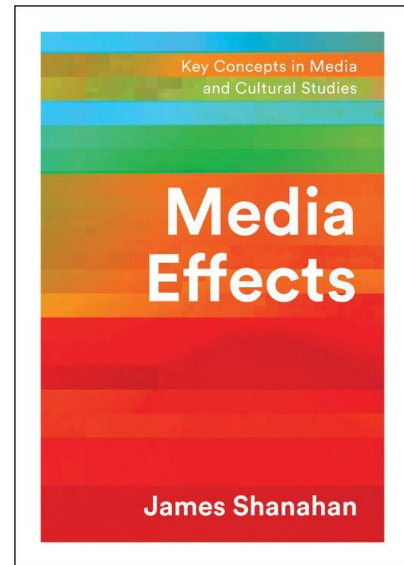


James Shanahan, **Media Effects: A Narrative Perspective (Key Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies)**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2021, 251 pp., \$55.27 (hardcover), \$15.17 (paperback).

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**Media Effects: A Narrative Perspective (Key Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies)** is written by an eminent scholar in media effects research, an authoritative representative of cultivation theory, who looks back and offers an original overall view of the field. In doing this, James Shanahan uses a “narrative” perspective as a unifying lens to link different subfields, results, and disciplines that have been investigated in media effects research for almost a century. Using this construct, Shanahan takes a stand on the basic research questions of the field: What are the effects of the media? Are these effects large or small? Do digital media render traditional effects theory obsolete? What remains unknown?



Chapter 1 introduces the main concepts of media effects research. Shanahan explains the historical emergence of notions like “opinion,” “mass communication,” and “propaganda,” distinguishing between an “informational” and a “critical” framework. A neat elaboration of the concepts is enriched by colorful quotes: We get to read excerpts from the Buffalo Bill Adventures that worried conservative elements of the American society of the late 1800s, as well as relevant references from LeBon, Lasswell, Adorno, and other milestone authors.

Chapter 2 is about the “narrative” perspective. Ranging from Aristotle to Russian folk tales, the reader is led to understand that narration is “a natural, evolved form in which humans receive and store information” (p. 202). Narrations can be performed around the fire of ancient villages as well as through the most advanced media technologies. Therefore, stories are the substance of the mediated environment and the nonmediated reality. Under this perspective even the very questions of media effects research can be rethought: “Media reality and non-media reality are both narrative domains, so there is a sense in which we are asking, ‘What is the effect of stories upon story-telling?’” (p. 65).

Chapter 3 is about the effects of media violence, seen as the archetypical issue of media effects research. It offers a remarkable synthesis of the results of a long and much-debated line of scientific inquiry. Through this rereading, one finds confirmation of the relevance of the narrative perspective. Indeed, scholars’ attention has mostly focused on how media violence could determine violent behaviors, but in this respect only relatively small impacts could be demonstrated. It turns out, instead, that a more relevant effect of media violence is the way heavy users learn to *perceive* the world. Media violence tells us about a violent world so that we, too, end up narrating it like this to ourselves (the well-known “mean world syndrome”), with a series of psychological, social, and behavioral consequences (e.g., going out less, having less trust in others).

Chapter 4 is about the relationship between media and social representation. As Shanahan states, it shows how the media “highlights majorities and deselected minorities” (p. 32). However, the case of representation of sexual minorities is particularly relevant to show how narratives can change in time together with social change. Sometimes, it is enough that some sectors of society start to accept a minority for the media to act as a sounding board and amplify the change. In some cases, media narrations of sexual minorities have even ended up overrepresenting those who were once underrepresented, exerting opposite measurable effects on users over a few decades.

In chapter 5, the author explains why and how media are a means for social elites for preserving their power. Indeed, the reader finds confirmation that social control “is an important form of, and a sometimes under-recognized example of, a media effect” (p. 142). Still, there is also room for change, and social movements can have an impact on media representations, especially when elites can find good economic justifications for change.

I found the central question of chapter 6 particularly interesting: Are digital media making obsolete the traditional theories that the author has talked about up to this point? Shanahan does not hide that the theoretical basis of the book lies in the mass media era, which now seems confined to the past. And the author does not spare himself in the effort to question his own theoretical background with the novelties of emerging media. For example, he highlights that with digital media “one could make one’s own programs, one could personalize one’s own stream of programming, and with all of this, the dominance of the entertainment networks over the mediated life of consumers might be challenged” (p. 171). Indeed, while narratives are constitutively structured linearly, digital media can technically bypass this need. However—Shanahan notes—despite that they could technically challenge traditional narratives, most of the time they do not. “Binge-watching” is one of the many examples where a user stays immersed in a linear narrative for hours and hours, even if she could technically enjoy the contents in a fragmented and hypertextual way. Therefore, Shanahan sees continuity along with change. Many of the big issues of traditional media effects research are still relevant for digital media. They are just more difficult to test, as the environment is far more fragmented.

In the epilogue (chapter 7), the author confronts a basic question that hovered in the reader’s mind throughout the volume: Are media effects large or small? The author assesses that—overall—research on media effects has found only small to moderate effects, which is undoubtedly in contrast with our impression that media have a very relevant impact on our societies. Shanahan examines the reasons behind this inconsistency, the most relevant of which is that research cannot count on actual control samples: The media build the narrative foundations of the world we live in, even for those who do not use media at all.

Although the back cover states that *Media Effects* is a “concise introduction which studies the ways in which media use affects society,” the book is suitable reading for those already familiar with such theories. For this kind of reader, the volume offers a tasty treat that makes you understand the concepts you had never fully understood, discover those bonds you had never grasped, and understand the historical reasons for the birth and evolution of specific theories.

In Shanahan’s history of the field, it emerges clearly that United States’ internal affairs have influenced global research on media effects. For example, the discussion on violence in the media and its

effects is linked directly to crime increases in American cities during the 1970s and 1980s, and then to the beginning of the dramatic era of school shootings. Perhaps unintentionally, the book offers an uncommon perspective on American cultural dominance in the postwar era.

I agree with the back cover—instead—on the term “authoritative.” The book provides the reader with an interpretation of the field according to the perspective of a person who directly participated in one of the most important research groups in its history, that of George Gerbner and the Cultural Indicators project. As is admitted in the preface, the theory of cultivation ended up taking a preponderant place. But this is for the most part a competitive advantage of the book, as it moves away from a neutral review and takes a stand, without hiding the specificities of its roots.

What I missed in this book is an analysis of the economic causes that lead the media to represent reality in certain ways. In the rich chapter on the relationship between media and violence, for example, there is little that helps to understand what the economic incentives of the media in overrepresenting violence are. Also, in chapter 7, the interesting perspective on the continuities between old and new media could have been enriched by a description of the substantial similarity between the economies of commercial television and those of social media platforms. So, the question remains unanswered of how much media business models influence the stories that media tell us, and therefore their effects.

Various passages of this outstanding book aroused in me a thought concerning a different disciplinary field, which is, however, relevant for all who work in academia. Within educational sciences, there is a hot debate regarding the replacement of so-called frontal teaching with more active forms of learning, also fostered by digital technologies. Shanahan’s book made me think about frontal teaching from a different angle. After reading the volume, one knows that speaking in front of an audience, telling a story to a group of friends, is not just one of the many ways of conveying ideas and information but is a privileged communication channel for human beings, one that has the greatest effect on them. So, I have been led to consider an additional reason why lectures have not yet disappeared from schools and universities, and presumably never will. In the overstimulated media environment in which today’s students live, we could consider classrooms as protected contexts for experiencing narrative performances, where physical presence is just an additional help to stay focused.

More generally, this book makes a milestone contribution to answering the question of whether the digital panorama will destroy linear narrative or, in the end, emerging media features will be used to convey it in new and more effective ways. Shanahan seems to suggest that the second is far more likely.