

Media Theories

Scholars have created a large number of theories to identify many effects of the media and to explain the processes behind those effects. Any book that deals with media effects must necessarily highlight the scholarly work that is encapsulated in theories. So this chapter begins with a brief analysis of the importance of theories, then poses the question: What are the most salient media effects theories? The chapter profiles the most salient dozen theories of media effects, then concludes with an argument for why it is so important to move beyond theories when examining the full range of what we know about media effects.

BEGINNING WITH THEORIES

Theories are essential tools for scholars. Theories help *organize* thinking about a phenomenon by highlighting key ideas and by providing carefully crafted definitions that can be shared by all scholars as they build knowledge about their phenomenon of interest. Theories can *predict* which effects will occur under certain situations. Theories can *explain* effects by revealing the factors that lead to those effects and showing how those factors work together. And theories can provide *critiques* of scholarly practices by pointing out shortcomings and suggesting alternative explanations, predictions, definitions, and structures.

Without theories, scholarly fields grow slowly and in a haphazard way. Scholars have few common sets of ideas or definitions for those ideas, so they spend a lot of time “reinventing the wheel,” so to speak, as they waste their precious few resources struggling to construct a definition of a concept that someone else has already defined well. Scholars have few predictive statements to focus their work so they intuitively select factors that might or might not predict an effect. Scholars have few explanations for the “how” or “why” questions, and those explanations that do exist are shallow and not well developed. And with few critiques of their practices, they have little vision to correct faulty practices and make better use of their resources. Therefore theories are needed to help scholars develop understandings of their phenomena of interest in an efficient and effective manner. When a scholarly field has a few good theories, there is great efficiency because all scholars can share a common vision of which concepts are most important, how those concepts should be defined, how those concepts predict one another, and how those concepts work together in an effective system of explaining the phenomenon of interest to the field.

With the phenomenon of media effects, scholars have created a great many theories over the years. For a partial list of the more popular of these media effects theories, see Exhibit 5.1. While some of these are labeled as models, some as hypotheses, and some as effects, they all can be regarded as theories, because each one provides some sort of organization, prediction, explanation, or critique of some facet of the media effects phenomenon. Notice also that this list looks similar to Exhibit 3.1 in Chapter 3. You should not be surprised that the lists are similar, because the theories in Exhibit 5.1 are effects theories and they focus on organizing thinking, making predictions, and offering explanations about media effects as listed in Exhibit 3.1. However, the lists are not identical because some effects have stimulated the creation of more than one theory. Also, there are other effects that have been identified through exploratory research, and scholars have not yet presented conceptualizations to organize, predict, explain, or critique that effect.

The large number of theories is an indication of the vitality of the research field; that is, the topic of media effects has attracted a large number of scholars, each of whom has generated explanations about how the media effect people and society. However, the large number of theories is also an indication that scholars have not converged on a small set of theories that they agree are the best and most useful explanations of media effects. With such a large number of theories, it is difficult to see the big picture of media effects. We need to do something to sift through all these theories, some of which have accounted for only a study or two and which may deal with only a tiny fraction of the overall phenomenon of media effects. In order to keep the focus on the big picture in this chapter on theories, I highlight only those theories that have received the most attention by media effects scholars. These are the theories that have generated the most research activity and have been found to receive the strongest empirical support for their predictions and explanations. First, I identify these popular theories. Second, I offer a brief profile of each. Then I use the Media Effects Template (MET) to plot the theories and show where their attention has been directed and which parts of the overall media effects phenomenon have been relatively ignored.

WHAT ARE THE MOST PREVALENT MEDIA EFFECTS THEORIES?

The theories listed in Table 5.1 were gathered in a study I did with Karyn Riddle (Potter & Riddle, 2007). We analyzed a good deal of the media effects literature published in the major scholarly journals, and those theories were what we found. We also counted how often each theory appeared prominently in different articles. We reasoned that if our scholarly field had a dominant theory or two, those dominant theories would each appear in a relatively large percentage of articles. We found no such dominant theory. Among the 336 articles that we identified as theory driven, cultivation theory was mentioned in 27 articles, or about 8% of that literature. The top dozen mentioned theories are listed in Table 5.1. These 12 theories accounted for about half of all theory-driven articles. The rest of the theories on the list in Table 5.1 were mentioned only once or twice, so it is reasonable to conclude that they are not having much of an impact on the research field. Therefore the top 12 of these theories can be regarded as the most salient, that is, they have been found to be the most visible in the literature. They are profiled in the next section of the chapter.

Exhibit 5.1 Theories Explaining Some Aspect of the Media Effects Phenomenon

ABX balance model (Newcomb, 1953)
 Advertising and social change (Berman, 1981)
 Affective aggression model (Anderson, Collins, Schmitt, & Jacobvitz, 1996)
 Affluent society (Galbraith, 1976)
 Agenda building (Lang & Lang, 1981, 1991)
 Agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993)
 Associative network model (John Anderson, 1983)
 Attitude construct approach (Fazio, 1990)
 Audience as commodity (Jhally & Livant, 1986)
 Audience flow (Eastman, 1993)
 Audience polarization (Webster & Phalen, 1997)
 Automatic activation Model (Fazio, 1990)
 Availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973)
 Availability-valence model (Kisielius & Sternthal, 1984)

Buffering Hypothesis (Davis & Kraus, 1989)

Capacity model (Fisch, 2000)
 Catharsis (Feshbach, 1961)
 Channel repertoire (Ferguson & Perse, 1993)
 Channel theory of publication (Coser, Kadushin, & Powell, 1982)
 Character affiliation theory (Raney, 2004)
 Civic engagement (Putnam, 2000)
 Coalition model of agenda building (Protess et al., 1991)
 Cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957)
 Cognitive flexibility theory (Lowrey & Kim, 2009)
 Cognitive response theory (Greenwald, 1968)
 Communication/persuasion matrix model (McGuire, 1985)
 Consumer culture theory (Ewen, 1976)
 Cue theory (Berkowitz, 1965)
 Cultivation (Gerbner, 1969; Gerbner & Gross, 1976)
 Cultural imperialism (Boyd-Barrett, 1977; Schiller, 1969)
 Culture of narcissism (Lasch, 1978)

Decision-making models (Ryan & Peterson, 1982)
 Diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1995; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971)
 Direct effects model (Lasswell, 1927)
 Disinhibition effect (Bandura, 1994)
 Disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976)
 Distribution of knowledge (McQuail & Windahl, 1993)

(Continued)

Exhibit 5.1 (Continued)

Double action model of gatekeeping (Bass, 1969)
 Drench hypothesis (Greenberg, 1988)

Elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981)
 Elite pluralism theory (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Key, 1961)
 Empathy theory (Zillmann, 1996)
 Encoding-decoding model (Hall, 1980)
 Exchange model of news (Sigal, 1973)
 Exchange theory (Solomon, 1989)
 Excitation transfer theory (Zillmann, 1983)
 Exemplification theory (Zillmann, 1999; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000)
 Expectancy value model (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1982)

Fraction of selection (Schramm, 1954)
 Frame analysis (Erving Goffman, 1974, 1979)
 Framing (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Scheufele, 1999)
 Free market model of media (DeFleur, 1970)

Gatekeeping (White, 1950)
 Genre theory (Kaminsky, 1974)
 Global village (McLuhan, 1964; McLuhan & Fiore, 1967)
 Gratification seeking and audience activity model (Rubin & Perse, 1987)

Hegemony theory (Gramsci, 1971)
 Heuristic processing model of cultivation effects (Shrum, 2002)
 Hidden persuaders (Packard, 1957)
 Homogenization hypothesis (Bagdikian, 1997)
 Hostile media perception (Hwang, Pan, & Sun, 2008)

Imitation (Miller & Dollard, 1941)
 Indirect effects model (Cartwright, 1949; Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947)
 Information flow theory (Davis, 1990; Greenberg & Parker, 1965)
 Information model of advertising (cited in Jeffres, 1994, pp. 279–281)
 Information seeking (Donohew & Tipton, 1973)
 Integrated model of media enjoyment (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004)
 Integrated response model (Smith & Swinyard, 1982, 1988)
 Interpretation by social class (Morley, 1980)
 Interpretive resistance theory (Carragee, 1990)

Knowledge gap theory (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970)

Law of double jeopardy (McPhee, 1963)
 Least objectionable programming (Klein, 1971)

Levels of processing theory (Craik & Lockhart, 1972)
 Limited-capacity model of mediated message processing (Lang, 2000)

Market power model of advertising (cited in Jeffres, 1994, pp. 279–281)
 Marketplace model (Webster & Phalen, 1994)
 Marxist theory (McQuail, 1987)
 Mass audience (Blumer, 1946)
 Media access (Westley & MacLean, 1957)
 Media as culture industries (Jhally, 1987; Hay, 1989)
 Media culture (Altheide & Snow, 1979, 1991)
 Media enjoyment as attitude (Nabi & Krcmar, 2004)
 Media entertainment theory (Mendelsohn, 1966)
 Media flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Sherry, 2004)
 Media-public relationships (McQuail & Windahl, 1981)
 Media system dependency (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1975)
 Medium is the message (McLuhan, 1962, 1964)
 Medium theory (Meyrowitz, 1994)
 Message construction (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991)
 Mood management (Zillmann, 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994)
 Motivated attention and motivated processing (Nabi, 1999)

Neo-associationistic model (Berkowitz, 1984)
 Neo-mass audience (Webster & Phalen, 1997)
 Network model of political priming (Price & Tewksbury, 1997)
 News content theory (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996)
 News diffusion (Greenberg, 1964)
 News factory (Bantz, McCorkle, & Baade, 1980)
 News frame Theory (Tuchman, 1978)

One-dimensional man (Marcuse, 1964)

Parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rosengren & Windahl, 1989; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1990)
 Play theory (Stephenson, 1967)
 Pluralistic ignorance (Allport, 1924)
 Political socialization theory (Graber, 1980)
 Politics of signification (Hall, 1982)
 Polysemy theory (Fiske, 1986)
 Power elite theory (Mills, 1957)
 Priming (Berkowitz, 1965; Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002)
 Principled reasoning theory (McLeod, Sotirovic, Voakes, Guo, & Huang, 1998)
 Profit-driven logic of safety theory (Gitlin, 1985)
 Program choice theory (Steiner, 1952)
 Proteus effect (Peña, Hancock, & Merola, 2009)
 Pseudo-events blur reality (Boorstin, 1961)

(Continued)

Exhibit 5.1 (Continued)

Psychodynamic model (DeFleur, 1970)
 Psychological conditioning (Klapper, 1960; Skinner, 1974)

Rally effect (Coser, 1956)
 Reasoned action theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975)
 Reception paradigm (Katz, 1987)
 Reinforcing spirals model (Zhao, 2009)
 Resource dependency theory (Turow, 1984)
 Revealed preferences (Mansfield, 1970)
 Riley & Riley sociological model of mass communication (Riley & Riley, 1959)
 Ritual model of communication (Turner, 1977)

Selective exposure (Freedman & Sears, 1966; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944)
 Self-perception theory (Bem, 1972)
 Semiotic theory (Baudrillard, 1983)
 Social cognitive theory of mass communication (Bandura, 2001)
 Social construction of meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Lippmann, 1922; Mead, 1934)
 Social identity (Meyrowitz, 1985)
 Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977)
 Social norms theory of enjoyment (Denham, 2004)
 Social responses to computer technologies model (Nowak, Hamilton, & Hammond, 2009)
 Sociology of news theory (Schudson, 2003)
 Spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1991)
 Star theory (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001)
 Storage battery model (Fiske & Taylor, 1991)
 Storage bin model (Fiske & Taylor, 1991)
 Suspense theory (Knobloch-Westerwick, Hastall, & Rossmann, 2009)
 Synapse model of priming (Fiske & Taylor, 1991)

Technological determinism (Fischer, 1992)
 Technological drivers (Neuman, 1991)
 Television trivialization of public life (Postman, 1985)
 Third-person theory (Perloff, 2002)
 Transactional model (Graber, 1988; McLeod & Becker, 1974)
 Transmission model (Shannon & Weaver, 1949)
 Transportation model (Carey, 1975)
 Transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000)
 Two-step flow (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955)

Uses and dependency model (Rubin & Windahl, 1986)
 Uses and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Lasswell, 1948; Rosengren, 1974; Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985; Wright, 1960)

Videomalaise (Robinson, 1976)

Table 5.1 Twelve Most Salient Theories

Theory	n	%
Cultivation	27	8.0
Third person	25	7.4
Agenda setting	24	7.1
Uses and gratifications	19	5.7
Priming	16	4.8
Cognitive capacity	14	4.2
Framing	12	3.6
Feminism	11	3.3
Social learning	7	2.1
Elaboration likelihood	7	2.1
Schema	6	1.8
Diffusion of innovations	4	1.2

Note: Percentages are based on 336 articles that mentioned a theory.

PROFILING MOST SALIENT MEDIA EFFECTS THEORIES

Each of the top dozen media effects theories is briefly profiled in this section. If you are interested in learning more about any one of these theories beyond the short descriptions provided here, you can read the citations that are provided.

1. Cultivation

Cultivation theory was created by George Gerbner in 1969 as a response to his criticism that media effects research had been focusing only on short-term laboratory effects and ignoring the long-term effects that were gradually taking place over the course of a person's everyday life. He argued that television, which he called the dominant storytelling of the time, presented messages with consistent themes and that people who were exposed to these stories over time came to believe that the themes and patterns in these television stories applied to the real world.

Gerbner (1969) argued that the media cultivate a "collective consciousness about elements of existence" (p. 138) and explained:

I use the term [cultivation] to indicate that my primary concern in this discussion is not with information, education, persuasion, etc., or with any kind of direct communication "effects." I am concerned with the collective context within

which, and in response to which, different individual and group selections and interpretations of messages take place. (p. 139)

Key to cultivation is the focus on public information with an

awareness that a certain item of knowledge is publicly held (i.e., not only known to many, but *commonly known that it is known to many*) makes collective thought and action possible. Such knowledge gives individuals their awareness of collective strength (or weakness), and a feeling of social identification or alienation. (pp. 139–140)

The media have the ability to construct publics by making certain information available that shapes “collective thought and action quickly, continuously, and pervasively across previous boundaries of time, space, and culture” (p. 140). In creating cultivation theory, Gerbner was not interested in particular messages but broad patterns. Also he was not interested in individual interpretations of receivers but instead the beliefs that they shared.

2. Third Person

The third-person effect (TPE) was first observed in 1983 by W. Phillips Davison, a sociologist, who was examining patterns across the results of public opinion polls and noticed that typically people felt that the media exerted a strong effect on other people (third persons) but not on themselves (first person). He found consistent patterns that people overestimate the effect of media messages on other people and underestimate the effect of media messages on themselves.

This effect has been explained as a “self-serving” perception whereby people think the media exert powerful influences, but only on other people, not on themselves. This allows people to complain about the media and call for regulation of harmful content so as to control the media exposures of other people. At the same time, it excuses them from having to take responsibility for possible negative consequences of their own exposures as long as people tell themselves that the media have no influence on them personally. This effect has been widely cited in the research literature (Tal-Or, Tsfati, & Gunther, 2009), and it has been found to have strong empirical support (Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000).

3. Agenda Setting

Agenda-setting theory focuses its explanation on how news content in the media shapes the public’s beliefs about what is important in society. The first clear empirical support of this agenda-setting effect was provided by McCombs and Shaw (1972) in their analysis of the 1968 campaign for president. They found that when the media presented certain issues more saliently than others, those salient issues became the focus of the campaign. Over time, this agenda-setting research has included findings that the media also tell us what to think about; this is called *second-level agenda setting*. This second-level agenda-setting research has found that media messages do not just emphasize issues but they

present informational elements about those issues, and those informational elements tell us what to think about the issue.

Closely related to the agenda-setting theory is the spiral of silence theory, which also focuses on how the media influence public beliefs. However, the spiral of silence theory also moves into explaining how public beliefs influence public discourse. Noelle-Neumann (1974) created this theory after observing patterns of news coverage in Western Europe. In her theory, she explained that when the media avoid covering an issue, people typically will not express their beliefs on that issue even if those beliefs are very important to them. They will remain silent. Thinking that they are in the minority, they refrain from expressing their beliefs for fear of being ostracized. Then silence begets more silence, and the belief that the issue is not important gets reinforced over time.

4. Uses and Gratifications

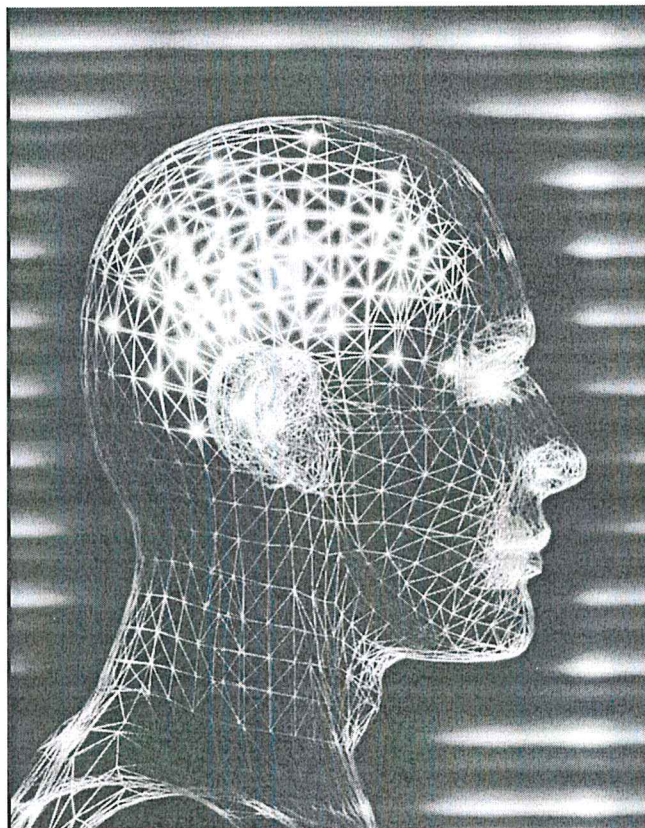
Uses and gratifications is a very broad theory that is based on two assumptions about media audiences. One of these assumptions is that individuals are active in making choices about selecting media and messages. The other assumption is that individuals are aware of their motives for information and entertainment; people use these motives as guides as they actively seek out media messages to satisfy their needs.

The explanatory system of uses and gratifications theory makes five claims:

1. Communication behavior is goal directed, purposive, and motivated.
2. People initiate the selection and use of communication vehicles.
3. A host of social and psychological factors guide, filter, or mediate communication behavior.
4. The media compete with other forms of communication in the gratification of needs or wants.
5. People are typically more influential than the media in the effects process (Rubin, 2002).

Because uses and gratifications theory regards audience members as active, the effects of the media are not viewed as particularly powerful; that is, people can control the effects to a large extent. Rosengren (1974) argued that the key idea of uses and gratifications was that individual differences among audience members intervene between the media and any effects. This means that media effects are explained not just by the media content but also by audience characteristics, such as their motivations and involvement with the content.

These ideas can be traced back to Wilbur Schramm (1954), who argued that people make their selection of media exposures by comparing expectation of a reward with effort required. This idea was later elaborated by Palmgreen and Rayburn (1985), who contended that people compared gratifications sought (GS) with gratifications obtained (GO). Because media exposure is a process repeated over the course of a person's life, each person has a lot of experience with GOs from past exposures, and this helps in forming expectations for each decision in the present.



Source: Chad Baker/Photodisc/Thinkstock

5. Priming

Priming theory focuses on how one set of information or stimuli can affect the interpretation of a subsequent set in a person's memory. This theory conceptualizes the human mind as being organized in associative networks where each node in the network is a bit of information. When people think about a particular bit of information, that node is activated and the thinking proceeds from that node outward through associative networks to other nodes that are most closely related to the activated node. Thus when a node is activated, the next closest nodes in the associative network are primed; that is, they are most likely to be activated next (Jo & Berkowitz, 1994). The primed node is important because it sets up our expectations for our thought paths. Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, and Carpentier (2002) say, "As applied to the media, priming refers to the effects of the content of the media on people's later behavior or judgments related to the content" (p. 97).

Originally referred to as cue theory, Leonard Berkowitz (1965) conducted early testing that showed that media portrayals contain particular symbols and when these symbols appear in a person's real life, those symbols cue the person to remember the media portrayal. Berkowitz conducted empirical research in the area of violent media content and how it affected viewers' behaviors. He found that when violent portrayals contained weapons, these weapons were powerful cues to people in real life. So when people saw a particular kind of weapon in real life, this real-life weapon triggered memories of the media portrayal and these memories were likely to lead to aggressive behavior.

Priming theory has undergone a good deal of testing with the topic of media violence. People shown a violent message in which characters are wronged will have the idea that violence is a good tool to use in getting revenge against one's aggressors. Later, in real life, when these people are victims of aggression, they will recall the use of violence as a successful tool to use in gaining vengeance and be more likely to behave in a vengeful manner.

6. Cognitive Capacity

Lang (2000) developed the cognitive capacity theory to provide a cognitive explanatory system for how people screen information then process it. She said that this process is structured by three tasks of encoding information, storage, and retrieval. The process begins with a person's sensory organs being stimulated; information then automatically enters a person's brain, where it spends up to a few seconds in a sensory storage area where most of it is wiped out, and only a small fraction moves on to short-term working memory. The person then selects certain bits of information to use in constructing what she called a "mental representation" of the outside event that stimulated the person's sensory organs. This selection is guided by a person's goals, existing knowledge, and the environment. Thus what is encoded is not an identical replica of the event; instead it is composed of a small fraction of the stimulus and is a highly idiosyncratic representation of the event. These representations are then stored in associative networks where ideas are linked together, making later retrieval possible. People undertake this processing in a parallel fashion; that is, there is more than one line of information being processed at the same time. Because processing resources are limited, people divide these resources across tasks at any given time. Those information-processing tasks that are given the most resources get processed in more detail and are therefore more likely to be remembered.

7. Framing

Framing regards meaning as residing primarily in the message, particularly news messages. The frame of news stories is constructed by journalists in the way they select certain bits of information while ignoring others and by how they structure their stories to direct attention toward certain facts. The frame is the way the story is presented; that is, it is the point of view from which the story is told. The frame is the news angle or the context for the story (Tuchman, 1978).



Source: Digital Vision/Photodisc/Thinkstock

The frame of a news story tells the audience members what the theme or meaning of the event is and therefore constrains and shapes the meaning of the event for the audience. The frame provides context in the way it defines a problem, diagnoses causes, makes moral judgments, and suggests remedies.

Framing theory is related to both the agenda-setting and priming theories. Framing explains how the agenda is set by the way the media frame their stories. Once a person is exposed to a media message, it is the framing of the message that determines which nodes get primed.

8. Feminism

Feminist theory contends that there is a sexist ideology permeating the media. This ideology presents a patriarchal world where there is a male-dominated social order that is assumed to be natural and just. In this ideology, women are weaker and less capable than are men, so women gain their identity through their association with male characters. Under feminist theory, the media continually present messages with paternalistic themes that foster a false belief system in their audiences (Rakow, 1992).

According to van Zoonen (1994), the focus of feminist theory is to provide answers to questions such as, How are discourses about gender encoded into media texts?, How do

audiences use and interpret gendered media texts?, and How does audience reception contribute to the construction of gender at the level of individual identity? Some feminist scholars also contend that women can use the media to empower themselves by forming groups and creating their own meanings that reject the paternalistic themes (Radway, 1984).

9. Social Learning

This theory has its origin in the ideas of Miller and Dollard (1941), who found that people learned behaviors by observing the actions of others; they did not need to perform the behaviors themselves in order to learn those behaviors. Bandura (1977) took this idea and elaborated on it with the concepts of identification, vicarious reinforcement, and self-efficacy. Bandura showed that this observational-type learning was enhanced to the extent that observers identified with people who performed the behaviors (role models) as well as when those behaviors were rewarded or at least not punished. He also showed that the role models need not be people in real life but can be characters in fictional stories presented through the media. Bandura (1986) continued to elaborate this explanation by adding cognitive components. Bandura argued that it was not only characteristics about the environment that accounted for social learning but also characteristics about the person; that is, people think about what they experience and transform their experiences into cognitive models. This transformation is guided by four types of processes: attention, retention, production, and motivation.

10. Elaboration Likelihood

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) was developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1981) to move scholarly thinking beyond the limited approach to opinion formation that assumed people paid attention to arguments and logically weighed the merits of those arguments when making up their own minds. Although the ELM is typically regarded as a theory of persuasion—not learning—fundamentally it is focused on how people encounter and process information. ELM acknowledges that there are times when people do carefully attend to information—what they call the “central route of information processing”—but that there are also times when people encounter information and arguments in an unconscious state or when they are not logical in their handling of the information—what they call the “peripheral route.” The central route involves effortful cognitive activity whereby the person draws on prior experience and knowledge in order to scrutinize carefully all of the information relevant to determine the central merits of the position advocated (Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002, p. 165). Using this route, people actively think about the importance of claims, saliency of information, and the consequences of accepting the message claims. In contrast, the peripheral route requires low-effort processing of persuasive information; people react to simple cues in messages and act as cognitive misers, that is, allocate very little mental effort. With little mental effort, people are likely to select a peripheral reason and ignore more important reasons. Which route a person uses is really a decision about how much effort he or she is willing to expend in processing the information in a message. The key factors that affect the amount of thinking a person is willing to

undertake are a person's cognitive trait of the general motivation to think, as well as a person's reaction to characteristics in the message—such as the perceived personal relevance of a message, trustworthiness of source, whether source is stigmatized or not, key arguments presented as questions or assertions, number of message sources, and expectedness of the position being argued.

11. Schema

Schema theory has attracted a wide range of scholars. George Herbert Mead (1934) is often credited with originating the idea of schema in his book *Mind, Self, and Society* in which he argued that symbols mediate and structure all our experience. Sets of symbols, called *schema*, are the templates that help us make sense of all the sensory stimuli we are exposed to constantly.

Cognitive psychologists built on this idea by conceptualizing schemas as associative networks that reside in a person's mind. A schema is "a cognitive structure that represents knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relations among those attributes" (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 98). Ideas are organized as nodes in associative networks. When we activate one idea, other ideas that are most closely related to the activated idea are also activated. Thus thinking proceeds from idea to idea according to how they are related together in these associative networks.

These schemas serve to organize an individual's memory for people and events. They are composed of linguistic and nonlinguistic information, images, words, sounds, and sequences of experiences (Graesser & Nakamura, 1982). Some schemas are sequences of events and are then referred to as *scripts*. They are culture specific, so they contain prejudices and beliefs embedded in the culture.

Schemas are used by individuals to help them comprehend events. Thus schemas are templates of expectations for people and events that have been developed and modified over the course of a person's lifetime. When we meet a new person, we read the salient cues about that person (for example, body type, obvious personality characteristics, and the like) and match these cues to our schema about people. When we find a schema that best matches the cues, we use that schema to set our expectations for that new person.

12. Diffusion of Innovations

In 1962 Everett Rogers conducted a major review and synthesis of the literature on how information gets disseminated in societies. He came up with the diffusion of information theory, in which he built on the ideas of Lazarsfeld and extended those ideas beyond the realm of political information and paid special attention to how information about innovations—especially about agriculture and health—was disseminated. Rogers argued that information about innovations was disseminated in a step-by-step fashion to different groups of people in a society. The first group to receive and use the information were people he labeled as "early adopters." These are people who liked to try new things and were continually monitoring the media to find out what those new things were. Rogers said that these early adopters passed their information along to the opinion leaders (à la Lazarsfeld), who then tested

out the idea or innovation. If the opinion leaders found they liked the innovation, they passed it along to other people in their interpersonal networks (the opinion followers). Finally the information spread out to the “laggards” or later adopters.

THE BIG PICTURE WITH MEDIA EFFECTS THEORIES

The salient media theories are a good place to begin when learning about media effects. However, as you will soon see, they do not cover the entire phenomenon.

Take a look at Figure 5.1, which is a minor modification of the individual-level MET with its six types on the lines and the four functions in the columns. The three columns from the macro-level MET have been collapsed into one column at the right. This modified matrix has 30 cells.

Onto this matrix, I have plotted the dozen most salient theories profiled in the previous section of this chapter. Notice that there are theories plotted in only 10 of these 30 cells, which indicates that while these 12 theories are salient in the sense that they are the most tested theories, as a set they cover only about one third of the full media effects phenomenon.

We of course need to remember that there are many more theories than the 12 salient ones plotted on the MET in Figure 5.1, so this argument is not made to convince you that there is no theoretical activity in many cells. Instead, my argument is that the most well-known theories of media effects are concentrated into a few cells. First, learning a lot about what these 12 theories have to say about media effects is a good beginning, but this strategy will deliver only partial understanding of the full phenomenon of media effects. In order

Figure 5.1 Plotting Theories Onto the Media Effects Template

Type of Effect	Media Influence Functions				
	Acquiring	Triggering	Altering	Conditioning	Public
Behavior					Uses & Grats
Physiology	Cognitive Capacity	Priming	Schema	Schema	
Cognitive	Cognitive Capacity	Social Learning	ELM	Framing	
Belief	Third Person	Agenda Setting	Cultivation	Spiral of Silence	Feminism
Attitudes	ELM				
Affects					Uses & Grats

Note: Percentages are based on 336 articles that mentioned a theory. "Grats" is short for "Gratifications."

to get a more complete picture of the overall media effects phenomenon, we would have to learn about several hundred theories, and this makes for a rather inefficient approach.

There is also a second reason for why a theoretical approach is not a good strategy for learning about the big picture of media effects. This argument is based on the finding that much of the large literature concerned with media effects is not generated by theory. To illustrate this point, let's return to the content analysis study I mentioned earlier in this chapter (Potter & Riddle, 2007). This was a content analysis of the media effects literature published in the major scholarly journals. Recall that we found that 336 articles that were theory driven and that 144 theories were mentioned, with the top 12 most mentioned theories accounting for 168 of those articles or about 50% of the set of theory-driven articles. However, what I did not mention yet is that the total sample we analyzed was 962 media effects studies. Thus only about 35% (336 articles out of 962) of the total media effects literature featured a theory. The other 65% of the media effects literature was generated by no theory at all.

Other studies of the media literature also reported similar findings. This pattern of a low percentage of theory-driven studies has been found in the larger media literature percentages run as low as 8.1% (Potter, Cooper, & Dupagne, 1993) and as high as 27.6% (Riffe & Freitag, 1997) and 30.5% (Kamhawi & Weaver, 2003). In an analysis of published literature on mass communication from 1965 to 1989 in eight journals, Potter et al. (2003) found that only 8.1% of 1,326 articles were guided by a theory and provided a test of that theory; another 19.5% were tests of hypotheses but these hypotheses were not derived from a theory. Kamhawi and Weaver (2003) reported that only 30.5% of all articles published in 10 communication journals from 1980 to 1999 specifically mentioned a theory, which led them to argue that

theoretical development is probably the main consideration in evaluating the disciplinary status of the field. As our field grows in scope and complexity the pressure for theoretical integration increases. It seems that scholars in the field should be developing and testing theories to explain the process and effects of mass communication. However, that was not widely evident in our sample. (p. 20)

While theories have been important to the development of the media effects scholarly field, we cannot conclude that our understanding of media effects is predominantly theory driven. Instead theory development is sporadic and thin. This clearly indicates that our research is not organized efficiently by a handful of theories that present scholars with a parsimonious set of conceptualizations and that direct long paths of programmatic research, much like what is done in other scholarly fields, particularly in the physical sciences. Returning to the Potter and Riddle (2006) analysis, there seem to be few examples of programmatic research guided by theory; among the 336 articles we found that did feature a theory, 144 theories were mentioned, and only 12 of those theories were mentioned in more than five studies. The remaining 132 theories were spread out over the remaining 168 articles that were theory driven. This indicates a pattern of rather thin theory development. This finding was also in evidence in the study by Kamhawi and Weaver (2003), who found that only three theories (information processing, uses and

gratifications, and media construction of social reality) were mentioned in as many as 10% of their analyzed articles.

Less than one third of the very large media effects literature is guided by a theory of any kind. Therefore, in order to understand more than a relatively small segment of knowledge about media effects and how they work, we need to move beyond the theory-driven portion of the literature. That is the purpose of the next nine chapters.

SUMMARY

Theories are important to the development of any scholarly field. With the scholarly field of media effects, many theories have been developed. However, few of those theories account for more than a handful of research studies. And the most salient dozen theories as a set has generated only a small fraction (about 17%) of the total media effects research literature.

When trying to build your own understanding of media effects, the study of theories is a good place to begin. The most salient media effects theories orient us to the most popular effects. However, there is much more wisdom about media effects that is not conveyed by theories; that is, much of the vast literature of 10,000 research studies is not theory driven.

In Part II of this book, I take you through that literature. Of course, we will not visit each of the 10,000 studies—that would be too much detail! Just to list the citations of those studies would consume 650 typed pages. Instead of focusing on all the detail, I will try to direct your attention to the big picture patterns so that you develop an understanding of the overall phenomenon of media effects.

Review Questions

1. What is the purpose of theories?
2. List the most prevalent dozen media effects theories. What is the main idea of each one?
3. Why is it insufficient to limit our study of media effects to effects theories?

Further Thinking Questions

1. Figure 5.1 shows the most salient media effects theories mapped onto the Media Effects Template. Can you think of any reasons why certain areas of the map have multiple theories while other areas have none?
2. Pick an area on the Media Effects Template where there are no theories plotted. Can you create a theory to fill that gap?

