

Media coverage ... why bother?

Heather Maitland delves into some research about the effects of media coverage

You may not have to pay for media coverage but it still costs because getting it is so time consuming. So why invest all that time and energy?

Politicians are understandably interested in whether media coverage works. Pippa Norris explored how the media affects the way people vote in her analysis of the 2005 General Election.¹ She looked at the direct effects of communications on the priority voters placed on particular campaign issues, the way they altered people's attitudes regarding the performance of the government and the competence of party leaders, their influence on voting choice and on whether people turned out to vote at all.

Of course, there's no point in asking people straight out what media most influenced their vote. People are unlikely to be aware of the complex range of influences shaping their political beliefs and perceptions. The project researched the political beliefs and attitudes of nearly 3,000 people both before and after the election. It then looked at whether changes were consistently associated with people who had used particular communication channels.

Norris concluded that different communication channels were effective in different ways. Newspaper readership was most strongly associated with changing voting choices and mobilising people to vote. Reading a Conservative-aligned newspaper had a negative impact on evaluations of Tony Blair but also on opinions about Michael Howard. She found no evidence that the media impacted on the priority

people placed on particular issues, in spite of media claims that they set the political agenda. Party election broadcasts on TV were most strongly associated with increasing people's interest in the election and influencing perceptions of the competence of party leaders.

But canvassing by the Conservative Party (but not Labour) was also associated with changes in voting choice, generating political interest and mobilising the vote. Online sources impacted on voting choice and perceptions of government performance on the issues of crime and asylum seekers and of leadership competence. So the media did matter, but there isn't any evidence to support simple assumptions about whether any particular communication channel is more effective.

The Drinking Water Inspectorate looked at the impact of the media on

whether people believed it was safe to drink water out of the tap.² Their research concluded that people remember negative stories in the press simply because they are more interesting. They don't necessarily believe them, though. Some presumed that stories were exaggerated to increase sales of the paper while others, influenced by previous 'health scares', believed the stories but not the rebuttals made by the authorities. Positive stories were also read with scepticism on the basis that the water companies were 'massaging public opinion'. Research commissioned by the Mayor of London explored the impact of media coverage of asylum seekers. It, too, identified scepticism which meant that readers didn't believe the more alarmist stories. Unfortunately, this scepticism wasn't enough to correct the lasting impressions caused by inaccuracies.

So why does media coverage still have an impact, even when people don't believe it?



Brain scans have shown that people don't make rational choices. Complex brain processes shape what we pay attention to, remember, recall and react to. Brands are a complex web of associations that include sensory perceptions, abstract meanings, emotional markers, learned attitudes and behavioural responses.³ The emotional markers are important. Most of our rational decision making just supports what already feels right.⁴ That's because our brain has already scanned the options and filtered out those that cause a subconscious negative reaction.⁵ Strong, positive emotional markers make an association long lasting and easy to recall.

Mark Westaby argues that these emotional markers take longer for the brain to process. The longer and more deeply we engage with a communication, the deeper the emotional response. People choose

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what editorial coverage they read and so they engage with it so much more than the advert they just glance at.

The intensity of the emotional marker depends on the emotional content of the coverage. Letting someone look as long as they like at an advert with strong emotional content creates a more intense emotional marker than editorial coverage with little emotional content.

Robert Heath and Agnes Nairn disagree with this analysis. They conclude that communications we pay little attention to but are exposed to repeatedly create longer lasting emotional markers than those we pay

attention to but see only once or twice. They say our emotions are more easily influenced if we don't know it is happening.

Both Westaby and Heath and Nairn agree, however, that each communication about a brand or product builds on the emotional response of the previous one. So we can't conclude that media coverage is more effective than any other communication method. But we do know that it has a crucial role to play in an integrated campaign in which all the elements work together to ensure our key messages are remembered and vividly recalled. ■

See p.23 for reports referred to above.



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