research funding are evident in the plethora of studies with small samples and simple measures, and in the paucity of longitudinal designs and the lack of good replications. On the positive side, much of the research has been funded by public bodies, conducted by independent researchers, and published in peer-reviewed journals available in the public domain.

McQuail observes that 'the entire study of mass communication is based on the premise that there are effects from the media, yet it seems to be the issue on which there is least certainty and least agreement' (1987: 251). By contrast, home, school and peers are all readily acknowledged as major influences on children's development, though the theories and methods designed to investigate them are complex, diverse and often contested. In the contentious field of media effects too, the research questions asked are remarkably similar to those asked in the fields of education, sociology and psychology regarding the many other potential socializing influences. As in those fields, the media effects literature is divided on questions of methodology (what counts as evidence) and politics (why are certain research questions asked), resulting in confusing messages to policy-makers. Yet it seems that straightforward answers are more often expected, in relation to media influence.

BEYOND SIMPLE EFFECTS

One problem endemic to these debates is the markedly simple, even simplistic nature of the questions often asked about the effects of the media in both public and academic discussion (e.g. Is television bad for children? Do video-games make boys violent?; Gauntlett, 1998).[1] Yet if we set aside the media coverage that often accompanies new findings – admittedly often sought and sanctioned by the researchers – and instead examine the peer-reviewed published articles, we find that, by and large, effects researchers do not claim simply that, for instance, children copy what they see on television. Rather they tend to claim, carefully, that certain media contents increase the likelihood that some children, depending on their cognitive and social make-up, may copy what they see, provided they have interpreted the content in a particular way (this in turn depending on its textual framing – e.g. an association between violence and reward) and if their circumstances encourage such behaviour (e.g. playground norms) and – here a long list may follow, identifying a variety of contingent factors. Such qualified and contingent answers do not make life easy for industry or regulators; nonetheless, when dealing with complex social phenomena (violence, aggression, sexuality, prejudice, etc.), many factors – including but not solely the media – must be expected to play a role.

There are, arguably, rhetorical advantages to posing questions in a form that makes them 'impossible' to answer, and this points us to a further problem, namely the highly polemic nature of the debate, pushing opponents to extreme, polarized positions. These opposing views often, though not always, draw on psychological versus cultural studies traditions of studying the media.[2] In their volume, Alexander and Hanson (2003) pit opposing sides directly, showing the theoretical and methodological disputes at stake. Asking, for example, whether television is harmful to children, Potter (2003) takes a psychological perspective, pointing to the extensive body of research pointing to harmful effects, while Fowles (2003), from a cultural studies perspective, identifies a series of methodological issues (artificial experiments, small effect sizes, inconclusive fieldwork) that undermine claims for effects. Potter concludes that media violence has become a