

We also examined the methodologies used in each of the top-cited articles and will review that briefly here. We found no dramatic shifts in the dominant methodological approaches in use. Of the 200 articles, 15% of them were content analyses or employed content analyses to measure one or more variables, 43% were surveys, and 18% were experiments. The use of content analysis increased in the 1970s and 1980s, probably as a result of cultivation and agenda-setting studies, which are commonly cited from those periods. Surveys, while remaining the most common methodology cited, have declined slightly since the 1980s, while the number of experiments cited has increased over time.

Although 8% of the articles used time series data, only one article in our sample employed a time series design after the 1980s. Similarly, only 2.5% of the studies were panel designs and none appeared in the data set after the 1980s. Four percent used aggregate data, but almost no aggregate studies appeared after the 1970s. Factor analysis and related methods hit a peak in the early 1980s and have since declined and leveled off. On the other hand, the use of mediation, moderation, path analyses, and structural equation modeling increased over time, likely in part as a result of advances in computing and statistical design, but perhaps also owing to a post-Klapper interest in contingent and indirect effects and processes. Interestingly, none of the articles in the data set used hierarchical linear modeling. Finally, 30% of the articles were strictly theoretical pieces, literature overviews, and in more recent years, meta-analyses.

Discussion

In a pensive mood, De Fleur (1998) looked over the corpus of communication research and concluded that there have been no significant new theories since the early 1980s and the golden age of communication research appears to have passed. We beg to differ. And we would like to suggest that novelty of theory unconnected to the evolving corpus of research may not be the best measure of theoretical progress.

Pondering the intellectual history of a field of scholarship from time to time is an important and constructive exercise. Scholarly disputes on where the field has come from and where it should be headed are a natural outcome of such activity.