

In the third and current stage of theoretical development, according to the narrative, the unfair and dismissive minimal-effects notion becomes the red flag to the bull as a new generation of scholars seeks to justify the discipline itself and to demonstrate significant effects through new theories, better measurement tools, and improved methodological designs. Klapper becomes the rather convenient *bête noire* as scholars demonstrate various “not so minimal effects” (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982) or demonstrate that if the media could not tell you what to think they were “stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The polarity between minimal effects and big effects continues as a central thematic, sometimes in the foreground, as in McGuire’s (1986) “The Myth of Massive Media Impact” and Zaller’s (1996) response “The Myth of Massive Media Impact Revived,” or more often as a back drop for various empirical and theoretical inquiries (Bennett & Manheim, 2006; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Our thesis is that, despite its pedagogical allure, the minimal-effects/significant-effects polarity could function as an impediment to theorizing—in essence diminishing our understanding of real progress in theory and research that has characterized the last 50 years of scholarship. There are three elements to our argument.

First, the minimal-effects/significant-effects polarity conflates the empirical effect size of media impacts and their theoretical and practical importance. A mathematically tiny effect can accumulate over time to play a decisive role. Frequently, as in many election campaigns, a tiny fraction of the electorate becomes a pivotal swing vote. In

the practical terms of electoral outcomes, the fact that the large majority of voters do not appear to be swayed by political ads and bumper stickers is simply beside the point. Numerically small and scientifically important results, in our view, require no apologies.

Second, the narrative unduly simplifies the history of communication research, and by diminishing earlier scholarship, it awkwardly puts younger scholars in the position of needlessly reinventing ideas and repeating research in a manner that is less constructive and accumulative. Lasswell’s (1935) ideas about the interaction of psychopathology of national identity, for example, have new resonance in a post-9/11 world. Lazarsfeld and Merton’s (1948) nuanced theorizing about conformity and status conferral provides abundant grist for modern-day critical theory and analysis (Katz, 1987; Simonson, 1999; Simonson & Weinmann, 2003). In addition, even Klapper’s (1960) much derided compendium and analysis offers thoughtful discussion of the conditions under which media effects tend to be the strongest and advice on how further research might clarify our understanding of those conditionalities. A close reading of Klapper reveals that he called for further research on