

(a) the psychological predispositions of audience members; (b) the situated social context of message reception; (c) the broader social, societal, and cultural context of message reception; and (d) the structure of beliefs among audience members, not just the direction of beliefs. Each of these four represents a critically important condition of the communication process, and each has served as a foundation for theoretical advancement and refinement. We will demonstrate that these foundational points are well represented in the literature and correspond to four of the six fundamental media effects theory clusters we derive from our citation analysis of the literature. For the record it should be noted that Klapper never used the phrase “minimal effects” in the book and concludes with just the opposite argument in his review, noting that the greatest danger in a summary of research is “the tendency to go overboard in blindly minimizing the effects and potentialities of mass communication” (Klapper, 1960, p. 251).

Third, the minimal-effects/significant-effects polarity we believe is a demonstrable impediment to the design and interpretation of media effects research and the evolution of an accumulative agreed-upon set of findings about the conditions that impede and facilitate those effects at the individual and aggregate level. We find, still as late as 1999, Emmers-Sommer and Allen in their overview of the field concluding: “Taken together, these findings can be used to lend insight for future research directions. Overall, we can conclude that the media do, indeed, have effects” (1999, p. 492). It would appear that even after 50 years, simply to demonstrate a statistically significant effect in the ongoing battle against the vestiges of Klapper’s evil empire is sufficient justification for celebration and publication. The fact of the matter is that the research corpus in media effects documents a very impressive range of effects from no effect at all to very large effects. The challenge to our discipline is to systematically theorize and test the conditions that may facilitate or impede such effects and not simply to celebrate that the mean measure of effect size is larger now than the effect

sizes typically assessed by preceding generations of researchers. To be clear—our thesis is not that historically and currently many communication scholars do not see themselves as part of a three-stage evolution. They do. Indeed, they acknowledge their efforts to reject the stage-two “minimal effects” notion energetically and frequently. We argue instead that such a perspective may have unintended and unfortunate consequences.

The six-stage model

There may be well over 100 published textbooks, scholarly articles, and reference book entries that attempt to summarize and organize the media effects field; so we entered this crowded terrain with some trepidation.