

To support his fragmentation thesis, Craig cites Anderson's (1996) content analysis of seven prominent communication theory textbooks, which identified a disconcerting abundance of some 249 distinct "theories." Furthermore, Anderson found that only 22% of these theories appeared in more than one of the seven books, and only 7% were included in more than three books.

Other analyses of the literature appear to support Craig's (1999) cautious appraisal. Riffe and Freitag (1998) found that only a quarter of the articles they studied included

an "explicit theoretical framework." Kamhawi and Weaver's (2003) analysis of a representative sample of two decades of articles from 10 mass communication journals concluded that only 30% of the articles mentioned a theory explicitly and an additional 9% appeared to imply a theory. Bryant and Miron (2004) reviewed 1,806 articles from communication journals from 1956 through 2000 and found that only 576 (32%) included some theory, and of the 604 different theories addressed in these articles only 26 were cited in more than 10 of the articles.

The thesis of this article is that this skepticism is misdirected. The theoretical anchor points of an evolving theory of mass communication effects, we believe, are evident and frequently cited. So why the pessimism? The core problem may be some confusion about the very concept of communication effects itself. We will argue that there is a widely accepted "received wisdom" about the history of the field positing an opposition of "minimal" versus "significant" effects and that this characterization may have some unfortunate effects on the design and practice of communication effects research. We offer analysis of the citation patterns of a sample of the 200 most frequently cited articles in the field of communication effects focusing on patterns of reference to 36 seminal books and articles and provide an alternative, more positive history of what we have come to identify as six sequential and accumulative stages of media effects research. Rather than simply repudiating previous scholarship, in our view, a close reading reveals that these key articles cumulatively identify an increasingly sophisticated set of social, cultural, and structural conditions and cognitive mechanisms that help explain when mass-mediated messages do and do not affect the beliefs and opinions of audience members.

### **The received history of the field**

The dominant historical narrative of communication effects research posits three stages pivoting on alternative notions of significant versus minimal effects (see, e.g., Berger & Chaffee, 1987; Bryant & Thompson, 2002a; Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1982; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1988; Delia, 1987; Katz, 1980, 1987; Keppinger, 2008; Noelle-Neumann, 1973; Perse, 2007; Power, Kubey, & Kiousis, 2002; Schramm & Roberts, 1971; Wartella, 1996; Wicks, 1996).