

According to Sparks (2010), new technologies “challenge the traditional concept of mass communication” (p. 220). Sparks (2010) clarified by stating, “according to the old definition, the source of a mass communication message was a large organization” (p. 220). Today, the potential to draw large audiences is not limited to messages produced by organizations because individuals can set up websites and blogs, along with other forms of technology, that hold the ability to draw similar levels of mass attention. This aspect becomes even more convoluted because, as McCombs and Shaw (1993) described almost 20 years ago, “Today two dozen newspaper racks are in front of the downtown post office, and an equal number of channels are available on cable television. The media system has fragmented” (p. 64).

These issues not only bring attention to the name “mass communication” because 1) the message is not always sent out by one large organization and 2) the message is not always intended for a “large, heterogeneous, scattered audience” anymore (Sparks, 2010, p. 220), but it also brings attention to the role of “traditional” media-based theories in the social media-dominated environment that exists today. One may question whether media effects theories developed during times when only two or three television stations existed can really explain effects associated with, for example, user generated content on Facebook. The purpose of this paper will be to examine the future of three avenues of media research (two-step flow, uses and gratifications, and agenda setting) in regards to media technologies today. Ultimately, it is argued that each paradigm can highlight different components of the same process, thus making them applicable today. Specifically, the paper will first address the distinctions among the three avenues in order to understand their unique contributions. Then, how those contributions open up possibilities for future research will be explored, ending with a discussion

of their interconnectedness and an examination of the usefulness of these theories overall today.

Distinguishing Among Media Theories

In an analysis of the similarities and differences among framing, priming, and agenda setting, Weaver (2007) noted that “I see these areas of communication research as interconnected and as involving some similar, although not identical, cognitive processes and effects” (p. 142). The same thought holds when examining three media effects theories: two-step flow, uses and gratifications, and agenda setting. Yet, any proposed interconnectedness among these theories may cause one to wonder just why and how the theories are different.

First, in exploring the connections among the three theories, it is important to realize that the interconnectedness goes beyond attempts to explain and predict media effects because some of the key concepts can also overlap. For example, when using agenda setting as the theoretical framework to explore the relationships between traditional and social media, Meraz (2009) found:

The top 20% of the unique 646 URL domains in this study command 2890 of the 3721 links, or 78% of attention across all networks. The network’s close adherence to the 80/20 Pareto power law suggests that a few elite actors are in control of the majority of source influence throughout the entire network of traditional media and citizen media blog links. (p. 691)

The finding that only a few people were the source of the majority of the news items found in blogs is similar to two-step flow’s conceptualization of opinion leaders as informational gatekeepers. Opinion leaders, Case, Johnson, Andres, Allard, and Kelley (2004) explained, “are regarded as authorities on, or as simply well-informed about, certain topics; they influence those

around them by passing on information and opinions that may result in learning, decisions, choices, and opinion changes among those they are in contact with” (p. 661). Two-step flow holds that it is only through these opinion leaders that the general masses are affected by media messages (Katz, 1957). If two-step flow argues opinion leaders are the primary sources of information and Meraz (2009) found most news items in blogs come from only a few people in a study of media agenda setting, one might argue that the theories are simply using different names for the same concepts. However, that person would be oversimplifying the theories because it is not necessarily in the details where the theories differ but in their overarching purposes.

To clarify, two-step flow’s primary focus is the pattern of information dissemination and the resulting interpersonal conversation that occurs. While early versions of the theory predicted a top-down influence, where media messages influenced opinion leaders, who influenced the general public, later evolutions of the theory became more sophisticated because they understood that opinion leaders were influenced by other people as well (Katz, 1957). The idea of opinion leaders did not become irrelevant, though, as early findings indicated there were still some people who others tended to cluster around, thus causing media messages to spread more rapidly (Katz, 1957). This evolution means that research using two-step flow as the theoretical framework is more concerned with tracking the flow of an idea from media production to the public, what the resulting pattern looks like, and identifying people central to spreading the message than with....

On the other hand, agenda setting is more focused on the media message itself. In agenda setting, the media can frame not only what one thinks about (i.e., first-order agenda setting and the salience of objects) but it can frame how a person thinks about the object (i.e., second-order

agenda setting and the salience of attributes), as Kiousis and McCombs (2003) summarized.

Like with two-step flow, the theory originally held that media content was produced by those in the media production industry (e.g., journalists), which resulted in a top-down chain of influence (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993). However, later variations of the theory noted the bidirectional influence, which drew attention to the need to understand what influences the selection of the message (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). For example, Messner and Watson DiStaso (2008) found that a cyclical influence exists between traditional media sources (i.e., newspapers) and blogs where they use each other as sources. Research using this theory is more concerned with what media portray, the content or tone of the messages, and influences on message selection at the production level.

A limitation constant in both agenda setting and two-step flow paves the way for the third research avenue—uses and gratifications theory. Just as the initial versions of two-step flow and agenda setting ignored multidirectional influence associated with the production and spread of media messages, both theories largely ignored the multidirectional influence between producers of media content and consumers, namely that the audience has the ability to choose media channels and media content in order to fulfill certain needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973-1974). Katz et al. (1973-1974) argued that media effects were a result of people actively choosing media content over “other sources of need satisfaction” to satisfy their needs (p. 512). In this theory, the content of the media does not matter as much as knowing what function the media serve and whether the need was fulfilled by the media choice. As Katz and colleagues (1973-1974) stated, “the issue, then, is what combinations of attributes may render different media more or less adequate for the satisfaction of different needs” (p. 514). As a result, uses

and gratifications theory focuses on why individuals choose their media exposure and is especially concerned with the psychological reasoning behind how the media use actually fulfills the needs of those involved (Katz et al., 1973-1974).

Drawing Connections

Overall, there are some similarities in the theoretical processes and concepts (although those are not identical); however, the corresponding purpose of the theory changes not only what questions the research should answer, but also changes how the research would be conducted. For instance, both agenda setting and two-step flow, in their more modern forms, posit a cyclical influence between media and consumer. One theory wants to examine how the information moves from source to source (two-step flow), whereas the other desires an understanding of what content is produced and spread (agenda setting). Uses and gratifications focuses on the individual choice to pay attention to a message—thus making it appear quite different from the other two theories discussed—but it also relies on the cyclical relationship between media and consumer. Audience members can only fulfill their needs if the content is available in the media, which is something that can be explained through the agenda setting theory, and if they become aware of the content's existence, which can be explained by two-step flow theory.

These unique purposes allow a researcher to explore a singular topic, like news content on Facebook, in different ways. Two-step flow could explore how the news appeared on Facebook and the resulting conversation around and reproduction of that information. Uses and gratifications could find out why people chose to pay attention to that media and whether their needs were fulfilled by the presence of the information. Finally, agenda setting could help researchers understand what content is being produced and the connotations associated with that

information. It is through these different purposes that a full picture of media effects and news content on Facebook is able to occur. One could think of the phenomenon (news content on a social media website) as a room. Each of these perspectives is a different flashlight that highlights a different area in the room. Alone, each theory is limited in helping researchers understand what is going on in the room, but together, the three flashlights light up enough for researchers to see a much larger picture. Understanding that these theories together still have a strong ability to illuminate a phenomenon, help make the theories applicable to the newer media technologies.

Everland's mix of attributes approach helps further solidify the role of traditional theories in today's media environment (Sparks, 2010). Instead of assuming that every media technology is inherently different, this approach postulates media technology varies on five continuums: content, textuality, channel, structure and interactivity. The focus on similarities among media forms means that the impact of media is also not necessarily different. Even though the composition of those five continuums may change how a medium appears to function, these attributes are present in all media forms and provide enough similarities that the core processes at work are the same. When applying theory to various media technologies, the key, then, is to understand how the purpose of the theory is at work within the media form. It is through this focus on the fundamental purpose of the theory and the base attributes of the media form that the "older" media theories, such as two-step flow, uses and gratifications, and agenda setting, are still relevant today.