

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Evolution of Media Effects Theory: A Six-Stage Model of Cumulative Research

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The literature of media effects is frequently characterized as a three-stage progression initially embracing a theory of strong effects followed by a repudiation of earlier work and new model of minimal effects followed by yet another repudiation and a rediscovery of strong effects. We argue that although this dramatic and somewhat romantic simplification may be pedagogically useful in introductory courses, it may prove a significant impediment to further theoretical refinement and progress in advanced scholarship. We analyze the citation patterns of 20,736 scholarly articles in five communication journals with special attention to the 200 most frequently cited papers in an effort to provide an alternative six-stage model of, we argue, cumulative media effects theories for the period 1956–2005.

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This is an article about the last 50 years of communication effects research. It aspires to develop two arguments. The first is that the evolving character of this research reveals an underlying structure moving from relatively simple models of persuasion and prospective attitude change to more sophisticated and layered models as scholars successively address the conditions and contexts of communication effects. The progression is cumulative, we argue, because once an effect of some sort has been identified, subsequent research can systematically address the conditions under which such an effect is diminished or strengthened. The second argument is that this underlying structure is routinely obscured and the advance of cumulative scientific refinement is potentially derailed by a widely held construction of this history known as the “minimal-effects hypothesis.” We can demonstrate empirically through citation analysis that the first argument is true, although the structure of citations is modest rather than dramatic. We are unable to prove that the second is true, although we can identify what we believe is ample anecdotal evidence. On the second argument, we would be pleased to have successfully raised the issue rather than conclusively won the point.

We start with the notion of “media effects.” It represents one of the core ideas of communication research since its inception. Elihu Katz (2001b) characteristically

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