings**, a TV **watershed** and online-safety rules, especially to protect children;
- **authoritarian regimes** (and parties in wartime) control the media and use **propaganda** because they believe it keeps them in power; the Nazis set up a propaganda ministry in **1933**.

Yet when researchers try to measure these effects, results are often **inconclusive**. After the UK's **1992** general election *The Sun* claimed "It's The Sun wot won it", but studies of voters found little sign that readers had switched because of the paper; papers may follow their readers as much as lead them. Advertising succeeds for some products and fails for others.

Old media or new? The classic models were built in a world of a few channels and newspapers. The new media pulls both ways:

- **Stronger influence.** Platforms collect data on every user and can **micro-target** them; the **Cambridge Analytica** scandal (revealed **2018**) showed Facebook data being used for political targeting in the **2016** US election, and a Russian "troll farm" (the Internet Research Agency) was accused of trying to sway the

same election. **Fake news** spreads quickly; **algorithms** feed people more of what they already watch, which can draw a few towards extreme views and **radicalisation**; **influencers** with millions of devoted followers shape what they buy, wear and believe. **Digital pessimists** stress this side.

- **Weaker influence.** Two people in the same house may now scroll through completely different feeds, so the old picture of a whole nation watching one broadcast no longer holds: audiences are **fragmented**. Users answer back, fact-check, and make their own content. People **challenge** the media: complaints that get sexist adverts withdrawn, the UK's Stop Funding Hate campaign (from **2016**) pressing firms to stop advertising in papers it accused of stirring hatred, blogs and messaging apps getting round state censorship (as in the Arab Spring of **2011**), and growing distrust of mainstream news across the political spectrum, with some on the right dismissing it as "fake news", all show audiences resisting rather than absorbing. **Digital optimists** call this the **democratisation** of the media.

Key facts and formulas

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

Key term	Status
Direct against indirect, short-term against long-term, thought against behaviour	Learn it
Mass manipulation (Marxist, Frankfurt School, mass society); hegemony (Gramsci)	Learn it
Four possible effects of violent media: imitation, desensitisation, catharsis, sensitisation	Learn it
Method problems: isolating the media, artificial settings, direction of cause, defining violence, short against long term, ethics	Learn it
News values; relative deprivation; fear of crime	Learn it
Deviance amplification spiral; moral panic; folk devils; moral entrepreneurs; exaggeration, prediction, symbolisation	Learn it
Signs of a moral panic: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, volatility	Learn it
Werther and Papageno effects; slacktivism	Learn it
Sensationalism; compassion fatigue; mean world; hyperreality	Learn it
Stereotype; symbolic annihilation; self-fulfilling prophecy	Learn it
Micro-targeting; algorithms; digital optimists and pessimists; democratisation	Learn it

Key term	Status
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 16 questions for this topic (2021–2026), all 35-mark "Evaluate this view" essays from Paper 4. Three were set in two papers of the same session, so there are 13 different questions. Three questions ask about both direct effects and evidence, so they count under two types and the counts add up to 19.

Question type	Questions
Evaluate a claim that the media has a direct (or only indirect) effect on behaviour	8
Evaluate a claim about how strong the research evidence for media influence is	7
Evaluate a claim that the media shapes or significantly influences how people think and behave	3
Evaluate one concept as the best explanation of media influence	1

Paper 4 lasts 1 hour 45 minutes for two essays, so allow about 50 minutes for each, including 5 minutes to plan. No question yet has been set only on violence, crime, positive effects, sensationalism or stereotyping, so the worked examples cover those.

First, find the side. These quotations are written both ways round ("has a direct influence", "has **only** an indirect influence", "there is **little** evidence", "evidence **clearly** shows"). Before planning, write at the top of your page what agreeing would mean, in your own words. Then everything that agrees goes in the first half, and everything that disagrees in the second.

1. Evaluate a claim that the media has a direct (or only indirect) effect on behaviour (8 questions)

Asked as: the media has a direct influence on social behaviour (2, the same question in two papers); the media has only an indirect influence on social behaviour (1); the media has a direct and powerful influence on human behaviour (1); the media does not have a direct impact on human behaviour (1); evidence clearly shows that media content has a direct impact (1); there is clear evidence that the media has a direct impact (2, the same question in two papers).

- 1. Introduction.** Define **direct** (the message itself changes behaviour, quickly, much the same for everyone) and **indirect** (through people, norms, labelling or years of exposure). Say which side the quotation takes.
- 2. The direct case**, built by **speed**, from fastest:
 - **moments of shock:** War of the Worlds, RTLM in Rwanda, copycat crimes;
 - **experiments:** the Bobo doll, Drabman and Thomas, plus the Newson report;
 - **the theory behind it:** the hypodermic syringe and Marxist mass manipulation, which made sense in the 1930s mass society;

- **what institutions bet on:** advertising and influencer budgets, children's age ratings, propaganda in dictatorships;
- **the new media:** micro-targeting, Cambridge Analytica, the alleged Russian interference in 2016, influencers' devoted followers, radicalisation.

3. The indirect case:

- **the audience filters:** two-step flow (opinion leaders), uses and gratifications (choice), reception analysis (Morley's groups decoded the same programme differently because of class, ethnicity and occupation);
- **slow power:** cultural effects and hegemony; Fiji; stereotyping. Make the key distinction here: **indirect does not mean weak**. Some neo-Marxists think the indirect influence is very strong;
- **panics and amplification:** powerful, but they work through labelling, police and courts;
- **weak or missing direct evidence:** St Helena, Hagell and Newburn, Feshbach and Singer, Cumberbatch and Howitt; Lazarsfeld's 1940 voters rarely switched because of radio or newspapers, an early blow to the mass-society picture;
- **method:** isolating the media is almost impossible, so "direct" claims cannot be proved;
- **today's media:** fragmented audiences, people answering back and making content, campaigns against sexist and state-controlled media.

4. **Conclusion** on the exact words, for example: direct effects are real only in rare, high-fear moments or with vulnerable individuals; most influence is indirect, but that indirect influence can still be strong.

When the quotation says "only indirect", the sides swap: the indirect material supports, the direct material evaluates.

Placing uses and gratifications. Picture a viewer who puts on a crime drama to unwind. On one reading, what the drama does to her depends on that need, so the influence is filtered: support for "indirect". On a sharper reading, she takes from it only what she came for and is barely changed: a challenge to "influence" itself. Both earn credit; tell the examiner which reading you are using.

When it says "direct and powerful", test the two words separately: an effect can be powerful but indirect (cultural effects, panics), or direct but weak (a short-lived Bobo doll effect).

When it says "evidence clearly shows", it is also a type 2 question: put the studies and their weaknesses at the centre.

2. Evaluate a claim about how strong the research evidence for media influence is (7 questions)

Asked as: there is little evidence that the media influences the way people think and behave (1); there is no clear evidence that the media influences social behaviour (1); research evidence suggests that the media has little impact on behaviour (1); there is no clear evidence that human behaviour is influenced by the media (1); evidence clearly shows that media content has a direct impact (1); there is clear evidence that the media has a direct impact (2, the same question in two papers).

The word **evidence** is the instruction. Examiners place model-only answers in the middle of the range, so build this essay on **studies and methods**, with theory explaining them.

1. **Introduction.** What would count as clear evidence: a measured change in behaviour, caused by the media and not by something else.
2. **Evidence that seems to show influence, by research method:**
 - **laboratory experiments:** Bobo doll; Drabman and Thomas;
 - **surveys and correlations:** Belson; Gerbner's heavy viewers; Schlesinger and Tumber's fear of crime;
 - **observation and case studies:** Cohen's Mods and Rockers; Young's drug-takers; Hall et al. on mugging; Becker in Fiji; Philo and the Glasgow Media Group;
 - **natural events:** War of the Worlds; RTLM;
 - **behaviour of institutions:** advertisers, regulators, propaganda ministries.
3. **Evaluate that evidence** (this is where the marks are):
 - each method's weakness: labs are artificial and short; correlations cannot show which way cause runs; case studies may not generalise; Cantril found most listeners were **not** frightened;
 - **counter-evidence:** Feshbach and Singer; St Helena; Hagell and Newburn; Cumberbatch and Howitt's review; Ferguson; Hobson and Buckingham on media-literate audiences; Lull and Morley on active, interpreting viewers;
 - **the problems for all research:** isolating the media, defining violence, ethics, long-term effects (Gauntlett);
 - even voting and advertising research, where effects should be easiest to measure, gives mixed results (*The Sun* in 1992).
4. **Theory as a lens.** Marxists, the Frankfurt School, feminists and postmodernists all assume great media power; pluralists see the audience in charge. Point out that **belief** in strong effects is widespread but the **research base** is thinner.
5. **Conclusion**, for example: there is good evidence of influence on **thought** (fear, stereotypes, body image) and of short-lived or indirect effects on behaviour; clear evidence of direct effects on behaviour is scarce, partly because it is so hard to get.

3. Evaluate a claim that the media shapes or significantly influences how people think and behave (3 questions)

Asked as: the media is able to shape the way people think and behave (2, the same question in two papers); the media has a significant influence on how people behave (1).

No model is named and no word like "direct" narrows it, so the question is **how much**. Organise by **area of life**, not by model; it shows range and avoids a list of models.

1. **Introduction:** define "shape" (form beliefs, identities and actions, not just reflect them); set out the spectrum from strong to minimal influence.
2. **Where the media's shaping looks strongest**, an area at a time:

- **identity and the body:** feminists on how women see themselves (Fiji, symbolic annihilation), influencers and celebrities as role models, postmodernist hyperreality and identities built from media images;
- **beliefs about society:** cultural effects and hegemony (Gramsci), Glasgow Media Group, Philo, Gerbner; the Frankfurt School's mass society;
- **crime and deviance:** moral panics and amplification; stereotypes and policing;
- **buying and voting:** advertisers' dependence on manipulating consumers; micro-targeting; propaganda; the hypodermic syringe and mass manipulation behind them;
- **positive change:** health campaigns, Papageno, #MeToo (shaping can be good).

3. Where the influence weakens:

- **active audiences:** uses and gratifications; two-step flow; reception analysis; resistance by feminists and other groups who campaign against the media;
- **the audience is in charge:** pluralists and functionalists point out that outlets ignoring their readers lose them; *The Sun* switched to backing Labour before the **1997** election, when its readers were already moving that way;
- **the new media:** anyone can make content (democratisation), though digital pessimists reply that algorithms and big platforms give new power to shape;
- **the evidence gap:** weak or contradictory research; isolating the media; correlation not cause.

4. **Conclusion**, for example: the media shapes thought widely and behaviour sometimes, most strongly where people have no other source of information; "significant" is fair for long-term influence, not for instant control.

4. Evaluate one concept as the best explanation of media influence (1 question)

Asked as: the influence of the media on human behaviour is best explained by the concept of mass manipulation (1). This question is also tagged with *Different models of media effects*, whose note covers the models in more detail.

1. **Explain the concept** (AO1): early Marxist, Frankfurt School, mass society from the 1930s, the media as a ruling-class tool; link the hypodermic syringe as its mechanism.

2. Why it can seem the best explanation:

- **a real historical fit:** it was born when Goebbels's ministry and wartime radio really did move whole populations, and where one broadcaster has no rivals (RTLM in Rwanda) it still describes events fairly well;
- **dramatic cases:** War of the Worlds; wartime and authoritarian propaganda; moral panics as short bursts of mass behaviour;
- **the bets of the powerful:** advertising budgets; governments restricting what children can see;
- **the new media:** election targeting, fake news, celebrity influence;
- **quick effects do exist:** the Bobo doll and Drabman and Thomas show a single viewing changing what children do within minutes, so a fast, direct push is not fantasy.

3. **Why other explanations are better** (compare, don't just list):

- **its picture of the audience:** passive, isolated and all affected alike, against the social, active audiences of two-step flow, uses and gratifications and reception analysis;
- **its picture of the media:** one unified machine, when content is varied and ownership spread across many competing firms (pluralism);
- **later Marxism:** Gramsci's hegemony and the cultural effects model keep media power but replace crude manipulation with slow consent; this is the strongest rival because it shares the concept's Marxist starting point;
- **the media against the powerful:** the Panama Papers, citizen journalism, the new media as a way round controlled outlets;
- **evidence:** no convincing research for direct, powerful effects.

4. **Conclusion**, for example: a useful starting point that is right about the media's power but wrong about how it works.

Do not use the active-audience models as **support** for mass manipulation: they are the case against it.

Worked examples

Each is a new 35-mark essay on part of the syllabus that has not yet had its 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

'Violent media content leads to violent behaviour.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Define violent media content (films, games, news, music videos, online clips) and violent behaviour (actual harm to people, not just aggressive play). Set out the four possible effects: imitation and desensitisation would support the view; catharsis and sensitisation would contradict it.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Learning by copying:** the Bobo doll children reproduced the adult's attacks, and social learning theory explains why a screen can be a model.
- **Getting used to it:** Drabman and Thomas's children were slower to stop a real fight after watching violence.
- **Long-term exposure:** Belson's heavy viewers reported more serious violence.
- **Public belief and policy:** the Newson report, the Video Recordings Act, and age ratings all rest on the idea that violent content harms children.

Against the view (AO3).

- **Better-designed studies find little:** on St Helena, children's behaviour did not change after television arrived; Hagell and Newburn's young offenders watched no more violence than others.
- **The opposite effect:** Feshbach and Singer's boys on a violent diet were slightly less aggressive.

- **Weak methods:** the Bobo doll test was artificial and immediate; Belson found a correlation, and violent boys may choose violent viewing; Gauntlett's wider critique.
- **Reviews:** Cumberbatch and Howitt found the evidence too uncertain; Ferguson found youth violence fell as violent games spread.
- **Active audiences:** Buckingham's media-literate children tell fiction from reality; reception analysis says the same scene is read differently.
- **Moral panic:** the fear itself fits Cohen's pattern (Bulger and the video the boys were never shown to have seen).

Conclusion. Violent content is unlikely to cause violence in most people; at most it adds to the risk for a few people who are already at risk, and its clearer effect is on fear. The view overstates the case.

How it would be marked. Accurate, detailed knowledge of at least four studies and the four possible effects (AO1 7–9), every point applied to **behaviour** rather than just attitudes (AO2 10–11), and sustained evaluation of the methods behind each study leading to a reasoned judgement (AO3 12–15).

Example 2

'Moral panics show that the media creates the deviance it reports.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Define moral panic, folk devils and deviance amplification; explain that "creates" is a strong word: it means there would be less deviance without the coverage.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Wilkins's spiral:** reaction produces more recorded and more actual deviance.
- **Young's drug-takers:** police and press attention turned a minor habit into a group identity, raised prices and drew some into dealing.
- **Cohen's Mods and Rockers:** exaggeration, prediction and symbolisation built a conflict that young people then joined.
- **Hall et al.:** the mugging panic increased stop-and-search, which produced the arrests that "proved" the stereotype.
- **Labelling theory:** deviance is what is labelled as deviance, and the media is the main labeller.

Against the view (AO3).

- **The deviance was there first:** panics amplify behaviour that already exists; the media does not invent it from nothing.
- **Others do the creating:** police, courts, politicians and moral entrepreneurs act, so the media is one link in a chain.
- **Real harms:** some "panics" concern serious problems (knife crime), and calling the concern a panic dismisses victims.
- **Today's media:** McRobbie and Thornton say folk devils answer back, audiences are used to panics, and some groups welcome the publicity.

- **Evidence:** most panic studies are qualitative case studies from one time and place, so it is hard to measure how much deviance the coverage added.

Conclusion. Moral panics are strong evidence that media reaction can **increase** deviance and shape how it is seen; "creates" goes too far, because the media works with other agencies and on behaviour that already exists.

How it would be marked. Accurate use of Wilkins, Cohen, Young and Hall et al. with key concepts (AO1 7–9), consistent application to whether the media **creates** deviance (AO2 10–11), and a sustained weighing of the media against other agencies and of old against new media (AO3 12–15).

Example 3

'The media has more positive than negative effects on human behaviour.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Define positive effects (prosocial, healthier, better informed, less prejudiced) and negative ones (violence, crime, fear, prejudice, harm to self-image).

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Prosocial learning:** if children copy aggression, they also copy cooperation; *Sesame Street*.
- **Health and safety:** campaigns changed norms on drink-driving and smoking; the Papageno effect.
- **Collective good:** Live Aid, the Ice Bucket Challenge, #MeToo.
- **Democracy:** the watchdog role (Panama Papers), citizen journalism; the pluralist and functionalist view.
- **Many negatives are overstated:** the violence research is weak; panics fade.

Against the view (AO3).

- **Sensationalism:** fear of crime (Dutton and Duffy, Schlesinger and Tumber), compassion fatigue (Moeller), the Werther effect.
- **Stereotyping:** Fiji's girls; symbolic annihilation; prejudice against Muslims and ethnic minorities (Poole, van Dijk).
- **Crime:** relative deprivation (Lea and Young); amplification and panics.
- **The new media:** radicalisation, fake news, micro-targeting.
- **Marxist objection:** even charity and campaigns can serve capitalism and hide the causes of inequality; slacktivism.
- **Measurement:** positive effects are as hard to prove as negative ones.

Conclusion. For example: the media's effects are mostly indirect and depend on the audience, so "more positive" or "more negative" varies by group and medium; but the long-term effects of sensationalism and stereotyping are harder to undo than the short-lived boosts of campaigns, so the view is too optimistic.

How it would be marked. A balanced range of positive and negative effects backed by studies (AO1 7–9), applied throughout to **behaviour** and to the comparison "more than" (AO2 10–11), and a judgement that weighs the two sides and questions how far effects can be measured (AO3 12–15).

Common mistakes

- **Opinion instead of sociology.** The examiners keep reporting answers that give personal views about the media with no studies or theory. Every paragraph needs a named study, model or concept.
- **Agreeing without challenge.** Weak answers accept the quotation (the media controls behaviour) and never test it. Even if you agree, give the other side a full half.
- **Models but no evidence on evidence questions.** When the quotation says "evidence", answers that only describe models stay in the middle band. Review studies and their methods.
- **Treating "indirect" as "no effect".** Cultural effects, moral panics and stereotyping are indirect but can be powerful. Separate how strong an effect is from how direct it is.
- **Using a study without saying what it shows.** "Bandura did the Bobo doll experiment" earns little; "it suggests imitation, but in an artificial setting minutes after viewing" earns AO3.
- **Ignoring the new media.** The examiners reward contrasting traditional and new media; it is the easiest way to test whether a 1930s or 1960s idea still fits.
- **Confusing who supports what.** Active-audience models are evidence against mass manipulation, not for it.

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 studies with their findings, and use the terms: direct and indirect effects, imitation, desensitisation, catharsis, folk devils, deviance amplification, sensationalism, stereotyping, hegemony.
- **AO2 interpretation and application (11):** the top level (10–11) needs material that is accurate and **consistently applied to the question**. If the quotation says "evidence", talk about evidence; if it says "direct", keep testing directness.
- **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 evidence as well as views:** say what each study's method can and cannot show.
- **Use the distinctions:** direct and indirect, short-term and long-term, thought and behaviour, traditional and new media, some audiences and others.
- **Reach a judgement** that answers the exact words: for which people, in which situations, and through which process the media has most influence.
- **Answer two questions from different sections;** the paper is out of $2 \times 35 = 70$.

Quick check

1. Name the four effects violent media might have, and say which two would reduce violence.

2. Ditton and Duffy found that violent and sexual crimes made up 45.8% of newspaper crime stories but only 2.4% of recorded crimes. How many times over-represented were they, to the nearest whole number, and what effect might this have on behaviour?
3. Explain how deviance amplification turns a small amount of deviance into more, using Young's study.
4. Give one argument and one piece of evidence that the media can have a positive effect on behaviour, and one criticism.
5. Why does stereotyping support the view that the media has a strong influence, but not that it has a direct one?

Answers

1. **Imitation, desensitisation, catharsis and sensitisation.** Catharsis (releasing aggression in fantasy) and sensitisation (seeing violence's consequences) would **reduce** violence.
2. $45.8 \div 2.4 = 19.08$, so about **19 times**. Readers overestimate violent crime, become more afraid (Schlesinger and Tumber), stay in or avoid places, and support tougher punishment.
3. The media exaggerates a minor deviance; the public demands action; police target the group and record more of it; the group is labelled and becomes closer and more deviant; the "rise" is reported, and the cycle repeats. Young's hippies made drug use more central to their identity after police and press attention, and some began dealing.
4. Argument: social learning works for helpful behaviour too. Evidence: health campaigns, the Papageno effect, the Ice Bucket Challenge or *Sesame Street*. Criticism: effects may be short-lived (slacktivism), or Marxists say campaigns can hide the causes of inequality.
5. Years of the same images can shape self-image (Fiji), ambitions (symbolic annihilation) and prejudice (Poole), so the influence is strong. But it builds up slowly, through many images, and works through people's beliefs and through institutions such as the police, so it is indirect, as the cultural effects model says.

Past questions to try

- **9699/41/M/J/21 Q4:** essay on whether there is clear evidence that behaviour is influenced by the media.
- **9699/42/F/M/24 Q4:** essay on whether the media has a direct and powerful influence on behaviour.
- **9699/42/M/J/22 Q3:** essay on whether the media has a significant influence on how people behave.
- **9699/42/O/N/21 Q3:** essay on whether research evidence suggests the media has little impact on behaviour.