

# Myers, media and modern times

**L**IKE many of psychology's pioneers, C.S. Myers watched no television, never played a videogame, could not text and was unable to surf (the web). By contemporary standards, he lived a life of barely imaginable media deprivation. But he did play a major role in the development of the British Psychological Society and its publications, wrote influential early textbooks, steered the development of the Experimental Psychology Laboratory at Cambridge, and went on to direct the National Institute of Industrial Psychology (NIIP) (Bunn, 2001); and all this in an era innocent of e-mail, SMS and instant messaging.

If he had lived in different times, would Myers (1873–1946) have had the slightest professional interest in the media explosion of the late 20th century and beyond? Writing an essay in his honour allows me to engage here in what the reader could, under other circumstances, categorise as a conveniently self-serving and patently hard-to-test external attribution – I speculate that he would. I propose also that he should. That is, as a leader and visionary among psychologists, Myers would and should have been encouraging the rest of us to pay more attention to the uses of media than we do.

He was certainly adept in using newly emerging media as research tools. Among his contributions to the Cambridge anthropological expedition to Torres Strait in 1898, Myers (whose interests also included musicology) worked on recording the songs and tunes of the indigenous people. The expedition was the first British foray to exploit the recently developed medium of the wax-cylinder phonograph for data collection (in a fortunate confluence of primitive technology, ancient vocal tradition and modern



**KEVIN DURKIN** delivered the C.S. Myers Lecture at the 2006 Annual Conference.

communications, you can listen today to the products on the web: see [www.collectbritain.co.uk/collections/wax](http://www.collectbritain.co.uk/collections/wax)). It seems likely that he also recognised human modes of expression and communication as rich topics for psychologists – among other early sections of the BPS that he encouraged was one devoted to aesthetics.

With some notable exceptions, psychologists have tended to ignore or deplore the media, and disregard them as objects of study. At first glance, this is understandable. Much media content deserves to be dismissed and there is plenty to criticise. But this rather misses the point: whether we like them or not, the media are pervasive in everyday life and occupy huge amounts of our attention, cognitive, linguistic and social activity. This is a basic descriptive fact of the main species whose capacities and behaviour we profess to study and explain. Furthermore, the diverse media serve many purposes and can be addressed to many goals. (The BPS and *The Psychologist*, incidentally, are readily absolved of neglect, as both have taken a longstanding proactive interest in the role of the media in communications between our discipline and the broader society that funds our work.)

According to Barlett (1937, p.109), Myers believed that

*...to live psychology must grow. He desired to bring it into closer touch with a wider sphere of activity outside the University. In particular he saw clearly great problems of industrial and social organization in the solution of which psychology must play its intimate part.*

With this clarity of vision and sense of purpose, it is unlikely that he would have overlooked, in our times, the prominence of the media in almost every aspect of collective life.

## The ubiquity of the media

There can be little doubt that the mass media are integral to contemporary social organisation. The 'traditional' media remain dominant. In a large survey of British adults, Couldry *et al.* (2006) found that 96 per cent watch TV daily, for an average of one to three hours, and 80 per cent listen to radio, for an average of 30 minutes.

As newer media proliferate and hybrid forms emerge, take-up is rapid. Young people in particular tend to be at the forefront of exploiting new communicative technologies (Livingstone & Bober, 2004; Roberts *et al.*, 1999): approximately 90 per cent of adolescents own a mobile and 96 per cent of these use SMS services. Most young people and many adults play computer or videogames (Vorderer *et al.*, 2006). The worlds of education, politics and business are transformed by such new media use.

## How does psychology respond?

When psychologists *have* paid some attention to media, it has often been with negative preconceptions. Quite a lot of effort has been expended on proving that the media cause or exacerbate aggression. Related endeavours have attempted to gauge contributions to other social ills, such as crime, sexism, racism, substance abuse and health disorders. Space does not permit a review of all of this work or debate on its progress, though I would suggest in passing that debate is still very much needed.

There is an oft-repeated opinion that, with respect to the effects of media on aggression, 'the debate is over'. Curiously, this conviction does not inhibit those who hold it from continuing to publish familiar claims, variants on the basic experimental paradigms and meta-analyses of preferred findings. While I would not presume to guess on which side of the debate Myers

## CALL FOR PAPERS

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would have placed himself, it is fair to conclude that his commitment to the two-way transaction between science and application would have left him in favour of at least holding debate. He certainly entered a few debates in the course of his career, including the controversy over the notion of 'shell shock' and the scope for industrial psychology in improving the workplace. Debate in Myers' time was fundamental to the scientific enterprise; now, some authoritative sources would preclude it.

However, this is not to argue that that particular debate merits centre stage, or that it is the only productive way in which psychologists can contribute to the study of media. One limitation of that debate is that it tends to focus attention on causal models of human behaviour that appear wildly implausible to researchers in most other areas of psychology. There are various guises, but the 'debate is over' stance is usually associated with accounts that presume linear effects (the more you watch, the worse it gets) or injection models (the media insert nasty things into us). If, on top of this, researchers are prone to assert 'and we don't need to discuss it any further', then the likelihood of productive interchanges with other areas of the discipline is compromised.

This is unfortunate, partly because it runs the risk of detaching media research from investigations of the more substantive factors underlying serious social problems, such as aggression, sexism and racism, and

partly because it feeds unhelpfully into lay reasoning about these matters. This can have impact on policy (e.g. media regulation) and on parental anxiety (e.g. the widespread myths that TV and videogames are irremediably 'bad' for children, and that one is defaulting as a caregiver if the evil screens are permitted in the home).

### **What do young people do with their media?**

Another way of examining the media is to consider what people might or might not do with them. This is a question which should hold interest for, and can elicit answers from, almost all specialisms in psychology.

In my own work, I have approached issues relating to young people's uses of the media primarily from the perspective of a developmental social psychologist. From this perspective, the questions of interest are very much akin to those of interest to developmentalists generally, namely:

- How do young people make sense of what they encounter in the media?
- Do they extract information from the media and, if so, how does it relate to their broader developing cognitive and social capacities?
- How does the acquisition of knowledge from vicarious representations of the world mesh with understandings achieved through direct and interpersonally mediated interactions with the real world?
- How do young people's media choices

and enthusiasms reflect their developmental needs?

We do not have the answers to all of these questions, but it is at least clear that the answers will have to take account of much more than the unidirectional processes assumed in much of the 'debate is over' ethos.

### **Media and gender**

Take gender roles, for example. A standard assumption is that because the entertainment media are full of traditional stereotypes, and because young people consume a lot of entertainment media, then the media must be causing, or contributing to, traditional gender-role development. Debate over? In fact, it proves enormously difficult to investigate this claim, partly because the processes of gender-role development are still not fully understood, partly because media representations are heterogeneous, and partly because of the methodological challenges of measuring exposure to and processing of media content (Durkin, 2005).

However, it proves rather less difficult to demonstrate that young people themselves are active social cognitive processors of gender-related information in the media and can impose readily their existing understandings and expectations on the available data. For example, by at least age four or five, typically developing children can supply explanations or elaborations of onscreen behaviours or events that draw on their knowledge (stereotypes) of how males and females are supposed to behave (Durkin, 1984; Durkin & Nugent, 1998). This does not settle the causal issue, but it does remind us (and I stress that this is not news to developmentalists) that children are not passive absorbers of social information but relate it to what they already know.

One way in which the media might contribute to social change is by challenging traditional stereotypes. To illustrate, the media could, in principle, serve to heighten young people's awareness of the range of occupational choices available to them, irrespective of gender.

C.S. Myers might well have been attracted to this mode of career guidance dissemination. At the NIIP, he attempted to take occupational psychology directly to young people by the use of careers floats on the streets of London, using live models in work uniforms to convey some of the

jobs to which adolescents might aspire. Photographs reveal that the gender typing of the models was in keeping with the times, but the basic idea was a well-intentioned effort to offer vivid careers information. However, while a careers float may be more engaging than leaflets or lectures, it does not necessarily reach eligible targets who fail to visit Trafalgar Square on the right Sunday afternoon.

The mass media have the potential to provide overt or incidental careers guidance to vast numbers of young people and their families. They can access dispersed audiences, much faster, with economies of scale, exploiting the creative and communicative expertise of skilled professionals. The messages the media offer about employment options might be influential, and could even be turned to positive ends.

But, with respect to attempts to promote nontraditional options, there is a catch. Gender counterstereotyped career messages are often met with resistance by many young people, especially adolescents (Durkin, 1985). They tend to reject vigorously the idea that women could be plumbers or men could be secretaries. The media do not shape or reshape people at will. Again, this is less surprising to developmentalists, for whom the acquisition of knowledge, beliefs, values and behaviour is a complex, multifaceted

#### Miscellaneous negative effects have been claimed for videogames

and protracted affair. Promoting change in something as profound and affectively laden as gender-role beliefs can be supported by media interventions, but is most likely when other key socialising agents (teachers, parents) are enlisted (Johnston & Ettema, 1982) – and even then remains difficult.

#### Media and crime

My colleagues and I have also been investigating the ways in which young

people use media (primarily television) information about crime and legal processes. Our concern is not 'Do the media cause crime?' Although crime in the media comes close to being another candidate for 'debate is over' treatment, such an effect is implausible: the onset and maintenance of delinquency is far more closely tied to social and developmental phenomena in the real world (Emler & Reicher, 1995; Moffitt, 1993). Rather, our interest lies in the ways children construct their understanding of society. The media may play an important part in the provision of crime and legal information, as these are domains of experience that are not directly available to most children. Crime and the law are much more frequent in everyday TV than in real life, though typically in ways which emphasise the sensational and exaggerate the efficiency of police services.

Understanding police programmes entails representing, storing and using complex patterns of event-related information. From a relatively early age, children can derive scripts or generalised event representations from routine television content, such as police shows (Low & Durkin, 1997, 1998). Five- and six-year-olds have some grasp of the basic themes of this area of TV, especially that the police chase bad guys. Over the next few years, children develop more elaborate representations and become able to process

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variations. These representations are productive and help them to organise their understanding and predict upcoming content.

Importantly, from a developmental perspective, these attainments are not instantaneous, are hard to explain as the result of the media 'injecting' knowledge, and are constrained by both children's developing social cognitive capacities and their interactions with the real world. For example, some aspects of television crime shows call for inferential leaps and the ability to represent other people's points of view. Children's developing perspectives and theory of mind influence how they interpret phenomena that seem transparent to older viewers, such as witnesses to crime (Durkin & Howarth, 1997). As children develop and gain more opportunities to observe police and legal matters in the real world, they tend to become more sceptical of distorted representations found in the media.

### Electronic games

Videogames have become the latest media shock horror story in recent years – ironically, or perhaps cynically, hyped up regularly by the (other) media themselves. There is no doubt that the games are very popular. Miscellaneous negative effects have been claimed, including allegations that the games are addictive, impair family life and peer relations, damage school performance and, above all, cause obesity and aggression. It is routine journalism to follow up truly horrific events, such as US high school shootings, with hasty accounts of what the perpetrators might have been playing on their consoles.

I suspect that C.S. Myers, who dealt first hand with the traumatic sequelae of engagement in real violence during World War I, would be intrigued to learn of the devastating effects imputed to electronic games almost a century later. Despite the familiar furore, the evidence of aggressive play affecting aggressive behaviour is slender and contentious (Griffiths, 1999; Gunter, 1998). Indeed, once more, the preoccupation with detecting negative 'effects' of the media runs the risk of diverting us from more fundamental matters, such as explaining their enormous popularity with young people (as well as adults), identifying the needs that players seek to gratify (Durkin, 2006; Goldstein, 1998; Jansz, 2005) and considering the games' wide range of potential benefits (Saloni-Pasternak & Gelfond, 2005).

Some evidence that computer game play may be associated with positive youth development comes from work conducted in collaboration with Bonnie Barber. We investigated the relationships between amount of play and several measures of social behaviour and adjustment in a sample of over 1000 16-year-old Americans (Durkin & Barber, 2002). We compared participants who never played computer games, low players (play occasionally) and high players (play daily or almost daily).

There were several advantages to the player groups. Low and high game players had more positive self-concepts in respect of intelligence and computer skills than did the never players. High players rated their mechanical skills higher than did never players. Low and high players reported less substance use than did never players. These measures depend on self ratings but, interestingly, consistent results were obtained on more objective measures, such as academic achievement. Low players had higher grade point averages (GPAs) than each of the other groups.

In contrast to the popular assumption that computer game play inhibits sociability, both low and high play groups reported higher levels of family closeness and attachment to school than did never players. Low and high play participants scored lower on a measure of association with 'risky' peers than did never players. Low and high players were significantly more likely to be involved in organised extra-curricular activities and clubs than were the never players.

Of course, this is a correlational study rather than a test of causal hypotheses. We would not claim that playing computer games led to these characteristics or can guarantee positive outcomes. A more likely explanation of the results above is that young people who engage regularly in voluntary, structured and challenging activities will be the kind of individuals who tend to enjoy relatively positive development. Playing electronic games may be one manifestation of what most developmental theories would see as the natural, active and constructive exploration of the environment engaged in by young people. The environment is changing because of the emergence of new technologies, and young people are responding adaptively.

Consistent with the view that playing electronic games does not necessarily mean

that young people are constantly inactive, in a separate study of 600 Australian pre-adolescents, no evidence was obtained of an association between amount of play and risk of overweight/obesity (Burke *et al.*, in press). We did find that TV-viewing predicted increased risk of overweight in boys (but decreased risk in girls). However, in line with other research, the effect size was negligible, suggesting that TV use is not of substantial clinical relevance (Marshall *et al.*, 2004).

### Conclusions

The shocking news I have to report is that the place of the media in young people's lives is not as shocking as we might expect. I am certainly not the first investigator of children's uses of media to conclude this, and there is much richer evidence than I have space to review here. There are aspects of media content and use that call for attention and concern – from researchers and from parents. However, this does not warrant the hyperbole that is often reiterated in... well, the media. Nor should it encourage psychologists in the complacent belief that the debate is over and the effects are clearly dreadful.

A healthier perspective, one which is more respectful of the young audience, is one which emphasises that children and adolescents (and even adults) are active, inquisitive and resilient beings developing in constant interaction with their ecologies. C.S. Myers did not study media use but he did advocate a climate in which psychology itself was inquisitive and eager to interact with the world around it. One way to sustain that spirit is to address the challenges of studying human beings' evolving uses of their media.

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### DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Should parents fear or embrace children's enthusiasms for media?

Are today's students really dependant on soundbites?

Why is the media so often blamed for society's ills?

Can psychology keep up with developments in the media and their consequences for information processing, understanding, relationships and affect?

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