The fourth and latest edition of Glenn Sparks’ *Media Effects Research: A Basic Overview* (2013) contains many welcome changes while retaining the basic structure of the textbook, which remains highly useful for teaching undergraduate classes in communication. The greatest strength of *Media Effects Research* is its ability to explain the more broadly construed theories and cases from within the history of media effects and communication in a simple and clear manner while providing many examples. Three pages outline the changes and new material (p. xix–xxi) in this edition, such as the inclusion of a new section on the contribution of the Decatur Study (p. xiv), and a discussion in Chapter ten of “females and new technology” (p. xx), among others.

In the book’s preface, Sparks states that he began writing the text when he noticed that his undergraduate students “gradually sank into the dry-sand prose of most texts that attempt to present theories of mass media” (p. xvii). “Once the sinking started,” he adds, “I was almost never able to rescue them. I finally grew tired of this routine” (p. xvii). Sparks became convinced that he should write “a book for undergraduate students” when he “realized that it was possible to write a text that was not dry and boring” (p. xvii, italics in original). He set out with two primary examples in mind: Robert Cialdini’s famous *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* from 1984 (the book was re-released in textbook form as *Influence: Science and Practice* in 2003 and is currently in its fifth edition) and Em Griffin’s equally successful introductory communication theory book, *A First Look at Communication Theory* (1991). Griffin’s book has been so popular that it is currently in its ninth edition and features two new coauthors (2014), including Sparks. *Media Effects Research* is written from a perspective that seeks to capture the same readable style as these early textbooks, and it succeeds admirably in doing so.

*Media Effects Research* contains twelve thematic chapters that are divided into numerous subsections. Generally, the first three chapters begin by explaining the scientific approach to media effects and the scientific method in communication, followed by a brief history of the main topic. Discussions incorporate prediction, explanation, understanding, and control (p. 5–8), as well as theory, falsifiability, creativity, and the nature of science (p. 9–20). Methods are covered in an introductory fashion (p. 24–47) and a discussion of historical examples (the Payne Fund Studies, media impact studies in the 1940s, etc.) of media effects research are discussed (p. 50–68). The largest section of the book, Chapters four to seven, deals mostly with the consequences and effects of mass media, particularly the effects of violence and sexuality on emotions (p. 71–170). Sparks specializes in this area so it not surprising that a more substantial voice is given to these topics. The research projects of individuals in the field (Albert Bandura, Leonard Eron, Rowell Huesmann, and Brandon Centerwall, etc.), as well as relevant studies and theories (priming effects, the Meese Commission Report, the dynamics of excitation transfer, the 1970 President’s Commission on Obscenity and
Pornography, etc.), are all covered. Chapters eight and nine deal with the persuasive effects of news media and politics, Chapter ten with stereotypes (p. 174–229). Lastly, Chapter eleven focuses on the impact of new media technologies and Chapter twelve explains the theories of Marshall McLuhan. Sparks thankfully includes helpful summaries at the end of each chapter of the book, along with a list of keywords, elements that are essential for any undergraduate textbook. Helpful tables are also provided throughout.

Most of Media Effects Research is cohesive and provides a complete introduction to the relevant topics and issues. However, there remains room for improvement. The penultimate and final chapters of the book seem oddly incomplete (Chapter eleven) and out of place (Chapter twelve). Chapter eleven is ostensibly about “the impact of new media technologies” (p. 258). It does cover this topic, but seems insufficient. Although Sparks comments that adding more material than what is currently included in Media Effects Research would not help his goal of creating a readable introductory textbook for undergraduates, there is an argument to be made for including more on new media in a way that might actually entice a younger audience. The book could stand to remove one of the chapters on emotions in favour of including another chapter on emerging information and communication technologies (apps, big data, wearable computing, etc.). Also, while Marshall McLuhan remains an important figure in the field of communication, an entire concluding chapter on McLuhan may have been edited back to be included within the book’s wide-ranging chapters on theories, cases, and individuals. In future versions, Sparks may serve his book and readers better by perhaps including all of the Toronto School of communication theory, with subsections on not only McLuhan, but also Eric Havelock, Harold Innis, Edmund Carpenter, and Northrop Frye. Or, perhaps, since the last section is subtitled “A Less Scientific Approach to Media Impact” (p. 280), Sparks could also include the work of other non-scientific media researchers, such as the Frankfurt school members, including Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas, not to mention other important German media and communication theorists, such as Friedrich Kittler.

A wide variety of texts on media effects are currently available on the market but are more suited to the graduate level. One of these, Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research (third edition) by Jennings Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver (2009), is an edited collection with twenty-one separate essays, including “Media Violence” (p. 269) by Sparks, coauthored with Cheri W. Sparks and Erin A. Sparks. At over six hundred pages, it is the largest among the group of books on media effects. While Media Effects by W. James Potter (2012) features sixteen chapters on different media effects and Fundamentals of Media Effects (second edition) by Jennings Bryant, Susan Thompson and Bruce W. Finklea (2012), essentially a textbook on media effects, both seem aimed at graduate level students rather than undergraduates. The SAGE Handbook of Media Processes and Effects (Nabi & Oliver, 2009) and Elizabeth Perse’s Media Effects and Society (2001) round out the group.

Among the variety of available texts, Media Effects Research remains the most valuable for the specific task of teaching an undergraduate class in media effects and com-
munication, a claim that is reinforced by the number of positive student reviews currently on Amazon. If one wishes to find an enjoyable and clearly written introductory text on some of the basic theories in the history of communication research, *Media Effects Research* is the right book. Excluding the minor issues with the last two chapters, one Amazon review from a student, who had to read the book for a first year communication class, might have put it best: “This is a really great textbook.”

**References**


*Andrew Iliadis*, Purdue University