

The average number of citations per article in the top-200 sample for each five-year interval is about 100 citations with some expected falloff for the most recent five-year intervals, which have not yet had sufficient time to be read, utilized, and cited in published work given the inevitable multiyear delays. The total number of articles published in the communication field has been steadily expanding over this time period, but that growth is primarily a result of the introduction of new journals. For these five core journals the number of articles per year is roughly the same at about 400 per year, rising slightly in the middle decades and declining slightly in the number published per year in the last decade.

Given the dominant three-element historical communication research narrative of strong effects first embraced, then rejected, then rediscovered, one might expect a pattern of the rise and decline of opposing and successive literatures. It is demonstrably not the case (see Figure 2, derived from the 20,736-article data set). Only the first cluster, persuasion citations, declines, and the falloff is modest. Despite the strong pull of the Mathew Effect, scholars cite focused research on the conditions of media effects rather than a few celebrated citations that characterize the typical size of effects. Later, scholars may have seen themselves as part of a “strong-effects school,” but their patterns of citation reveal a richer and more detailed story.

This pattern of growth through the process of citing, building on, and refining previous work continues throughout the 50-year span for each of the other clusters. Indeed, theoretical innovation and integrative theorizing of previous work is a defining characteristic of the highly cited articles. Take, for example, the most frequently cited article from our sample in the 1961–1965 period—Kelman’s (1961) article in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, “Processes of Opinion Change”—which is cited 476 times. It represents an interpretive review of the literature, still at that time dominated by notions of persuasion and direct, propaganda-style effects, and innovatively elaborates three psychological mechanisms that are invoked in the persuasion process—compliance, identification, and internalization—that Kelman draws from his own research. These dynamics, although the precise vocabulary did not catch on, represent a prototype that would presage work in active audience theorizing.

The top article in the 1966–1970 segment is Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien’s (1970) inventive article on knowledge gaps (cited 197 times), which is itself the seminal cite for that theory (number 17 on our list). Tichenor et al. offer up a provocative hypothesis about educationally based differential attentiveness to media and put forward a set of methodological techniques for measuring beliefs with survey research data over time to test it. As Kuhn (1962) might assert, this introduction of a theoretically grounded puzzle connected to a methodology to “solve” the puzzle is the definition of how cumulative science works. Entman’s (1993) *Journal of Communication* article on framing effects is not the first to introduce the concept but critiques and builds on the paradigm. It is the most frequently cited article in the 1991–1995 interval and is cited 281 times during the period of our analysis. The top article in the final segment 2001–2005 is the 2001 *Communication Research* article by Shah, McLeod, and Yoon, cited 40 times, which conducts a secondary analysis