Media Psychology: A Field Whose Time is Here

By Bernard J. Luskin, PhD

The convergence of media, technology, communication, art and science is transforming our world, and the socio-psychomedia effect is as enveloping to our society as water is to fish in the sea. Universities have begun to respond to our changing world with fresh approaches to help professionals develop mastery of new and emerging fields. New career opportunities abound, and new types of positions are emerging. Burgeoning media industries have an accelerating need for capable media professionals, solutions architects, and highly-developed practitioners who understand both psychology and state-of-the-art technology such as writers, producers, programmers, engineers, designers, directors, artists, cinematographers, public relations and advertising specialists. Today's educational institutions need faculty and staff who understand higher concepts in media arts and sciences. Our new tools are both physical and intellectual, with an understanding of psychology being central to the most effective use of new media in society. Individuals must understand implications of media to perform competitively in the majority of new and emerging occupational specialities. The study of media effects, and understanding the psychology of media, are fundamental to emerging trends. This article offers an overview of new developments in media studies, and the emergence of media psychology as a rapidly evolving field of advanced study.

Media Studies programs are emerging in a variety of ways, and universities are launching new programs. All media manifests itself in communication, and effective communication requires an understanding of human behavior. Media Studies is the field covering the broad study of media effects, the area of research where psychology and media elements converge. Media psychology is related to Media Studies much as arithmetic is related to accounting.

June Wilson, one of my students, is completing her PhD in psychology with an emphasis in Media Studies. Her descriptions of 13 major U.S. and international Media Studies programs may be seen in Appendix One.

Psychology and Education

In 1998, Lilli Friedland and I co-chaired the APA Division 46 (Media Psychology) Task Force Study on Psychology and New Technologies. Using Delphi methodology to survey a wide variety of experts, we identified 11 major fields where psychology is fundamental to their application:

1. Writing about media or performing as expert guests on various media
2. Consulting with media personnel
3. Researching ways to improve all forms of media
4. Making new technologies related to media more effective and user friendly
5. Using new technology in media to enhance clinical psychology
6. Most areas of education or training
7. Developing media standards
8. Working in commercial fields
9. Studying sociological and psychological media effects
10. Developing materials for physically and developmentally challenged populations, as well as all underserved populations.
11. Working with deviant or criminal populations

Media Psychology and Education

The Fielding Graduate Institute [http://www.fielding.edu] School of Psychology offers the first PhD program in Media Psychology in the United States. The program focuses on the applications of psychology to multi-media, and media effects. The School of Education offers an EdD in Education with an emphasis in Media Studies that focuses on higher education, community colleges, or K-12. Both schools offer the same basic media psychology courses, and are taught by the same instructors.
Media psychology embraces *pscybermedia*, a neologism that combines psychology, artificial intelligence (cybernetics) and media. Media psychology also includes an understanding of both physical and emotional aspects of the brain, range of emotion, the psychologies of expression, persuasion, sexuality, and gender. It encompasses study of theories of emotional control, believability, situational cognition, assessment, learning, mapping, feedback, reinforcement, mastery, persistence, success and failure.

**Dimensions of Media Psychology**

Media psychology is both an art and a science, embracing teaching, theory construction, research, application, and performance as they pertain to the production and to the processing and impact of mass communications and entertainment media messages on individuals, groups, and societies. It views these impacts in terms of sensory and cognitive processes, as well as larger group and individual effects related to cultivated or instigated behavior, attitudes and values. The wide and exciting realm of *effects research* (how various news and entertainment media effect and are affected by audiences, audience demographics and audience numbers) is central to media psychology. Examples of such influences would be formation, maintenance and/or change of individual and group stereotypes, on-camera and off-camera diversity and its effects on media stories and media perspectives, advertising and propaganda messages, and learning and utilizing new skills and information.

Another dimension of media psychology in the applied realm involves the appearance of psychologists in various print, electronic and computer-based media, and their presentations of information about, and clarification of, the entire discipline of psychology. This group includes psychologists who consult with the media on various topics, psychologists who produce products for the media (such as books, films, magazine articles both on and off-line), psychologists who appear on radio or television in various guest and host capacities, and psychologists who offer on-line services such as education, advice and counseling information.

A third dimension of media psychology concerns those who work with and within the government, business and learning industries, in the never-ending process of adapting hardware and software to various goals of information communication; and those who apply psychology in a variety of fields including commerce, education, entertainment, government, health services and telecommunications. Multi-media presentations in institutional settings, as well as the pursuit of commercial opportunities and/or innovations in remote or distance learning for educational and corporate university populations, are also part of this dimension.

Theories examining the effects of verbal and nonverbal communication in understanding music and sound, images and orienting human reaction may be applied through media psychology. Luskin’s (2002) *Three S’s* is among a number of distinctive and specialized areas of application. The S’s are: (1) Senesthetics, the study of stimulating and combining one sense with another; (2) Semiotics, communication through identification, manipulation, and use of symbols, including screen design, iconography, navigation and user interface; and (3) Semantics, the understanding of the use, effects and implications of words. An understanding of synesthetics, semiotics and semantics is pivotal to the relationship between media, the human response and the evolving language of this new field. New vocabulary such as emoticon, screenager, webhead, and cybrarian, and are examples of emerging terms and changing language.

**The Scholar Practitioner Approach**

The field of psychology is rapidly evolving and expanding. Most of the emphasis over the years has been on Clinical Psychology as an area of key importance. As the broader aspects of psychology gain attention, a new vision of the scientist practitioner is emerging. Building programs in psychology that offer new opportunities in health services, public service and public policy, publishing, education, entertainment and commerce, opens a world of potential for those whose foundational understanding of psychology is sound.

The concept of the scholar practitioner is interesting to contemplate. It is logical that those who are highly educated in understanding the mind and human behavior are well suited to assume key positions to help the world solve its problems and to capitalize on its opportunities. In education, coupling psychology and
media will contribute significantly to field of educational psychology. In public policy, such knowledge will be central to the dramatic socio-psycho-media world in which we live. All fields will be affected. Thucydides, author of The History of the Peloponnesian War written in 431 BCE., is reputed to have said, "A nation that draws too broad a difference between its scholars and its warriors will have its thinking being done by cowards, and its fighting done by fools."

Bernard J. Luskin, PhD received his doctorate in Education, Technology and Psychology from UCLA, and is Director of the Media Studies Program at Fielding Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara, California. His newest book Casting the Net Over Global Learning was published in 2002 by Griffin Publishing Group. Dr. Luskin is Executive Vice President of Institutional Partnerships, and was Founding President of Coastline College, Founding Chancellor of Jones International University, President of Orange Coast College, Mind Extension University and Knowledge TV. He has been recognized with distinguished alumni awards by UCLA, CSULA, distinguished leadership awards from the University of Florida and Council for Resource Development, and with lifetime achievement awards for contributions in digital media research by the European Commission, and Irish Government. Dr. Luskin may be contacted at bluskin@fielding.edu. References are available from the author upon request.

Appendix One

US and International Media Studies Programs

Interdisciplinary Studies

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (www.cms@mit.edu) The two-year program leading to a Master of Science degree in Comparative Media Studies (CMS) is part of MIT's School of Humanities and Social Sciences. CMS has been described as focusing on the social, cultural, political, legal, and ethical implications of media, in a larger historical context. The PhD in Media Arts and Science Program (also known as the Media Lab) is part of the School of Architecture and Urban Planning. The Media Lab has been described as a place for designing and developing innovative new technologies.

Communication/Media

University of Chicago (www.uchicago.edu) This Cinema and Media Studies Graduate Program offers a PhD degree program that focuses on the history, theory, and criticism of film and media. Courses in media psychology are included.

University of Denver (www.dms.du.edu) University of Denver offers a Master of Arts degree in Digital Media Studies. This program is in partnership with the School of Communication, School of Art and Art History, and the Department of Computer Science. Media psychology is among the subject matter.

University of Iowa (www.uiowa.edu) This graduate program in Media Studies is within the Department of Communication Studies.

New York University, Steinhardt School of Education (www.nyu.edu) The Steinhardt School of Education now offers both an MA and PhD in Educational Communication and Technology. This degree is in Media Studies and media psychology is built into the program.
Stanford University (www.stanford.edu)
Stanford's PhD program in Communication Theory and Research prepares students to conduct research on communication processes and effects within social and behavioral sciences.

The New School (www.newschool.edu)
The New School's MA in Media Studies program explores the relationship between theory and practice across comparative media, and also offers courses in media psychology.

California State University at Los Angeles (www.csula.edu)
The program offers a Masters Degree in Psychology with an emphasis in Media Psychology.

International Programs

University of Stirling - Scotland (www.fms.stir.ac.uk/postgraduate.html)
This program has both an online program and traditional program offering an MSc/Dip through their Film and Media Studies Department. Contact r.b.haynes@stir.ac.uk for further information.

University of Sussex - UK (www.sussex.ac.uk)
Two Masters Degrees; one in Media Studies and one in Digital Media are now accessible through the University of Sussex. Media psychology is specifically enumerated in the curriculum.

University of Western Ontario - Canada (www.uwo.edu)
The Master of Arts in Media Studies from the University of Western Ontario is an interdisciplinary study of media, technology, and culture.

British Open University - UK (www.open.ac.uk)
The British Open University offers a Masters degree in Distance Education with a focus on media and behavior.